

# Religion in Rehearsals & Relief

## A Discussion of Martin Riesebrodt's Theory of Religion

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Gestern standen wir noch am Abgrund,  
heute sind wir schon einen Schritt weiter.  
(Riesebrodt 2007:24)

Students of religion may sometimes feel that they are standing on the edge of an abyss when asked to answer the question “what is religion, really?” Despite the vertigo that may occur when leaping into such inquiries, it is probably a good thing for a discipline being called “the study of religion.” Indeed, sometimes it will lead to *theories of religion*. One of those who have dared to take the one step further is the sociologist Martin Riesebrodt. Riesebrodt offers a comprehensible theory of religion in his monograph *Cultus und Heilsversprechen*, that translates to *Cultus and Promises of Salvation*, or as I suggest *rehearsals and promises of relief*. In the following sections I present a discussion of the various features of this theory. (1) I touch upon Riesebrodt's point of departure in justifying ‘religion’ as an analytical category. (2) After presenting his connections with Weber, (3) I present his definition, I tie it in with the two main features of his theory. (4) ‘Cultus’ will be discussed with a focus on his typologies of religious practices. (5) ‘Salvation’ will be discussed with regards to religious virtuosi. (6) Conclusively, I take a closer look at Riesebrodt's assessment of the origins and future(s) of religion.

Unfortunately, the frame and focus of this paper will not allow me to go deeply into the empirical examples provided by Riesebrodt. I will also not go into his work on fundamentalism, a theme he do not touch upon to any considerable extent in this publication. Arguably, a theoretical discussion without empirical justifications does seem artificial. I will therefore include reflections of how Riesebrodt uses his examples.

Martin Riesebrodt is employed as a professor at the Chicago Divinity School, and has previously written books, and several articles in English. However, the book where this theory is presented is written in German. Some English material from Riesebrodt's pen will be included in my discussion, but my main source is the recent monograph. This constrains the depth of the analysis as I am not an advanced speaker or reader of German.

It may be argued that the study of religion is now maturing from its adolescence. In its childhood there were several “fathers” that set the standards in which the Study of Religion grew up. In its childhood it was held that science was superior to religion. When the Study of Religion was let out of the home of theology, sociology, anthropology and psychology, it soon discovered some basic flaws with its upbringing. From that point, and up to now, it has learned to put question-marks on the implicit assumptions the earlier approaches to religion conveyed.

Riesebrodt names these four periods the Enlightenment Discourse, the Romantic Discourse, the Secularisation Discourse, and the Postmodernist Discourse (see Riesebrodt 2007: 20).<sup>1</sup> While it can make sense to outline the historical flow in such a way, it also creates the illusion that these are just periods, where the one ends where the other starts. A more precise understanding of these, I think, one that also fits well to Riesebrodt’s own idea, is that these labels overlapping and coexisting discourses. The Enlightenment Discourse is located to the question about religion and rationality and whether these two are compatible. The Romantic Discourse, Riesebrodt suggests, came as a reaction to the attempts of denouncing religious truths, and argued that the human had a religious “potential”, that could be “experienced” and not reduced by means of scientific methods. The Secularisation Discourse, Riesebrodt writes, has dominated in the last century, but only to be proven partially right (see *ibid.*: 20–21). As a heuristic tool to be used during my discussion, I would also like to add the there is a New Discourse within the study of religion. The New Discourse can most easily be recognised in the evolutionary-cognitive approaches to religion, that aim to unite insights from mainly anthropology, ethnography, psychology, and linguistics. It holds that religion, and its relatives, can be studied scientifically, that it is constrained and determined by evolution and is a universal phenomenon.

Within the Postmodernist Discourse there can be found several stances that rule out defining religion as either too difficult, impossible, uninteresting or irrelevant. Relating to the study of religion, the interest is on the already present definitions of religion, and how they can be through deconstruction can be construed as constructions within a specific historical milieu. It is also assumed that the definition of religion is always tied in with interests of power. The term ‘religion’ itself is therefore considered a proper object of study, as an example of power-relations in a concrete historical settings (see *ibid.*: 21; and also Asad 1993:29). Arguably, Marx’s definition, “Religion is the sigh of the oppressed creature, the heart of a heartless world, and the soul of soulless conditions. It is the opium of the people” (Marx 1844) could be interpreted as an execution of discursive power. This would reduce this statement to a product of the political and historical context Marx belonged to, namely the Enlightenment Discourse.

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<sup>1</sup> *Der Aufklärungsdiskurs, Romantischen Diskurs, Säkularisierungsdiskurs, und der Postmodernen Diskurs*

Before going into his own definition and theory, Riesebrodt discusses the Postmodernist Discourse. Here he pays some extra attention on the postcolonial critique put forth by the anthropologist Talal Asad, who has been one of the more prominent spokespersons for this stance. In *Genealogies, The Construction of Religion as an Anthropological Category* (1993) Asad criticises the definition of religion, put forth of anthropologist Clifford Geertz, because he thinks it possesses inherent Christian and Western ideologies. Asad also argues that there cannot be *any* universal definition of religion, not only because of its connection with ideologies, but also because of the historical specificity with definition itself (see *ibid.*: 29).

Another known protagonist for the deconstruction of religion as an analytical category is Timothy Fitzgerald. He proceeds in line with Asad, arguing that our conception of 'religion' is essentially Western, and that it as an analytical category distorts our view of other cultures (see Fitzgerald 1996:234). The same year as Fitzgerald made this arguments against the use of family resemblance to conceptualise religion, Bruce Lincoln, colleague of Riesebrodt, published his *Theses on Method* (Lincoln 1996). Here Lincoln proposes the position a scholar of religion in the History of Religions should take. Lincoln argues that the unfamiliarity with other cultures does not distort our perceptions, on the contrary, they "invite and reward critical study" (Lincoln 1996:10). A decade after Fitzgerald answers with his *Anti-Theses* (2006). While there are rather few new arguments, at least in the theoretical and methodological sense, he makes allusions to Riesebrodt's article *Religion: Just another Western Construction?* (2003) in a footnote, by arguing that the Chicago Divinity School's website is not showing a critical (in the postmodernist sense) digression towards the category Religion (see Fitzgerald 2006:406).

Riesebrodt writes that he is only partially convinced by the propositions from the Postmodernist Discourse, and claims that he has some good reasons to keep the term 'religion' as an analytical category. Riesebrodt offers four reasons to not let the postmodernist critique put an end for 'religion' (see Riesebrodt 2007:23): Firstly, postmodernists falsely assume that because a word has certain relations to a historical context, it cannot be corrected to fit with a global context. Secondly, those who claims that 'religion' cannot be used on non-western examples, still use it. Thirdly, while opponents of the category have rightly assumed that it is not possible to universalise discursive- or institution-theoretical perspectives of religion, but then again, they ignores the theory-of-action approaches. Fourthly, –and Riesebrodt puts this one quite sharply– the deconstruction-agenda has disabled serious research and confused a whole generation of students (*ibid.*: 24).

Riesebrodt does not discuss why exactly 'religion' should be the category, besides that it is possible, and "pragmatic" (*ibid.*:23). The Postmodernist Discourse is not the only factor that should account for the

background of Riesebrodt's theoretical proposals. What is more important is maybe the heritage from to Max Weber.

### *Weberian Influences*

It can be argued that *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (1904) is usually used as *the* example of Weber's approach on religion, yet Weber has written extensively on the theme, e.g. in the works *Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft* (1922). Talcott Parsons argues in the introduction to the translated version of *Sociology of Religion* (1963 [1922]) that Weber's main focus was on the "relations between religious ideas and commitments and other aspects of human conduct, especially the economic characteristics ..." (Parsons 1963:XX). This differs from Riesebrodt's main focus, that is mainly in religion in itself, and not so much on its relation with other social instances. Daniel L. Pals stresses Weber's interest in social action (see Pals 2006:150). Following Pals, Weber distanced himself from functional theories – such as Durkheim and Marx's – and held that "Religion is neither always cause nor always effect; it may be either both ..." (*ibid.*). As will be elaborated on later, Riesebrodt also holds functional definitions (and theories) as not satisfactory.

Much of the terminology used by Riesebrodt directly connects him to Weber's sociology of religion. 'Salvation', or 'promises of salvation' is a central feature in Riesebrodt's theory of religion. We will investigate this later, but it may be helpful to comment upon Weber's use of the term first. During the chapters of *Sociology of Religion* (1963 [1922]), 'salvation' appears in a typology of religion, but also with some of the affiliated processes and roles (such as prophets, rituals, etc.) (e.g. see 89;91;96). This typology emerges through the text, and the types are apparently not exclusive:

Yet there is apparent in these lower middle classes, in contrast to the peasantry, a definite tendency towards congregational religion, towards religion of salvation, and finally towards rational ethical religion. But this contrast between the middle class and the peasantry is far from implying any uniform determinism. (Weber 1963: 96)

Weber has noted that peasants are so dependent on "organic processes" that they do not bother with "rational systematization" of religion, and hence, are more oriented towards "weather magic" and "animistic ritualism or ritualism" (see *ibid.*: 80,82). He also suggests a correlation between different types of religion and societal stratification (see Pals 2006: 170).

Weber use the term (religious) virtuosi as a distinction for religious qualifications. Weber differ 'virtuosi' from organisational 'charismatic' persons, because they have charisma by mean of their own person (see Weber 1963:179). Among Weber's examples of such persons are shamans, hermits, monks, visionaries, mystics, and prophets (see *ibid.*: 180).

Riesebrodt has himself contributed in the discussion of Weber's sociology of religion. In article on the use of the term 'charisma', he argues that Weber uses the term in two different contexts, in political sociology and in the sociology of religion. He holds that a confusion of the term has emerged because Weber himself was inconsistent in his use of the term (see Riesebrodt 1999:2). Riesebrodt concludes with a proposal of how 'charisma' should be defined: "a general term which simply refers to any belief in extraordinary, super-human powers residing in people or objects" (*ibid.*:12).

There is more besides terminology that ties Riesebrodt to Weber's sociology of religion. Both Riesebrodt and Weber seems to be attracted to the idea of *inductiveness*, i.e. the analysing and systematising of empirical material to gain a theory. Paraphrasing Talcott Parsons, the two crucial foci in Weber's work was first the attempt to interpret action by understanding the motives of the actor from a 'subjective' point of view, and furthermore, formalise this into a theory by means of *ideal types* (Parsons 1963:XXIII). The first is the method of *verstehen*. The presentation of Weber's sociology of religion as a product of diligently inductive research by means of *verstehen* does somehow simplify the picture. On the one hand, Weber explicitly writes that he will not, and does not, offer any definition of religion, and that it can only be done after the presentation of the material (see Weber 1963 [1922]:1). This does not imply that Weber in fact does not has any definition of religion. Taking on Weber's stance on the question of definition makes us a segue into the next section.

### *Justifying Religion as an Analytical Category*

The definition of religion that Riesebrodt proposes is as follows: *Religion is a complex of religious practices, that is based on the premise of the existence of –usually invisible– personal, or impersonal superhuman powers* (Riesebrodt 2007:113). Riesebrodt calls this the *religious premise*, and elaborates further that "the super-humanity in this powers lies in that they are described as having control over people's lives and the natural world" (Riesebrodt 2007:113). The definition, as Riesebrodt mentions, is a modified version of that of the anthropologist Melford E. Spiro, and inspired by William James' concept 'ontological imagination' (*ibid.*). The definition being, a religion is "an institution consisting of culturally patterned interaction with culturally postulated superhuman beings" (Spiro 1966:96). Riesebrodt's modifications lays especially in 'impersonal', 'powers', and 'complex'. With the two former, Riesebrodt out less emphasis on superhuman *agency* than Spiro. This can be read as an attempt to include so-called non-theistic religions such as Western Buddhism. As for 'institution', Riesebrodt chooses 'complex of religious practices'. Spiro argues that with 'institution' he wishes to imply that religion – whatever it may be – is an "attribute of social groups, comprising of a component part of their cultural heritage..." (*ibid.*:96f). What we should understand by 'complexes' is not properly explained by Riesebrodt. The word itself connotes 'something that consisting of many different parts', and/or 'is difficult to grasp'.

Further, Riesebrodt wishes to conceptualise derivative terms from 'religion'. He argues that we must differ between 'religion' as institutionalised (!) practices, and 'religious tradition'. 'Religious', he suggests, is actions with reference to superhuman powers (Riesebrodt 2007:115). 'Religiosity', on the other hand, "is the subjective adoption and interpretation of the practices from religion, ... it is the result from dialectics with institutionalised practices..." (*ibid.*). While Riesebrodt is not entirely clear whether we should understand 'religious tradition' as relating to 'religiosity', it is evident this 'religious tradition' could coexist in a relation with 'religion'. By making such distinctions, Riesebrodt enables an analytical sensitisation between different levels of abstraction. A reason for the confusion may be that 'religious' refers to 'religion', rather than 'religiosity'. A possible solution would be to use 'religiose traditions'.

By taking the critique of the Postmodernist Discourse seriously, but not agreeing with its wider implications, Riesebrodt argues that the idea that the invention of the concept religion is rooted and restricted to the Western sphere is a false assumption. To justify the cross-cultural applicability of religion, Riesebrodt offers an approach he labels "referential legitimisation" (Riesebrodt 2003:2), or put otherwise, "religion as social reference" (Riesebrodt 2007:43). In "Religion: Just another Western Construction?" (2003) he writes that "referential legitimisation" means:

...that actors and institutions usually referred to as "religious" by academic disciplines actually tend to recognize each other and are recognized by third parties as being similar across historical and cultural boundaries, and express this perceived similarity in the ways they relate to each other. (Riesebrodt 2003:2)

At first sight it may be tempting to make the argument that these actors and institutions, and 'third parties' were possibly 'forced' to use this concept because of Western colonial interests, and henceforth, concepts made from these references are still tied to a Western ideology. But this argument is dependent on a conceptualisation of what the West is, and secondly, when the West became the West. All which would, or at least should, be deemed as problematic essentialism within the Postmodernist Discourse. Further, the argument has a temporal limitation, namely these Western constructions had to be enforced during or after Colonialism emerged between the sixteenth to the nineteenth century. One may take the argument further in changing out the (colonial) West with Christianity. Thus pushing the temporal limitation further back in the history. If one accepts Riesebrodt's justification, then, social references concerning superhuman powers put before Colonialism, or Christianity, could *not* be viewed as endowed with Western ideology.

Riesebrodt provides several examples of where and when such social references of religion has been done. In "Religion: Just another Western Construction" he lists "polemics and dissociations as well as borrowings, syncretisms, and identifications" (*ibid.*:2), and "edicts of emperors, which regulate, compare, and rank religious institutions" (*ibid.*). In *Cultus and Heilsversprechen* he adds travel-rapports (see Riesebrodt 2007:44). These themes are presented in different religions, mainly Judaism, Christianity, Islam, Buddhism, Confucianism, and Shinto. While the historical validity – did such and such really take place? – is a methodo-

logical concern with several of these text, it does not undermine Riesebrodt's point. His case is that at least somebody recognised someone as something else, in terms of their relations to (practices directed at or by) superhuman powers. However, if the notion in these sources can be judged as representative for the larger population is not discussed to any extent.

Riesebrodt in this respect points to general patterns, at least in textual sources. One of them is the returning polemics against worship of other superhuman powers than ones own. Riesebrodt presents Jewish, Christian, and Muslim texts where there are several examples of polemics against idolatry (see Riesebrodt 2003: 4–6; and also 2007: 47–50). As for Buddhism it distanced itself from other ascetic movements (see Riesebrodt 2003:6; and also 2007:50). It was subject for polemics in China by officials that supported the practices and ideology of Confucianism (see *ibid.*:51). Also, in Japan, there is a myth that Emperor Kimmei was warned against the wrath of *kami* if he worshipped a Buddha-statue (see Riesebrodt 2003:8).

As we saw in the examples of polemics, Riesebrodt proposes that when the worship of some superhuman power expands, or gets confronted by other expanding worships, it is forced to identify itself, or be identified by others (see *ibid.*:4; and also 2007:46). But even if religions often try to demarcate themselves from others, they also “borrow from, assimilate to, and incorporate elements of each other's practices” (Riesebrodt 2003:9). There are some nuances between the article in “Religion: Just an Western Construction?” where he uses the terms “Borrowings, Syncretism, Identifications,” and in *Cultus und Heilsversprechen* where in the chapter “Assimilation”, the main categories are “fusions,” “synthesis,” and “identifications.” (*ibid.*:9; and also 2007:57–8). As with polemics, where religions recognise competitors, with assimilation they recognise others as similar (see Riesebrodt 2003:9; and also 2007:57).

As we have seen, Riesebrodt holds that it is possible to define a concept religion that has a universal applicability, and to make a theory about the meaning of religious actions. Religion, he argues, cannot just be seen by it functions, but only be identified by means of social actions that is “marked out” (see *ibid.*:109). Further, these religious actions get their specific meanings with their reference to superhuman powers (see *ibid.*).

By bringing “meaning” into the equation, Riesebrodt finds it necessary to clarify the relationship between understanding (i.e. *verstehen*) and explaining. A *verstehende* theory of action, he proposes, has to overcome the gap between religious insider-perspectives and scientific outsider-perspectives (see *ibid.*:108). Riesebrodt claims that explanations that rule out the insider-perspectives is forced to legitimise its position of knowledge (*ibid.*:108–9). However, it is not obvious for me why this should be a problem. Sociological explanation can be legitimised by claiming to use empirical methods that are transparent and possible to repeat. Anyhow, Riesebrodt suggest his alternative as a *verstehende* explanation; that arrives at the outsider-perspective through abstraction and systematising of insider-perspectives, and thereby this explanation does

not claim “a privileged or objective position for itself” (*ibid.*:109) and “is different from insider perspectives, but does not contradict them.” (*ibid.*). So rather than reducing religious actions as for example something forced on the lower classes by the higher ones, futile attempts towards explaining the world, or neurotic illusions, explanations of religion can emerge from the interpretations of the religious actors.

From the point of a *verstehende* theory of action, Riesebrodt claims that one can explain the emergence and reproduction of religion without having to use functional definitions (see *ibid.*). Riesebrodt distances himself from the use of only functional theories, because they are unspecified and “ignores the meaning within actions” (*ibid.*:110). He claims with a vast range of examples of what a functional theory of religion should be concerned with, if the functions are “group-integrating” or “creating identity” (see *ibid.*:111).

### *Rehearsals and Relief*

Definition is not necessarily the same as theory. A definition can be used for demarcation, and thereby set the stage for which phenomena that is under investigation. Riesebrodt brings much attention to the problem of defining religion after the critique in the Postmodernist Discourse, but maybe what is more important, he also elaborates on a theory of religion. This theory is mainly sociological and discursive. Sociological because his theory mainly focuses on institutional practices and relation between these, and discursive in the sense of his source-material mainly consisting of various texts and ethnographic material.

As the title of the book suggests, Riesebrodt proposes that religion is tied to soteriology in the sense that it deals with promises of salvation. It must be pointed out however that my translation of *Heil* to *salvation* may have brought more Christian connotations than there is in the German term. Divine relief might have been a proper alternative, that also corresponds to Riesebrodt’s definition and, indeed, theory in general. Riesebrodt does not mean to say that he has found the meaning of being saved from sins because of faith in some Christlike figure in all religions. What Riesebrodt finds in religion, is the continuous turning to super-human powers because of a threefold of reasons: (1) The guarantee from mischief; (2) The coping with mischief; and (3) The granting of relief (Riesebrodt 2007:109,139). He argues further that what is perceived as ‘mischief’ and ‘relief’ is culturally postulated, but also that there are some cross-cultural patterns. These are related to human’s natural environment (floods & drought, fertility & wildlife), the human body (sickness, health), and human relationships (war, peace) (see *ibid.*:139f). To exemplify both the universal applicability of his definition, and how it can be used in finding these three reoccurring patterns of meaning, Riesebrodt chooses to analyse Judaism, Christianity, Islam, Buddhism, Taoism, and Shintoism (see *ibid.*:146ff,150ff). He argues that these represent both ‘universalistic’ and ‘ethnic’ religious, and have different emphasises on either the ‘ethical’ or the ‘magical’ (see *ibid.*:143).

The second part of the title is 'cultus'. Etymologically it shares the same root as 'culture', i.e. 'colere', which usually refers to the system or variety of religious worship. If we look at the term this way, it seems to almost be synonym to 'religion'. 'Cultus' is here defined as the "human intervention with superhuman powers" (*ibid.*:136). Riesebrodt gives us four main reasons why 'cultus' is put central in his theorising about religion: (1) It is the practices that constitutes logical and psychological foundations for the given discourses. (2) Interactions with social- and superhuman powers sets a meaningful range of cultural patterns that can be isolated, and in turn can be used in justifying a universal analytical category of religion. (3) Interactions with superhuman powers represents the largest part of the religious life. (4) Interventionist practices unites religious theory and practice (*ibid.*:136). In this respect we could also speak of 'rehearsal'. Riesebrodt lays a heavy emphasis on religious practices. What he calls 'interventionist practice' with superhuman power is what constitutes the religious discourses, and also makes them relevant to instances of political power, i.e. they become public. It is also what makes most of the data for religion, and where meanings can be drawn out by means of analysis.

What 'religious practices' can there be? What is indeed 'rehearsed'? Riesebrodt gives us a list of the four main types of interaction with culturally postulated superhuman powers: (1) *Symbolic actions*: (a) prayers, (b) songs, (c) gestures, (d) behaviour (f) formulas, (g) offerings/sacrifice, (h) vows or (i) divination; (2) *Manipulation by wearing amulets or the enforcement of a magic act*; (3) *Possession or ascetic rapture*; and (4) *Activation of the "sleeping" superhuman potentials*, that involves self-control by contemplation and experiences of enlightenment. (*ibid.*:113) All these he labels "interventionist practices" (*Interventionistische Praktiken*) (*ibid.*:114). Interventionist practices is further tied to two other types of religious practices; discursive and behaviour-regulating (*diskursive- und verhaltensregulierende Praktiken*) (see *ibid.*). Discursive practices denotes communication concerning superhuman powers, while behaviour-regulating practices is the 'everyday behaviour' where superhuman powers is considered (e.g. eating *kosher*, or doing the sign of the cross) (see *ibid.*). Obviously, these types are not mutually exclusive as behaviour-regulating practices could be interpreted as interventionist practices. Riesebrodt notes this, but argues that it is not crucial to his definition, and that interventionist practices is where "the key to explaining religion" is (*ibid.*:115).

Arguably, Riesebrodt focuses on discursive practices when justifying his definition. For his theory, however, he put emphasis on interventionist practices. To set the example of how this ought to (or could) be done, Riesebrodt chooses to take a closer look at three kinds of practices, those dealing with the calendar, 'the life-cycle', and those which deviate from theological ideology (see *ibid.*:146ff;158ff;162ff).

As we touched upon earlier, Riesebrodt stresses that a definition of religion, and deriving from that, also the study of religion, should have a main focus on complexes of practices with premise on the existence of superhuman powers. The meaning with these practices is guarantees from and coping with mischief, but also the granting of relief. There is an emphasis on the centrality of ‘everyday religion’ in his definition, but he also makes room for elite-, or specialised religion. To sharpen the distinction between lay- and elite religion, he suggests that religious virtuosity should denote these practices where the actor is not involved with an organisation, e.g. a monastery. I will here use ‘salvation’ as to further underline this distinction. Here he evokes the weberian vocabulary, as Riesebrodt labels persons that voluntary searches for salvation by extreme means; ‘virtuosi’ (see *ibid.*:175). Here it also becomes clear that Riesebrodt’s theory is not intended as a functional theory: Religious virtuosi have such an emphasis on the search for salvation, that they are willing to live in states of mischief (*ibid.*:182). He also mentions that is this state lay-people view as a “sacrifice”. Indeed, this theme reminds us of the “costly signalling” or “commitment” theory, or maybe in this context, “costlier signalling” that has been elaborated on by various scholars with an evolutionary-cognitive approach to religion (e.g. see Sosis 2000).

Riesebrodt also attempts to establish ‘religious virtuosity’ as an analytical category (Riesebrodt 2007:176). In this way, he seeks to distance it from a durkheimian notion of virtuosity as something that reflects societies’ needs, and rather define religious virtuosity by means of its “extreme asceticism, concentration or ethical strictness” (*ibid.*:176–7). In an argument concerning religion’s independent relation to other societal systems, Peter Beyer agrees that “Religious ‘virtuosi’ ... are still possible and very much present in today’s society” (Beyer 2006:103). Riesebrodt also makes a distinction between ‘religious experts’ who are designated legitimation/legitimacy and possibly “charisma” from organisations and institutions (Riesebrodt 2007:178). Beyer, on the other hand, does not hold this distinction within religious systems, but rather between religion and other systems. He suggests that “religious expertise does not require a high level access to the power of other systems: it only needs ‘calling’, ‘dedication’, ‘study’, ‘inspiration’, or ‘charisma’ (Beyer 2006:103). Thus, comparing Beyer and Riesebrodt we see that Riesebrodt’s emphasis on practice with the religious premiss makes “religious virtuosi” a more narrow category than Beyer’s conceptualisation. Here, Riesebrodt could be more consistent with his proposed distinction between ‘religious’, and ‘religios’. The virtuosi he wish to lay emphasis on, indeed seem more ‘religios’, than ‘religious’. Arguably, people would not be less inclined in attributing charisma – superhuman attributes – to representations from a monastery, or an *ashram*, than for ‘non-institutionalised’ persons. Such a distinction would also allow us to locate *religios* virtuosi within institutions as well.

## *The End of Religion?*

Many theories of religion often imply a theory of how religion became and how it will end. Riesebrodt is no exception. As we already know, Riesebrodt maintains that religion, as he has defined it, is a universal phenomenon. When discussing how religion is universal, he differs between ontogenetic and phylogenetic explanations (see Riesebrodt 2007:239). Phylogenetic theories, he claims, discuss religion as a feature of human evolution, in which religion is tied in with developments in the brain (see *ibid.*:239f). Riesebrodt's attitude towards these New Discourse theories seem sympathetic when he claims that "evolutionary-cognitive explanations is superior" (*ibid.*:239). It should however be stressed, that he does not go into any of them in any detail. Rather, he holds that religion in the face of powerlessness from various mischief, is an expression of the "principal need in the human species' to regulate and institutionalise their internal and external relations" (*ibid.*:240f). This seems close to what was suggested both within the Enlightenment Discourse, but also in the Romantic Discourse. Firstly, it is postulated that religion can *provide* consistency between the inside and outside world. Secondly, with regard to psychoanalysis, such a consistency would bring mental relief, viz. bring a favourable emotional state as held within the Romantic Discourse.

Ontogenetic theories, Riesebrodt argues, deals not with the origin of religion, but can help in explaining the universality and the plausibility of religious phenomena (see *ibid.*:241). At this point Riesebrodt invites us to a Freudian theory developed by the psychoanalyst Ana-Maria Rizzuto. In line with Freud's emphasis on the father-figure in religious development, Rizzuto asserts that it is the mother-figure, and other persons and object that is central in childhood (see *ibid.*:242). Rizzuto claims that people develop their own subjective images of god as a response to "narcissistic vulnerabilities and fears", and that these images often take form as "monsters, heroes or other superhuman beings" (*ibid.*). This is in other words where the religious foundation is laid. When growing into adulthood, we give up the childhood fantasy of Santa Claus and change him out with 'God'. This is, as Rizzuto claims, a reaction from maturing. The plausibility of gods strengthens when childhood fantasies seems more improbable (see *ibid.*:243). Riesebrodt does not go into depth at this point, but holds that it is sufficient combined with phylogenetic theories to support his own *verstehende* theory (see Riesebrodt 2007:243). Also in this case, it is noteworthy that Riesebrodt does not include the New Discourse. Evolutionary-cognitive theories also holds 'ontogenetic' theoretical insights of how people 'become' religious. Some of them are – as Rizzuto's – developmental and suggest how and at what stage children forms ideas about non-human agents (e.g. see Barrett, Richert & Driesenga 2001).

There are also studies that support Riesebrodt in finding correlations between insecurity, and so-called 'superstition', i.e. practices based on the premise on superhuman powers. Whitson & Galinsky has proposed – partly inspired from Malinowski's observation of a higher ritual activity among those Trobriand fishers that dealt with unexpected storms and unmapped waters – that uncertainty is positively correlated to 'superstitious' behaviour. Through six experiments they found that there was a higher degree of "illusory pattern

perception” when the participant experienced a lack of control (Whitson & Galinsky 2008:117). Albeit Riesebrodt insists that his theory is not functionalistic (e.g. as in ‘religion is the coping with mischief’), he also points to similar results, albeit not with specific references (see Riesebrodt 2007:241).

Pascal Boyer (2001) has criticised various ‘folk-theories’ of religion. Among those we can for example find that religion is a remedy for coping with death, or for giving existential comfort (see Boyer 2001:6f). While it is a little unclear where Boyer has gathered these ‘theories’, we can *prima facie* take them as recurrent explanations among those not involved with the academic study of religion. Boyer claims that it is “not-that-bad” (*ibid.*:7), but that it does not really explain why and where religion came from. As a feasible alternative, Boyer suggests how superhuman concepts is by-products of ordinary cognitive processes. Riesebrodt is aware of Boyer’s assertions, and notes that Boyer is focuses on “abstract cognitive subjective categories and not on institutionalised meanings with practice” (Riesebrodt 2007:291). Another reason has yet again to do with Riesebrodt’s disinterest with functionalistic theories. What Riesebrodt seems to miss, is that Boyer’s assertions lends his own theory much support. Especially concerning Boyer’s emphasis on superhuman agency, or in his own words, counterintuitive agency. Either way, Boyer also implies a critical position against these *functionalist* theories of religion. Namely that interaction with superhuman agency relieves or provide satisfaction, it is an expression from ordinary cognitive processes.

Spiro holds that there is a difference between causal and functional theories (see Spiro 1966:100). Causal theories proposes which instances that underlies the cause for something (*ibid.*) On the other hand, functional theories focus on “consequent condition[s]” (*ibid.*:101). I have already argued that Riesebrodt’s theory could without much effort be read as functional, as a ‘religion brings comfort’ theory. *Pace* Weber’s *verstehen*, it is supposed that actions can have many motives, henceforth, one cannot omit the possibility that there is indeed ‘functions’ in religious practices. From an account of the origin of religion, Riesebrodt also discusses its potential demise; secularisation.

### *The Future of an Illusion?*

When commenting upon the sociological discourse about the future of religion, Riesebrodt deploys three analytical categories: *secularisation*, *disenchantment*, and *dischurchment*<sup>2</sup> (see Riesebrodt 2007:244). He defines secularisation as the “process where public institutions emancipate from religious control” (*ibid.*:245). Since secularisation has a relative autonomy of different societal instances, Riesebrodt proposes, such a process leads to a greater independence and importance for religious institutions (see *ibid.*:248). This may seem awkward at the onset. We might expect that a religion with close ties to a public institution would have some advantages when compared with those without such connections. On the other hand, maybe

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<sup>2</sup> Riesebrodt mainly uses *entkirchligung*, there seems to be no proper English translation of this. A suggestion might be *dischurchment*.

religion is thought to hold more social capital where otherwise may be the case. With such close ties they may be more disposed for influence from other institutions, whereas an independent religion can “make its own public sphere ... and criticise other institutions’ ethics and practices” (*ibid.*).

Disenchantment is “the transformation of conscious structures in the mind due to rationalisation” (*ibid.*:245). Rodney Stark, who is a strong proponent of the “anti-secularisation” position, holds that secularisation theories, even if it is explicitly denied, postulate not just a decline in institutional influence from religions, but also a decline in individual religiousness (see Stark 2000:60ff). What Stark discusses, although not terming it so, is exactly the weberian disenchantment of the world. Disenchantment, as proposed by Weber, is an aspect of the process of rationalisation (see Riesebrodt 1999:5). Such a cognitive change may express itself in the turn to from religious to scientific explanations in the educational system, to the scientific jargon in theological/religious discourses such as among creationist movements (see Riesebrodt 2007:249). A disenchantment thesis can also predict that people is less involved with rituals and other religious practices. Riesebrodt exemplifies this with church-institutions that are more engaged with secular affairs such as welfare. On the other hand we also find enchantment processes, where religious trends (e.g., Pentecostalism) put “charismatic practices in centre” (*ibid.*:250). With both examples of (dis)enchantment, Riesebrodt considers it problematic to draw these into (dis)favour for the secularisation thesis (see *ibid.*).

Finally, dischurchment is where religious institutions experience a decline of participation in religious practices, which may entail “privatisation” (*ibid.*:245). From a global perspective, dischurchment seems to describe the modern Western Europe, but loose its applicability at the other side of the Atlantic Ocean (see *ibid.*:250f). There is two crucial points with ‘privatisation’ that Riesebrodt find problematic: The first is that religion is now less involved with political issues. The second is that privatisation is a consequence of secularisation (see *ibid.*:252).

Riesebrodt find that religion is not a necessary part of human culture, but that it is unlikely for it to disappear (see *ibid.*:239). As for secularisation he argues that it in fact has changed the position of religion in modern society. However, he also warns against clichés that heavily exaggerates the difference between ours’ and earlier forms of religions (see *ibid.*:252f). This point is consistent with his justification of the universality of ‘religion’. When Riesebrodt argues that it is not a necessary part of human culture, it would at first hand seem contradictory to his universal application of it. This would boil down to Riesebrodt’s reluctance vis-à-vis functional definitions that a “necessity of religion” would imply. Indeed, he predicts that religions with a focus on ethics and aesthetics will not survive the teeth of time: The future belongs to those religions “who take their promises of relief and guarantees from mischief seriously and credibly” (Riesebrodt 2007:257). In *Fundamentalism and the Resurgence of Religion* (2000) he asserts that religion has its

resurgence – at least to fundamentalists – partly due to “group dynamics”. Riesebrodt exemplify a group dynamic with how religion can be ‘new’ to those from secular families (see Riesebrodt 2000:284). Religion, he argues, is also the “strongest counterposition vis-a-vis the modernist milieu and its secular way of life” (*ibid.*:286). ‘

### *Conclusion*

Riesebrodt’s theory of religion is inductive in the sense that he claims to find three patterns of meaning in the core of those practices that relates to superhuman powers. It is deductive in the sense that he uses categories and types of practices that is well known in the study of religion. The theory emphasises human agency with its reference to *practices* and *discourses*, but downplays superhuman agency in adding *impersonal* and *powers*. He justifies the universal applicability of religion both in claiming to locate the features of his definitions cross-culturally, and in the various “social references” regarding these features in insider-discourses. Max Weber’s sociology is used especially in examination of religious virtuosi. Concerning the origin of religion, he holds that it originates both as a cognitive bias emerged through evolution, and as a psychological reaction to maturing. He concludes that religion is not a function of either the individual or the social, but that is likely to persist as long there exists crisis and promises of relief.

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