

# Thinking about Thinking about Religion

## THINKING ABOUT RELIGION: AN HISTORICAL INTRODUCTION TO THEORIES OF RELIGION

By Ivan Strenski

Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2006

Pp. 358. \$88.95, ISBN 978-1-4051-2012-8

## THINKING ABOUT RELIGION: A READER

Edited by Ivan Strenski

Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2006

Pp. 256. \$78.95, ISBN 978-1-4051-2166-8

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Many<sup>1</sup> students believe that they understand the theoretical side of religious studies when they know “the theory of Durkheim,” “the theory of Freud,” or “the theory of Eliade” (to name only the most popular). This is, of course, a rather optimistic statement and an oversimplified view of the authors’ respective works, which certainly cannot be reduced to one theory. How can this unfortunate situation be redressed? Could a book take into account the complexity of each author’s works? Would this book then still be pedagogically suited for undergraduate students? These questions underline the fact that writing an account of classical theories of religion is not just reproducing known arguments. Such an undertaking has to deal with certain sets of constraints: the selection of authors, the selection of their works, the option to proceed by themes or focus on a restricted number of authors, the necessity of writing clearly enough for undergraduate students, and the editorial constraints limiting the number of pages of a book. It is therefore quite tricky to produce a perfect book regarding each of these aspects, and the decisions of the author will necessarily reflect his own way of “thinking about religion.” Writing about classical theories thus implies a certain amount of creativity. One example of coping with these different points is the recent volume, *Thinking about Religion: An Historical Introduction to Theories of Religion* (hereafter *ThR*), by Professor Ivan Strenski, principally aimed at undergraduate students.

The book is organized into three parts including twelve chapters, each dealing with a major “theory” or “approach”

to religion. In the first part, “The Prehistory of the Study of Religion: Responses to an Expanding World,” Strenski argues that the very practice of abstractly thinking about religion arose as a result of certain “problems of religion.” This part includes: (Chapter 1) a presentation of early thinkers about religion (“Naturalism, God-Given Reason, and the Quest for Natural Religion”) and (Chapter 2), the contribution of biblical scholars to the study of religion (“The Critique of Religion Also Begins with the Critique of the Bible”).

The second part, “Classic Nineteenth-Century Theorists of the Study of Religion: The Quest for the Origins of Religion in History,” examines four authors who, Strenski maintains, were primarily concerned with the question of the origins of religion: (Chapter 3) Max Müller (“The Shock of the Old: Max Müller’s Search for the Soul in Europe”), (Chapter 4) Edward Burnett Tylor (“The Shock of the ‘Savage’: Edward Burnett Tylor, Evolution, and Spirits”), (Chapter 5) William Robertson Smith (“Evolution in the Religion of the Bible: William Robertson Smith”), and (Chapter 6) James George Frazer (“Setting the Eternal Templates of Salvation: James Frazer”).

The third part, “Classic Twentieth-Century Theorists of the Study of Religion: Defending the Inner Sanctum of Religious Experience or Storming It,” is devoted to different theories which, each in its own way, rejected the evolutionist point of view and acknowledged the role of the subjectivity in human culture (*ThR* 166): (Chapter 7) phenomenology of religion, from Cornelis Tiele to Ninian Smart (“From Evolution to Religious Experience: Phenomenology of Religion”), (Chapter 8) Max Weber (“Religious Experience Creates the World of Modern Economy: Max Weber”), (Chapter 9) Sigmund Freud (“Tales from Underground: Freud and the Psychoanalytic Origins of Religion”), (Chapter 10) Bronislaw Malinowski (“Bronislaw Malinowski, Bipolarity, and the ‘Sublime Folly’ of Religion”), (Chapter 11) Émile Durkheim (“Seeing the Sacred with the Social Eye: Émile Durkheim,” and (Chapter 12) Mircea Eliade (“Mircea Eliade: Turning the ‘Worm of Doubt’”). A conclusion (Chapter 13) provides the reader with methodological observations and reflexive remarks (“Science of Religion, the Bible, and Prince Charming”). The book contains references at the end of each chapter and is richly illustrated. The companion reader, *Thinking about Religion: A Reader* (hereafter *ThRR*), offers source material relevant to the main book. Both volumes include an index.

Since many books examining the classical theories of religion already exist, we might wonder whether a new book on that topic is most essential. We can recall, among others, Jacques Waardenburg's *Classical Approaches to the Study of Religion*, Eric Sharpe's *Comparative Religion*, James Samuel Preus's *Explaining Religion*, Hans-Gerhard Kippenberg's *Discovering Religious History in the Modern Age*, or Daniel Pals's *Theories of Religion*.<sup>2</sup> How then is Strenski's work in any way specific? I contend that, even if they are presented as introductory, these books are not exactly "classical" in the strict sense of the term, but give rather a fresh insight on otherwise very well-known theories.

There are at least four important peculiarities of *ThR* and *ThRR* that we have to emphasize: 1) Strenski's selection of authors does not completely reproduce the canonical list of thinkers usually handled in this kind of work; 2) Strenski adopts a historicizing perspective similar to the one he previously applied in *Four Theories of Myth*, and *Durkheim and the Jews of France*,<sup>3</sup> refusing to deal abstractly with "theories," but trying to understand them by relating them to the intellectual context in which their authors worked. They are exclusively considered to be historical productions of "theorists," and not simply as ideas coming "out of thin air"; 3) Strenski himself avoids judging the "theories" under examination to be either false or true, purposeless or useful: he systematically asks "why the theorists thought that they were right" (*ThR* 4). He, therefore, does not prescribe an "ideal theory" and does not think that such a theory actually exists, since "[n]o perfect Prince Charming of theories waits to carry us off to some intellectual paradise" (*ThR* 4); and 4) the companion reader (*ThRR*) includes articles from contemporary scholars (such as Samuel Preus and Robert Segal), providing alternative perspectives on the authors handled in *ThR*. I shall deal with these four points before discussing whether such an undertaking seems pedagogically appropriate for an introductory book, which aims to be read by students relatively new to the field.

#### 1. THE NOT SO HOLY "CANON" OF RELIGIOUS STUDIES

Let us underscore three unusual features regarding the choice of the authors handled in *ThR*: 1) the entire section dedicated to the "prehistory of the study of religion" is not a standard of the "canon" of religious studies (even if Preus's *Explaining Religion* already deals with authors such as Herbert of Cherbury or David Hume)<sup>4</sup>; 2) unlike numerous works on the history of the study of religion,<sup>5</sup> Strenski devotes one whole chapter to biblical scholars<sup>6</sup>; and 3) Strenski distinguishes phenomenologists of religion strictly speaking (ranging from William Brede Kristensen to Ninian Smart) from Eliade, whose "approach is so unique [. . .] that he merits [a] chapter of his own" (*ThR* 327).

Since the single act of selecting authors is partly subjective, it inevitably reflects a specific conception of the whole field. Indeed, the canonical list of so-called "fathers" of the discipline is not a revealed datum. It is in itself an historical production, matching specific interests, and tacitly implying a specific view of the discipline: why, for example, in the classical canon take account of Rudolf Otto, and not mention scholars like Andrew Lang or Sylvain Lévi? Why does the classical canon not usually include contributions of female authors, when, for example, a figure such as Jane Harrison authored significant works?<sup>7</sup> We have to note here that Strenski himself regrets not having been able (for the sake of the book's format) to present works of influential authors like Joachim Wach, Karl Marx, Ludwig Feuerbach,<sup>8</sup> Friedrich Heiler, William James, Carl Jung, Raffaele Pettazoni, and several other scholars writing in the study of religion today (*ThR* 344). So which view of the study of religion underlies Strenski's choice?

Strenski's selection of authors makes it quite evident that two parallel but more or less opposite ways of studying religion developed throughout history: the first can be traced back to the deists (Charles Blount, Matthew Tindal, John Toland, and others) and was revived by Müller, Tiele, Otto, or Eliade. These authors would certainly concur in saying that "religion" exists in itself and that all religions are *in fine* concrete manifestations of a shared religious essence. The second tradition goes back to skeptical philosophers such as Hume, and was taken further by, among others, Tylor, Frazer, Durkheim, and Freud.<sup>9</sup> These authors are "critics" rather than "caretakers," and their perspective can be qualified as "reductionist": religion is above all the by-product of various external causes (such as the fear of death, the human inclination for living in societies, or the functioning of human mind). Strenski acknowledges the respective importance of these two streams for the composition of the field as a whole,<sup>10</sup> though he would rather describe himself as a "critic of religion."<sup>11</sup> Yet the very opposition between "critics" and "caretakers" is maybe not so clear-cut than what one could think at first. Strenski illustrates the influence of these two intellectual traditions upon each other and insists that this opposition should not be radicalized. For example, Malinowski, mainly known for being a "critic" of religion, is depicted as sharing some ideas with the early phenomenologists of religion (*ThR* 177). Conversely, Müller's idealistic perspective, for example, was informed by philological methods familiar to proponents of the high criticism of the Bible, themselves closer to a critical approach to religion (*ThR* 63 sqq.). Müller is thus both a "critic" and a "caretaker" of religion (*ThR* 132).

In this regard, the inclusion of biblical scholars in the "canon" is especially welcome. The very fact that the biblical scholars' contribution is often played down in historical

accounts of the field is perhaps ultimately a far echo of the old-fashioned conviction that the academic study of religion had to deal with every religion except Christianity and Judaism. Those two traditions were believed to be too special to be handled on the same scale as other religions, and therefore needed special disciplines, distinct from the more general study of (other) religions.<sup>12</sup> It is, nonetheless, quite obvious that the rise of the scientific study of the Bible (from Spinoza to Renan) opened new possibilities for the scientific study of other “religious” texts. This, for example, is true of Müller, who worked in Oxford, while the higher criticism of the Bible was becoming a dominant paradigm among biblical scholars (*ThR* 65). Furthermore, certain scholars, having played a determinant role in the history of the comparative study of religions, specialized in the Bible (think for example of Maurice Vernes, or Albert and Jean Réville, at the *École Pratique des Hautes Études*, Paris).

Finally, the fact that Eliade is singled out among phenomenologists helps to distinguish several phenomenologies of religion (*ThR* 166). For Strenski, even if Eliade shares ideas with phenomenologists, he does so in a more extreme way.<sup>13</sup> It would therefore surely be a mistake to systematically address the criticism aimed at one particular author—say, Eliade<sup>14</sup>—to other phenomenologists (such as Smart) for the alleged reason that they would all work equally from a phenomenological perspective. Strenski looks for the historical factors determining the rise of phenomenology of religion and sees it mainly as a reaction against the extreme evolutionist explanations of the late nineteenth century. In that framework, Tiele is depicted as one of the precursors of the phenomenology of religion, having conciliated a kind of softened evolutionism with a morphological view on religion (*ThR* 169 sqq.). Tiele’s contribution was thus quite decisive, in that he brought new ideas that were reinterpreted by later authors (in particular, William Brede Kristensen and Gerardus Van der Leeuw). One should nevertheless remain aware that Tiele also developed unambiguously apologetic arguments for Christianity in several of his works, and in particular, in the article “Religions” of the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*.<sup>15</sup> Tiele’s morphology of religions was unfortunately biased from the very beginning.<sup>16</sup> All things considered, Strenski’s treatment of Tiele (*ThR* 167-73) could maybe have been a little briefer, allowing him to develop more thoroughly the contributions of Kristensen or Van der Leeuw.

## 2. THEORIES IN CONTEXT

As stated in the subtitle (*An Historical Introduction*), *ThR* proposes an historical approach to theories of religion. The author proceeds rather chronologically, from precursors of the study of religion to twentieth century’s scholars, but the term “historical” is not just here as a synonym for “chronological.”

The work of Strenski can be said to be historical in quite another meaning of the term. He aims to present the “theories” in a contextualized way, which implies a tentative reconstruction of their respective historical settings. Explaining his methodology, Strenski states in *Four Theories of Myth in Twentieth Century*: “As an alternative to the study of theory through texts alone, I am [. . .] proposing a style of intellectual history radically informed by the study of context and recovery of intention.”<sup>17</sup> This view of history is held by, among others, the British historian Quentin Skinner, to whom Strenski refers in a number of his other books. Skinner writes, in a typical statement of a famous article, “Meaning and Understanding in the History of Ideas,” that “the essential question which we therefore confront, in studying any given text, is what its author, in writing at the time he did write for the audience he intended to address, could in practice have been intending to communicate by the utterance of this given utterance.”<sup>18</sup> The focus then turns from the texts as autonomous documents to the author’s intentions and to the possible audience for whom he wrote at his time. The main point of Skinner’s work is to avoid separating ideas or “theories” from their historical context and discuss them as if they were eternal truths. In particular, Skinner criticizes historical surveys of a reified idea (e.g. social contract, separation of powers, doctrine of equality, etc.) considered as having always been there, only waiting to be discovered. Such a premise could result in two kinds of anachronisms: 1) “pointing out earlier ‘anticipations’ of later doctrines, and [. . .] crediting each writer in terms of this clairvoyance”<sup>19</sup>; and 2) conversely, negatively judging a writer for not having fully developed the canonical version of a theory, idea, or argument.<sup>20</sup> As Strenski’s works show, Skinner’s recommendations seem to be a good way to (at least partially) solve certain classical methodological problems linked with the very category of “religion.”

Indeed, even if Strenski does not make the point explicitly in *ThR*, one of the main problems with the category of “religion” is that it is continuously redefined according to the particular interests of particular writers.<sup>21</sup> This single fact, widely acknowledged in contemporary studies,<sup>22</sup> makes it difficult to carry out a study of theories of religion taken out of their respective contexts of production (for the reason that they would allegedly all deal with “religion”). Such a perspective would actually be legitimate if the concept of “religion” explained or dealt with by every “theorist of religion” was an objective matter, not subject to change (each author providing a new perspective on a constant object). Unless we can prove that “religion” is an objective matter, the study of theories of religion needs first to enquire as to how “religion” was defined or “constructed” in each specific context. The notion of “theory” itself has to be used with some caution, since not every author examined in *ThR*

consciously produced one *theory* of religion. Strenski is well aware of this problem and speaks rather of “theoretical ideas” than of “theories,” strictly speaking.<sup>23</sup>

At that point, we have to be aware of another pitfall. If we radicalize this particularist (or nominalist) perspective, we could raise the conclusion that, *in fine*, no possible intellectual history of the study of religion exists at all, but only discrete histories of specific works, dealing each with its particular set of questions, with a particular definition of “religion.” Indeed, Skinner himself is not far from such a point of view when he states, “it must be a mistake even to try [ . . . ] to write histories of ideas tracing the morphology of a given concept over the time.”<sup>24</sup> How does Strenski cope with this problem?

As he argues in another paper, “Why It Is Better to Know Some of the Questions than All of the Answers,” unlike definitions of religion, certain *problems of religion* have remained more or less constant throughout history.<sup>25</sup> Rather than the history of the study of “religion” as an object, we should therefore turn to the history of “problems of religion.”<sup>26</sup> There are common sets of problems and questions that are handled by more than one “theorist of religion,” and that represent key topics for the development of the study of religions: the origin of religion, the mere presence of several religions, the claim of truth of each religion, the function of religion, etc. These questions partly arose as reactions to crucial historical events or processes, such as the Great Discoveries, the Reformation, European wars of religion, the Enlightenment, the Christian missions, Western colonialism or secularization. It is in addressing these “problems of religion” that the study of religion became a real necessity. This viewpoint is constantly reflected in *ThR*, and the first chapter begins with the following statement: “People began studying religion because people were having ‘big’ problems concerning religion—fundamental problems about the very nature of religion. What was the first religion? How many religions are there really? Is religion a good thing? Have people always been religious?” (*ThR* 9). Each chapter is thus built around one problem of religion, “emergent at a particular time because of various changes that occur in a society” (*ThR* 5). As in *Four Theories of Myth in Twentieth Century*, Strenski adopts a “soft” version of Skinner’s historical particularism; he would not concur in saying that each “theory” about religion is incommensurate with each other.<sup>27</sup> The red thread is not anymore the very idea of “religion,” but the complex effects this idea had in history. Strenski’s goal is therefore to see at the same time “the trees and the forest” (*ThR* 4), that is, the meaning of one work considered in its own historical and biographical context, and the place (and “effect”) of the work within the global context of the history of the study of religions.

One can look at, for instance, Weber’s works on religion. According to Strenski, the biographical details of his life can contribute to new insights on his ideas. It is thus likely that Weber’s intellectual work was influenced by the recurring tensions between his two parents. His mother was a pious Lutheran, while his father rather was a rationalist, principally worried about worldly matters. Thus “[i]n a way, Weber could not live with religion, nor could he live without it. He might well have avoided considering religion as active and important in the world, but his conscientious scholarship simply prevented him from denying what he came to learn” (*ThR* 203). Similarly, the mere fact of Weber’s birthplace, Erfurt, which was at that time (second half of the nineteenth century) almost equally divided between Protestants and Catholics, could have developed his sensitivity to the comparison of cultures. Strenski indeed argues that “[t]his perception of difference seems to have left an indelible imprint on Weber that is evident in *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*.”<sup>28</sup>

The agenda of reconstructing a biographical and intellectual context is certainly a difficult one, and one must concede the tentative aspect of certain historical interpretations, especially for authors having lived and worked in a now-remote past, whose writings would deserve further historical investigation. Nevertheless, Strenski succeeds in this task, presenting concurrently the theories, the theorists, and their historical context in an informed way. For some topics, such as Durkheim and the French sociological school, Strenski is certainly one of the leading scholars working towards a reconstruction of this intellectual milieu today.<sup>29</sup>

### 3. “THE STUDY OF RELIGION WITHOUT METAPHYSICS”: FROM A HISTORICAL STUDY OF THEORIES OF RELIGION TO A HISTORICAL STUDY OF RELIGION

In the last chapter of *ThR*, Strenski defends a nondogmatic point of view toward theories of religion. Nearly every perspective examined in the book (in particular, Durkheim, Eliade, Freud, Malinowski, Tylor, and Weber) still has its followers, and it is certainly not possible to restrict the very name of “historian of religion”/“scholar of religion” to one paradigm only. Each view is legitimate to qualify as an approach to the study of religion.<sup>30</sup> This generous statement is certainly to be welcomed, for the book is primarily conceived as an introduction for students who primarily need a fair account of available theories. Nevertheless, two questions can be raised at this point: 1) in its noble will to be “nondogmatic,” can the study of religion work with any kind of theory of religion? 2) After all, is the historical perspective that Strenski himself uses in his presentations of theories not particularly relevant for the study of “religious” phenomena?

Let us examine briefly these two questions. Although he does not directly address the problem of a theory's validity in *ThR*, Strenski is quite explicit about it in other writings. In a paper published in a collective work examining the conflictual relationship between theology and the study of religion,<sup>31</sup> Strenski deals with a well-known argument, inspired by postmodern philosophy: that no theory can be ideologically neutral, that theological theories are no more ideologically oriented than others, and that an author like Karl Barth therefore should be considered a major figure in the field of religious studies.<sup>32</sup> The answer is clear:

In its parochialism and abject ignorance, the Barthian position is not only embarrassing for its coarse ignorance of the religions, but also offensive to the dignity of the spiritual and religious lives of literally billions of fellow human beings. [...] Barthian theology cannot challenge any sort of intellectual paradigm—whether of religious studies or not—because its position on religion is hopelessly sectarian and dogmatic.<sup>33</sup>

Consequently, not every position can be validated as a theory to be included in the canon of religious studies. Classical writers like Durkheim or Freud provided theories that can be applied to a large range of facts and do not directly emerge from a dogmatic point of view. At the same time, Strenski maintains (*ThR*: 339 sqq.), it would be a mistake to negate completely the religious motivations contributing to the rise of the study of religion. Strenski here refers to a recent book of Russell T. McCutcheon,<sup>34</sup> whom he criticizes for trying to wipe out any metaphysical foundation for the study of religion. “Indeed history teaches precisely the opposite lesson. Most founders of the study of religion felt that it was only by virtue of the God-given nature of reason that their researches into religion were possible!” (*ThR* 339). McCutcheon's suggestion to eradicate any theistic foundation would ironically, according to Strenski, “reintroduce metaphysics in the field” (*ThR*: 340), but a *naturalist* metaphysics. Strenski concludes: “[N]o [...] metaphysical foundation, supernaturalist *or* naturalist, is required for doing the study of religion” (*ThR* 340).

We turn now to our second question, the place of history among various theories of religion. Strenski suggests, independent of the question of metaphysical foundations, that we need rules of evidence just as we need them in courts of law, which “do not require us to prove or disprove the existence of a supernatural world” (*ThR* 341). In *ThR*, these rules—which are necessary for a fruitful collaboration between researchers—are not specifically articulated (and it is certainly not the purpose of the book to describe them). Reading the author, we however wonder whether the very historical method he uses for studying theories and theorists of religion would not be fit as well for the study of “religious facts” themselves. The methodological difficulties implied by a study of theories of religion and those of a work on “religious

facts” are quite similar, and both need context in order to make sense of the phenomenon under examination. Does such an historical awareness not constitute a basic requirement for the scholars of religion today *before* explaining and interpreting facts according to various theories? For that purpose, Skinner's methodology, which aims to recover the meaning of historical facts for their actors (equivalent to the emic standpoint in standard anthropological vocabulary), is of particular interest. This also means greater attention to the documents themselves (the way they were redacted, etc.), which is one lesson that students of religion can retain from the higher criticism of the Bible.<sup>35</sup> In the same vein, we can recall the following statement of Morton Smith, who argued almost forty years ago, “The science of religion, for which [...] histories of particular religions are prerequisites, is still far in future. But, when and if it comes, both it, and the individual histories already developing, will be shaped by a basic supposition of sound historical method.”<sup>36</sup>

#### 4. THEORIES AND THEORISTS IN RELATION

The companion reader (*ThRR*) equally reflects Strenski's historical methodology, aiming to recast a number of classic texts in the intellectual setting prevalent at the time of their composition. This can be seen in three features of *ThRR*. First, Strenski often selects excerpts from several works (and not only one long one from the most famous work of a given author), which helps the student to see the ideas of a writer as parts of a bigger work, and not simply as representatives of “his theory.” For example, in dealing with Tylor, Strenski gives one excerpt from his *Anahuac: Or Mexico and the Mexicans, Ancient and Modern*, as well as one from his better known *Primitive Culture*.

Second, *ThRR* also includes reviews of the works of “classical authors” written shortly after the time of their publication. Take for example the review of Müller's *Chips*<sup>37</sup> by the American sanskritist, William Dwight Whitney, which demonstrates that the criticism addressed to Müller's romanticism is in no way a modern one. Many of Whitney's arguments have indeed not lost anything of their relevancy today. The “Souvenir of Malinowski” by Lévi-Strauss is also a relatively unknown piece of text, which shows concurrently the deep respect Lévi-Strauss had for Malinowski and the irreducible points of divergence between the two thinkers (*ThRR* 182-83).

Third, *ThRR* also reproduces recent contributions of contemporary scholars in order to help students understand what the present relevance of a given theory could be. As far as I can tell, it is one of the first anthologies to include recent views on the works of older authors. Especially appreciated, for example, is the paper by Segal on Hume (“Hume's *Natural History of Religion* and the Beginning of the Social Scientific Study of Religion”), in which it is argued that Hume can

be considered a forefather of the modern study of religion.<sup>38</sup> This feature also provides the student with alternative perspectives to Strenski's treatment of theories and authors handled in the main book.<sup>39</sup>

##### 5. AN APPROPRIATE INTRODUCTION FOR STUDENTS OF RELIGION?

What is the most efficient way of teaching the main theories of religion to beginner students? What are the pedagogical consequences of a perspective focusing on the historical settings of theories rather than on the theories themselves? It would seem that this approach leads to quite a complicated picture, making it more difficult for students to grasp the nature of the theories. In reality, the opposite appears to be true. Even if the "theories" are presented with greater nuance (which makes them more complex than their traditionally conveyed image), their intellectual and historical context makes them more easily understood. Let us take an example: the attraction of Müller towards nature could seem strange to a contemporary student. Why would one think that the "first religion" was a "religion of nature?" How could the Indian Vedas reflect this natural state of religion? By linking Müller to the deists and to German romanticism, by recasting him in the cultural and political context of his time, and by showing the way in which vedic texts can be interpreted according to this worldview,<sup>40</sup> it becomes easier to understand why it was important at that time to "think about religion" in such terms. In a way, Müller's work will suddenly appear "logical." Were we to think of Müller not in his terms, but in *our own*, we would be forced to conclude that what he said is not relevant for the contemporary study of religion anymore, or that it is simply wrong. In my opinion, a proper understanding of a theory needs contextualization, and more specifically, needs to inquire about how the object the theory is supposed to explain was defined (or constructed) by a particular author at a particular time. This also has relevance for the actual practice of theorizing, in that it makes students aware of the hidden issues at stake behind any theory (including the ones they could themselves produce).<sup>41</sup>

Moreover, Strenski is constantly concerned with making his text understandable<sup>42</sup> and the books are written in a pleasant way (sometimes not without a certain sense of humour). For the above mentioned reasons, I believe Strenski's work to be pedagogically suited for students beginning in the field, and hope that this work will be widely used in introductory classes in the study of religion.

##### NOTES

1. For useful criticism and help on earlier drafts of this article, I am indebted to Professor M. Burger and K. Lawson.

2. Waardenburg, Jacques, *Classical Approaches to the Study of Religion: Aims, Methods, and Theories of Research. Introduction and Anthology*, New York/Berlin: de Gruyter, 1999 (1973-74); Sharpe, Eric J., *Comparative Religion: A History*, London: Duckworth, 1986; Preus, James Samuel, *Explaining Religion: Criticism and Theory from Bodin to Freud*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1987; Kippenberg, Hans-Gerhard, *Discovering Religious History in the Modern Age*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002; and Pals, Daniel L., *Eight Theories of Religion*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2006.
3. Strenski, Ivan, *Four Theories of Myth in Twentieth Century*, Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1987; and Strenski, Ivan, *Durkheim and the Jews of France*, Chicago/London: University of Chicago Press, 1997.
4. For comparison's sake, Waardenburg's *Classical Approaches* deals with the following thinkers (in alphabetical order): J. Bachofen, G. Berger, P. Chantepie de la Saussaye, F. Delitzsch, E. Durkheim, J. G. Frazer, S. Freud, H. Frick, N. D. Fustel de Coulanges, F. Heiler, W. James, C. G. Jung, H. Kraemer, W. Kristensen, A. Lang, L. Lévy-Bruhl, R. Lowie, B. Malinowski, R. Marett, M. Mauss, M. Müller, M. Nilsson, R. Otto, W. Otto, R. Pettazzoni, A. Radcliffe-Brown, P. Radin, E. Renan, W. Robertson Smith, M. Scheler, W. Schmidt, A. Schweitzer, N. Söderblom, H. Spencer, C. Tiele, E. B. Tylor, G. Van der Leeuw, A. Van Gennep, J. Wach, M. Weber, J. Wellhausen. Pals's *Eight Theories* includes theories of E. Durkheim, M. Eliade, E. Evans-Pritchard, J. G. Frazer, S. Freud, C. Geertz, K. Marx, E. B. Tylor and M. Weber. Preus's *Explaining Religion* deals with J. Bodin, H. of Cherbury, A. Comte, E. Durkheim, B. Fontenelle, S. Freud, D. Hume, E. B. Tylor and G. Vico.
5. Strenski prefers the term "study of religion" (*ThR* 338 sqq.) even if he occasionally uses the expression "religious studies" (*ThR* 338-39, in the titles).
6. Strenski is not completely alone on that point: Waardenburg too mentions the works of several biblical scholars (E. Renan, J. Wellhausen . . .) among the "classical approaches" on religion.
7. Waardenburg, for example, does not mention any female author in his *Classical Approaches*. Strenski mentions female contributions, mainly in link with Malinowski (*ThR* 279-81). Kippenberg devotes several pages (105-11) to Jane Harrison.
8. For reasons which could be in themselves worth research, L. Feuerbach and K. Marx are often forgotten in surveys of classical authors of the study of religion (note the exception of Pals' *Seven Theories*).
9. As is shown by Sharpe, Eric J., *Comparative Religion*, p. 267 sqq. These two streams are still to be observed and often raise conflicts in major congresses of the field.
10. Compare with the historical sketch suggested by Preus's *Explaining Religion*, which roots the contemporary study of religion exclusively in the tradition of skepticism, while ignoring the whole phenomenological school. For Preus, "[t]he study of religion issues from *criticism* of religion." (p. 82)
11. In *ThR* 338 Strenski calls himself "a proponent of what one might call a naturalistic (or nontheological) approach to the study of religion."

12. As Strenski interestingly recalls (*ThR* 299), this “exceptionalist” position is reflected by, among many others, Chantepie de la Saussaye, who deliberately excluded Christianity and Judaism from his *Manuel d'histoire des religions* (1887-89). Similarly (*ThR* 66-67), Müller's *Sacred Books of the East* does not include texts relevant to Judaism or Christianity (which Müller bitterly regretted).
13. Cf. *ThR* 311-13.
14. Strenski underlines several problematic aspects of Eliade's work and in particular Eliade's ambivalence toward history (*ThR* 313). On this point, Strenski quotes Dudley, Guilford, *Religion on Trial: Mircea Eliade and His Critics*, Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1977, p. 148, who had called Eliade an “anti-historian of religion.”
15. See “Religions” in *Encyclopaedia Britannica. Ninth Edition*, Edinburgh: A. and C. Black, vol. 20, 1884, p. 369: “If religion really is the synthesis of dependence and liberty, we might say that Islâm represents the former, Buddhism the latter element only, while Christianity does full justice to both of them. Christianity [ . . . ] has fused dependence and liberty, the divine and the human, religion and ethics into an indivisible unity.” See also his *Elements of the Science of Religion. Part 1: Morphological*, Edinburgh/London: W. Blackwood and Sons, 1897, t. 1, pp. 208-12.
16. In this sense, Tiele not only tried to “establish the existence and character of the noumenal ‘religion-as-such’” (*ThR* 173), but also repeatedly presented Christianity as the most developed manifestation of this essence of religion, which results in a prominent place among the “world religions,” themselves superior to other religions.
17. Strenski, *Four Theories of Myth in Twentieth Century*, p. 10. In *ThR* like in *Four Theories of Myth*, Strenski describes the “internal context” (i.e., the biographical and intellectual contexts of the writers) as well as the “external context” (i.e., the larger cultural context, including political, religious, economic, etc. aspects).
18. Skinner, Quentin, “Meaning and Understanding in the History of Ideas” in *History and Theory* 8 (1), 1969, pp. 48-49. For a criticism of Skinner's approach, see Tully, James (Ed.), *Meaning and Context. Quentin Skinner and his Critics*, Cambridge: Polity Press, 1988, pp. 135-228.
19. Skinner, “Meaning and Understanding . . .”, p. 11.
20. Skinner, “Meaning and Understanding . . .”, p. 12.
21. The book of Despland, Michel, *La religion en Occident. Evolution des idées et du vécu*, Montréal: Fides 1979, makes it clear that the meaning of the concept evolved through the ages, even if we can distinguish schools of thought between authors.
22. Thus Alles, Gregory D., “Religion [Further Considerations]” in *Encyclopedia of Religion. Second Edition*, Jones, Lindsay (Ed.), 2005, vol. 11, pp. 7704-5, in particular: “it is widely thought today that definitions are specific to contexts and purposes, and there is no reason religion should be any different” (p. 7705).
23. *ThR* 342: “In looking closely at the classic ‘theories’ of religion in *Thinking about Religion*, I have finally tried to reveal what so-called ‘theories’ of religion really are. In truth, I think we would conclude that they are not ‘theories’ at all, but at best theoretical *ideas*.”
24. Skinner, Quentin, “Meaning and Understanding . . .”, p. 48.
25. Strenski, Ivan, “Why It Is Better to Know Some of the Questions than All of the Answers” in *Method and Theory in the Study of Religion* 15/2 (2003), p. 171, and *ThR* 1-3.
26. In “Why It Is Better . . .”, p. 172, Strenski refers to Karl Popper (*Objective Knowledge*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1973) and shows that the very attempt to solve such problems constitutes the core of theoretical activity. The point is not about actually *solving* these problems but rather about *trying*.
27. See Strenski's critique of Skinner in Strenski, Ivan, *Four Theories of Myth*, p. 195: “I aim to soften Skinner's radical historical particularism.”
28. *ThR* 203. In his treatment of Weber (*ThR* 198-232), Strenski almost exclusively refers to *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* and unfortunately bypasses important aspects of Weber's other works (e.g., the distinctions between “prophets,” “priests,” and “magicians,” the question of the institutionalization of religion, or the notion of charisma).
29. See Strenski, Ivan, *The New Durkheim*, New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2006. Among other scholars having adopted a similar approach to Durkheim, see Jones, Robert Alun, *Emile Durkheim: an Introduction to Four Major Works*, Beverly Hills, CA: Sage Publications, 1986.
30. Thus *ThR* 337: “The study of religion is notoriously peopled by Weberians, Durkheimians, Freudians, Chicago School (Eliade) products, biblical critics working in the spirit of Spinoza or Robertson Smith, functionalists thinking about religion much as Malinowski did, anthropologists of religion tracing their lineage to Tylor and beyond, cross-cultural comparativists of many sorts, such as those working in the light cast by Max Müller or even Frazer, and finally the many species of phenomenologists—both of the classic variety or of the more recent vintage exemplified by Ninian Smart or Mircea Eliade.”
31. Strenski, Ivan, “Why Theology Won't Work” in *Religious Studies, Theology, and the University. Conflicting Maps, Changing Terrain*, Cady, L. E., and Brown, D. (Eds.), Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 2002, pp. 31-44.
32. The point is argued by Green, Garrett, “Challenging the Religious Studies Canon: Karl Barth's Theory of Religion,” *The Journal of Religion* 75 (1995).
33. Strenski, Ivan, “Why Theology Won't Work,” p. 35.
34. McCutcheon, Russell T., *Critics, Not Caretakers. Redescriving the Public Study of Religion*, Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 2001.
35. Strenski precisely underlines the relevancy of the higher criticism of the Bible school for the contemporary study of religion (*ThR* 342).
36. Smith, Morton, “Historical Method in the Study of Religion,” *History and Theory* 8 (1968), Beiheft 8: On Method in the History of Religions, p. 12. See also, in the same paper, the sharp critique of Eliade's antihistoricism (pp. 14-15).
37. *ThRR* 61-64. For an unknown reason (probably a printing mistake), in *ThRR*, Strenski refers to *Chips from a German Workshop* as *Chips from a German Woodshop* [sic].

38. *ThRR* 13-22. The paper was originally published in *Religion* 24 (3), 1994, pp. 225-34.
39. This is especially true for the inclusion of the article entitled “Mircea Eliade: *Apologia pro Opere Suo*”, in *ThRR* 241-47, whose author, Bryan Rennie, is, according to Strenski, “critical of the criticisms leveled by the editor of this reader [*sc.* Strenski himself] at Eliade’s work.”
40. Strenski actually quotes a portion of the *Rg Veda* (*ThR* 79) to demonstrate what aspects of the text possibly excited the interest of Müller.
41. I therefore do not agree with Donald Wiebe’s review of *ThR*, *The Catholic Historical Review* 92.3 (2006), p. 279, who finds making the students “understand how and why some remarkable folk thought about religion” (*ThR* 6) “an inadequate goal for a book meant to introduce students to the importance of theory in the study of religion.”
42. Take for example the helpful remarks on the terms of “natural religion,” “naturism,” and “religion of nature,” in *ThR* 68-69.