

Twins, Siblings and Close Neighbours: The Uses of Metaphor and the Genealogy of the Study of Religions – A Response to Kim Knott

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Professor Knott, in her most interesting essay on the important border-zones of our discipline, has urged us to reflect more deeply on the intellectual and ideological background of the present state of the study of religion. The text has certainly been intriguing and stimulating to read, and a challenge to comment on the perspectives presented.

The point of departure in Professor Knott's essay is a discussion of the metaphors and representations used in speaking about religion and in establishing the borders of what religion is. This has been, and still is, one of the core rhetorical tropes in any form of formalised religious discourse, i.e. the emic identification of the border of the group's own religion, and the most effective and clear way of doing so for any religious authority is the identification of non-religion. The power of religious authority seems to a great extent be to assume the right to define insiders and outsiders, followers and outcasts.

The first case (or example) of how the concept of religion is positioned in ideological, theological and moral systems in late medieval and early modern Europe is as opposed to – and absolutely contrary to – magic. My delight with this example is not due solely to my own interest in this particular field. The case also pinpoints one of the heaviest ballasts we carry in the study of religion and in our interdisciplinary co-operation. Few people within the discipline any longer make analytical (or for that matter empirical) distinctions between religion and magic. How many times have we not come across colleagues in other disciplines who provide solid and up-to-date social, historical and linguistic analyses, but then add dated works from our bookshelves that are founded in the conviction (and my use of this term is deliberate) that no matter how complex and intricate the practices of rituals and religious institutions may be, they can be distinguished at an ideological/theological level as religion and magic. Secondly, it is also a fine example of the application of Lakoff's and Johnson's theories of how metaphors are constructed and established – and the ideological consequences of such a

play with imagery in social life. Furthermore, the case serves as an example of how the definition of religion as either an empirical or a theoretical concept is not exclusively a concern for the study of religion.

Inasmuch as definitions of religion play a vital role in the material studied, be they expressed explicitly or implicitly, the sources for religious studies – texts, actions, artefacts – when observed in context carry in every detail the prisms of a whole.

Professor Knott's well-reasoned essay demonstrates how discursive elements, such as imagery in various types of discourse, can be analysed in order to indicate whole religious systems, values and world-views. In my reading of her texts, I very much welcome her broader definition of the empirical materials relevant to the study of religion. This opens the door to more theoretical studies of religion; this is a challenge of utmost importance when we try to explain why religious discourses, with all their harshness in condemnation, polarisation and division, actually work in a particular context. Rather than frightening people off, this harsh rhetoric seems to be a major mobilising factor and an element in the construction of social cohesion. The same is true when magicians and heretics are condemned and despised in medieval texts.

Therefore, to the discussion of how metaphors are constructed, a focus on agency could also be added. Using a metaphor, in contrast to a simile – which asserts the likeness of one thing to another – is to assert identity. In the world of religion this is usually something relatively abstract (a religious belief or truth or conviction), that is identified with something relatively concrete (identifiable in the everyday life-world). In short: an agent, be it a person, a group or an institution, takes an active position by establishing this hitherto concealed identity, i.e., takes the right to point at rightful correspondences in this world – and in the realm of God, as well as the realm of his counterpart. The metaphor changes from an innocent didactic tool to a forceful player on the social field. Religious expressions focus to a great extent on inclusion and exclusion, regardless of how long or short the discursive unit.

Using a metaphor, i.e., applying a word, phrase or concept to something which it does not literally denote in order to establish a connection and point to a broader system, must be regarded as an act of exercising power and dominance. To the cognitive and rhetorical dimensions emphasised in Kim Knott's essay, we could add social agency, in order to highlight what is always the core issue in the humanities: the actions and representations of human beings.

Yet another aspect of this case from medieval and early modern Europe must be mentioned briefly, as it is of relevance for the very foundation of interdisciplinary contact zones. Religious life from this period, with all its fascinating regional particularities, its social struggles and significant spaces of negotiation, is, I would argue, a much-neglected field. Historians of religions tend to focus on the pagan religions of Europe, especially at the European geographical periphery. Church historians are interested in religious life, be it dogmatic or liturgical, in connection to the Church. Ethnologists and folklorists deal with later periods and with what are often labelled 'folk beliefs' and 'folk customs'; the Middle Ages and the Early Modern period serve only (if at all) as background, and the long-term perspective seems to have gone out of fashion. Historians working with this period often study witch crazes and contribute to source criticism, but (with splendid exceptions, such as the work of Keith Thomas, Emond Duffy and Stuart Clark) we still to a large extent lack attempts to present an overview of the religious life of this period. It certainly deserves more of our interest: not only in its own right, but also because it offers several keys to an understanding of the study of religions, ideas and worldviews in Europe.

The empirical angle of Kim Knott's essay provides a clear example of the fatal consequences when the borders between disciplines are kept too tight. Enthusiasm over interdisciplinary work, however, can occasionally lessen on the sometimes bumpy road of co-operation. The reasons for these bumps are many; they are quite often to be found in the intellectual history of individual disciplines and in the ways concepts, models and theories have been used, rejected and redefined. Professor Knott's arguments are also an encouragement to read the history of our discipline from new perspectives. Pointing at the impact of metaphors casts a new light on the divisions between disciplines. Given borders should be contested, and Kim Knott has presented us with a theoretical model for ways to extract new knowledge from a period with comparatively scanty sources. As we all know from the cultural studies that have influenced our field of study over a long period, identity is a question of definitions, borders and self-understanding. As in the religious empirical materials we analyse, issues of narration, history-writing and identity construction are vital for the everyday life of a disciple.

Twins, Siblings or Close Neighbours?

Towards the end of her article, Professor Knott touches on the topic of interdisciplinary relations between theology and religious studies. I quote (although the italics are mine): 'they are *part of the same body* ... though they

often strive to be free and to experience themselves as separate and distinctive'. In the original lecture, the family and somatic metaphor is even more striking: 'they are like *twins, part of the same body*'.

Here I would like to express a somewhat dissenting point of view, and will do so by means of three different arguments. First of all, I find it important to underline other perspectives on the genealogy of the study of religion: history, literary studies, rhetoric, sociology, anthropology, political science – to mention just a few other inseparable areas. Looking at the development of the theory and methodology of the study of religion (or history of religions), we find many more fields of study and theoretical perspectives shared with the humanities in general than with theology. I do not think that religious studies are more inseparable from theology than from the humanities – in fact rather less so. The humanities share a common disciplinary history, in distancing themselves from the dominant position of theology and its close ties with the church throughout the early history of academic education. We need only think of the history of the University of Stockholm, which was established as the result of a private initiative at the end of the nineteenth century as an institution for higher education, separated from the dominance and influence of the Church.

Most of our colleagues in Scandinavia do not have a background in theological studies, and this field is also not a frequent partner in co-operation. Many common concerns do exist, but our closest siblings are elsewhere. For more than a century, the basic methodological tools and theoretical frameworks for the study of human culture (including religion) have been provided by such disciplines as history and sociology. It is thus that indisputable alliances are established.

Secondly, speaking of metaphors: I am hesitant to use the family metaphor, *twins*, and the somatic metaphor, *part of the same body*. Twins may be identical to the point of confusion, which I do not think is the case in the relationship between religious studies and theology. The imagery of parts of a body suggests that various parts of the body have different functions, contradicting the image of sameness and identical features.

The image of a body also has a flavour and a hint of something 'natural' or functional, which is perhaps not the most fortunate way of describing the relationship between academic disciplines. Here I would have preferred a greater stress on the processual aspects of interdisciplinary relations, and – perhaps more importantly – a more constructivist approach to the nature of our relations and relationships.

Thirdly, and this is my main argument in disagreement with the twin and body metaphors, I find it important to speak up in defence of theology, as

much from the perspective of a citizen as from that of a scholar. There has to be both a name and a space for the development of theology in the classic sense of the term, without bringing it within the fences of the study of religions with its specific analytical agenda. Theology has an academic record of its own, as do the humanities and the social sciences. There are common areas, possible interdisciplinary co-operation, but not necessarily sameness. What really complicates the matter is the terminological confusion. When 'theology' is used in (at least Scandinavian) religious studies, it is as an empirical category characterized by a specific material, i.e. systematized dogmatic knowledge within a specific religious tradition. Sometimes there is an emic term similar to this category, as for example when the Islamic term *kalem* is translated as theology (which can be questioned from many perspectives), but mostly the term 'theology' is used to indicate what kind of discourse is being analysed.

Enough of exegesis over a few lines. Professor Knott has provided us with a well-argued essay on the importance of analytical reflection over categories, typologies and metaphors that otherwise are too often taken for granted in scholarly discourse, and too often are used interchangeably as empirical and analytical categories –thereby leading to fuzziness in interdisciplinary work. Her well-argued perspectives have opened up for several themes for further discussion here and now as well as for future studies in the history of religions. To mention just some of the more crucial themes:

- the cognitive and spatial aspects of the metaphors we work with
- the importance of definitions
- the disciplinary history (and histories) of our various fields of study, and the effect of academic history on positions taken today
- the need for a dynamic discussion about our interdisciplinary relationships

These are core issues that should not be given overly definitive answers in a discipline sound and alive. Hopefully, its empirical varieties and theoretical pluralism will remain its hallmark.

