



Comparison, generalisations, and relationality in the Study of Religion\

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Abstract

This short response article will consider Oliver Krüger's "relational paradigm" as offering a potential mediating position between proponents of systematic-phenomenological and critical-relational approaches in the study of religion\'. Following a recent stand-off in the Dutch study of religion\', I examine the potential for careful comparisons and generalisations in the field. If Krüger is right and we have been relational for decades, the comparisons and generalisations of systematic and comparative research may be regarded with a charitable attitude. Rather than representing a return to the previous essentialist paradigm, such comparisons may be re-considered as explicit and reflexive approaches to religion\\' in past and present. To explore such opportunities, I present four principles and one publication strategy in which relationality takes a central place.

1. Introduction

In the summer of 2020, the study of religion\\' in The Netherlands experienced a stand-off between two streams of scholarship. Markus A. Davidsen, a sociologist of religion at Leiden University, published a programmatic statement about the "crisis" in the Dutch study of religion\\' to be solved by revisiting the systematic program of Theo van Baaren (1912–1989). Amongst the responses solicited by the *Journal for Theology and the Study of Religion* (abbreviated as NTT, following the former title of the journal) was Katja Rakow's critical response, arguing that anthropology was presented as "bogeyman" in the target article. Rakow, an anthropologist and sociologist of religion at Utrecht University, seems to accuse Davidsen of having missed the relational turn in the study of religion\', when she stresses: "Religion is not an essentialist category, but a relational phenomenon [...]" (2020: 259) While Davidsen argues for a strong and systematic response to postmodern criticism on — and rejection of — the central concept of the discipline, Rakow stresses the constructed and processual nature of religion. Their exchange highlights, amongst others, a profound tension between two streams of scholarship — which I

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will label systematic-phenomenological¹ and critical-relational² — about the promises and pitfalls of systematic research, comparisons, and generalisations in the study of religion\

s. In this short article, I will consider Oliver Krüger’s “paradigm shift” from “an Aristotelian *ordo essendi* to relation” (2022, 2026) for a potential mediating position between systematic-phenomenological and critical-relational positions. After introducing the problem of comparisons and generalisations in the study of religion\

s, I will argue that Krüger’s interpretation of the relational paradigm offers a perspective in which comparison and associated generalisations can be combined with a thorough reflexive and relational notion of religion. This will be followed by a brief reflection on how publication strategies may contribute to an honest and methodologically sound balance between the wealth of specific observations and theoretically informed generalisations.³

2. Comparisons and generalisations in the Study of Religion\

s. Since religion is often experienced as a controversial topic, it is not surprising that the study of religion\

s also entails strong positions with outspoken responses.⁴ One of the central topics of fierce controversy in the last decades has been the concept of “religion,” which has been criticised for its hegemonial and essentialising history. Scholars like David Chidester (1996) have highlighted how this concept in previous scholarship was embedded in colonial violence, and Russell McCutcheon (2018) and Timothy Fitzgerald (2017) have argued that the Western history of the concept makes it inherently problematic, to the extent that some scholars would rather eliminate the term from academic scholarship (Barton/Boyarin 2016).⁵

Oliver Krüger’s (2022, 2026) analysis of shifting discourses about religion in encyclopaedia articles between 1708–2006 connects closely to these debates about the concept of religion, identifying a fundamental paradigm shift in scholarship since the 1960s. His central contestation is that the encyclopaedic practise of defining religion reveals a shift from an Aristotelian paradigm to a “relational paradigm that understands concepts in the light of multiple social, cultural, and historical contexts” (2022: 25). Part of this paradigm shift is the increasing critical attitude towards generalisations, the motivations behind definitions of religion, and the development of systematic taxonomies. This understanding of a relational turn as a historiographical observation

¹ On the various definitions of the “phenomenology of religion” (Fuijwara/Thurfjel/Engler 2021; Cox 2010; Cusack 2011). An earlier statement reclaiming the name “phenomenology of religion” is found in Jensen 1993.

² Although all academic scholarship should be critical, a particular deconstructivist approach has claimed the adjective most visibly, for example in the journal *Critical Research on Religion*.

³ This article draws on my more detailed argument about integrating historicising — comparing — theorising research practices in the history of religion\

s, presented in Brand 2022. I have asked Davidsen and Rakow for their response to my characterisation of their positions and thank Markus Davidsen for his comments.

⁴ To indicate the tension between particular “religions” and the generalised notion of “religion,” I use of the backlash when designating the academic discipline. Following the designator used, amongst others, in Stausberg 2010.

⁵ Recent reflections include Watts/Mosurinjohn 2022; Martin 2022; Borup 2021; Schilbrack 2020; Goldstein/King/Boyarin 2016.

— rather than a programmatic aim (such as proposed in Krech 2020) — leads me to return to the role of comparison in systematic-phenomenological and critical-relational approaches, as exemplified in the exchange between Davidsen and Rakow.⁶ If both scholarly approaches are understood as fundamentally relational, rather than representing tension between relational and semi-essentialist approaches, the disagreement may be rephrased productively as centring around the question what kind of generalisations can be drawn from comparative work in a relational paradigm. Since comparison and the subsequent generalisations are central points of disagreement between Davidsen and Rakow, I will briefly sketch the two positions, focusing selectively on their statements concerning the types of acceptable generalisations.⁷

Davidsen's target article argues that there is a need to return to Theo van Baaren's "systematic science of religion," which aimed to move away from the religionist bias of the phenomenological position of his predecessor(s). Davidsen argues that van Baaren's programme has never been realised in The Netherlands because particularist approaches — i.e. studies that make no attempt to embed their particular research problem into a larger problem structure shared by the discipline — have dominated the field in the last decades. Since Davidsen considers the Dutch study of religion's to be in a crisis, he argues for a reorientation of the discipline in a four-fold way. His proposal includes: (1) a clear focus on religion as common object of study, (2) the ambition to compare, (3) the combination of comparison and explanation, (4) and a fundamental methodological agnostic position, necessitating naturalism (Davidsen 2020a: 234–36). These four factors will help the discipline to formulate coherent narratives about religion to share with other academic disciplines and society at large, particularly in the face of postmodern criticism on the concept of religion. In particular, he states:

“ We need to respond to postmodern criticism not by giving up theorizing, but by improving our theorizing. Only by doing so and by adopting an explanatory perspective that allows for the absorption of new theoretical paradigms, including the cognitive science of religion, can we reinvigorate our discipline and demonstrate its relevance for the other humanistic and social-scientific disciplines. (Davidsen 2020a: 238–239)

The aim of his proposal, therefore, is to regroup and consolidate around a shared disciplinary identity with a shared research agenda.

Few of the respondents to Davidsen's programmatic statement agreed with his assessment of the current situation and there was little subsequent enthusiasm about his four-fold reorientation of the discipline. Of the five initial response articles, Rakow's article most directly addresses the

⁶ Which I believe is illustrative for a larger pattern in academic exchange. See similar debates in the responses to Seiwert (2020) in the 2021 issue of the *Zeitschrift für Religionswissenschaft* 29 (2) and in programmatic discussions found in *Religion* 41 (2) of 2011 and vol. 50 (1) of 2020 as well as the *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 80 (3) of 2012.

⁷ See also the various other responses in the *NTT Journal for Theology* and the *Study of Religion* 74 (3/4) of 2020.

nature of comparison and the possibility of generalisations. In her response to Davidsen's characterisation of anthropology as "particularistic" Rakow defends the thematic and theoretical orientations of the anthropology of religion's (2020: 254 citing Davidsen 2020a: 238). She highlights a crucial difference between what anthropologists see as the outcome and purpose of comparative work, and "Davidsen's ideal outcome of comparative work, i.e. generalisations about the category religion or related subcategories" (2020: 256).⁸ Citing Peter van der Veer's work on the value of comparison (2016), she argues that comparison is not

“ [...] about creating general models, nor about taking some universalistic point of view from which a predefined essentialist entity ('ritual' or 'religious experience') is studied and compared cross-culturally. While Van der Veer thinks about comparative practice as bottom up, from the particular case to the larger picture, Davidsen conceptualises comparison top down, starting from predefined categories applied cross-culturally or transhistorically to material out there. In contrast to such a positivist approach, Van der Veer sees one of the tasks of comparative work to critically interrogate our conceived categories, which emerged as products of the Western historical experience. (Rakow 2020: 257)

Narrowing their disagreement down to the aim of comparative work, Rakow suggests that Davidsen regards anthropology as "theory-hostile" because it produces theory that is not aimed at "generalisations or universalisms." In fact, she regards his call for a scientific study of religion as characterised by "strong essentialist and positivist tendencies" (2020: 258).

Against what she sees as Davidsen's "essentialist" approach, Rakow highlights the relational paradigm, stressing that

“ [t]he notion of religion and related practices and materialities are constantly negotiated, appropriated, and reshaped. Religion is not an essentialist category, but a relational phenomenon, which makes it rather unproductive to state anything general about the genus 'religion,' because the term does not refer to a stable referent, but to contingent and changing formations. (Rakow 2020: 259)

Her own comparison between religio-therapeutic practices and discourses about the self of 20th and 21st centuries Buddhist experts and contemporary American Evangelicals prompts the reconsideration of these religious practices and discourses as being "shaped by larger socio-cultural processes that effect religious and secular practices alike" (Rakow 2020: 261). Her method is relational, in that it does not aim for transhistorical generalisation or the identification of essentialised features of Buddhism, but highlights how western Buddhists and Evangelicals "inhabit the same social and material world" (Rakow 2020: 260). This conclusion has a strong historical touch, as she presents historically contextualised conclusions against essentialised

⁸ It is, however, noteworthy that the target article speaks of patterns, comparison, typologies, explanations, and models, but not about "generalisations."

characterisations of inherently Buddhist psychological traditions.⁹ In other words, Rakow positions herself in a relational perspective that highlights similar processes in religion and secular phenomena, while she associates Davidsen's program with the search for universal patterns tied to essentialised religions.

Davidsen's rebuttal rejects this characterisation of their differences and focuses on the distinct ways of conceptualising comparisons. He argues that

“ ‘Generalisations’, for us, are not propositions about what is true always, but propositions about what is true most of the time. [...] As I see it, the goal of comparison is to look for patterns in our subject matter, i.e. (1) to figure out which elements are recurrent over a set of comparable cases but also to identify those cases that do not conform, and (2) to figure out whether some cases are sufficiently similar to each other, and sufficiently dissimilar to other cases, to be clustered together as a type within a taxonomy. (Davidsen 2020b: 282–83)

Davidsen stresses the taxonomical function of Rakow's comparison, as it produces not only knowledge about the compared units, but formulates abstract language applicable to a wide variety of cases (i.e., “religio-therapeutic practices,” Davidsen 2020b: 283). In fact, Davidsen's own research on fiction-based religion derives from very concrete empirical observations about Jediism and Tolkien Spirituality, which subsequently let to the question what the religious use of fantasy fiction in these cases might tell us of how religious narratives persuade more generally (Davidsen 2016). Both Rakow and Davidsen, therefore, move from observable particulars to higher abstractions, without reifying these patterns into universal or essentialised religions.

The difference between Davidsen's systematical-phenomenological position and Rakow's critical-relational position, therefore, boils down to questions about the aim of comparison and the type of generalisations we hold to be legitimate. With Jeppe Sinding Jensen, we could ask: “[...] how can or may scholars (or scientists) today compare and generalise about and on religion on nonapologetic grounds?” (2022: 310) This is where the relational paradigm, as introduced by Krüger, may facilitate a mediating position by claiming that we have been “relational” all along.

3. Comparisons and the relational paradigm

Oliver Krüger argues that we have witnessed a fundamental paradigm shift in the study of religion\ and culture\ over the last few decades, one that entails a crucial change in the scientific community's consensus on problem-solving. This change is not simply a transition in research approaches and methodologies, nor a turn to a different perspective. Instead, it is a thorough redefinition of what counts as a scientific problem and of the established ways of dealing with

⁹ As Rakow explains: “[...] this particular quality was often described as an essential feature of Buddhism [...] which is different from stating that Buddhism per se exhibits such traits, [...] has to be understood as a discursive effect of ‘Buddhist Modernism’ and not as an essential trait of Buddhist traditions” (2020: 260–261).

such a problem. Specifically, Krüger argues that the study of religion\’s has been through a shift from an Aristotelian paradigm with essentialist definitions to a relational paradigm focused on questions like “*How do people do ‘religion’ in their lifeworld?*” (Krüger 2022: 81, his italics). Within this relational paradigm, religion is studied in light of multiple social, cultural, and historical contexts. It is not taken for granted that all individual studies of religions or religiosity relate to a universal and unchanging concept of religion, nor are they essentialised into a single, coherent theory of religion (see similar approaches with different definitions of “relational”; King 2013; Quack 2014; Krech 2020; Berger/Buitelaar/Knibbe 2021).

This paradigm shift is most visible in the changing evaluations of the comparative method (Stroumsa 2018). Current academic criticism of previous comparative work in the study of religion is often informed by the rejection of essentialism and the increasing attention for a wide set of relations and contexts, leading to a focus on internal diversity and incoherence (Stausberg 2022: 22–23). Recent reflections, however, have argued that (1) comparison is inherent to all knowledge acquisition and transmission, (2) comparison can be used to undercut essentialism as well, (3) a certain level of decontextualisation and essentialisation is necessary for communicating intelligible about social, cultural, or religious phenomena (Freiberger 2019: 45–79). Basic comparison, therefore, remains a key ingredient of studying religion, culture, and society, even when aiming to acknowledge diversity and a complex entanglement of religious and non-religious phenomena. Methodologically, however, we can distinguish between comparisons aiming at clarifying specific elements from one case to the other (“the illuminative mode”) and comparisons seeking to establish general classifications, categories, and typologies (“the taxonomic mode,” Freiberger 2019: 116–131; Stausberg 2022: 27–28).

Krüger’s two paradigms provide a well-ordered framework to think about the development of the study of religion\’s and the various comparative approaches envisioned by individual scholars. I have summarised and abbreviated his two paradigms in table 1. He locates the main difference between the two paradigms in the function of definitions of religion. While Aristotelian definitions aimed to pin down the true essence and nature of religion, more recent definitions have abandoned such truth claims for more relational statements about how people do religion in their lifeworld. He concludes that within the former paradigm, “the practice of defining ‘religion’ has been based mainly on etymology, the definition of the essence (*Wesensdeutung*), and typologies of ‘religion’” (Krüger 2022: 76). In the latter paradigm, definitions focus on “interactions, communications, and relationships of people through and around ‘religion,’ in all its historical and intercultural reciprocity” (Krüger 2022: 81).¹⁰ As a critical note, I would like to emphasise that

¹⁰ My impression, however, is that his representation of the relational paradigm is only loosely based on his corpus of encyclopaedia articles, and rather engages more profoundly with academic scholarship of the last decades (Krüger 2017). Although listed as primary example of a relational paradigm by Krüger, the various Wikipedia articles on “religion” show that definitions, etymology, typologies of religions and religious aspects feature prominently next to the more critical reflections and the relationships with law, science, morality, politics, culture etc. The relationality, however, becomes visible in the revisions and embedded “talk”-page (Krüger 2026: 21).

relationality and change have always belonged to the core business of historians of religion\\$. Since historians tend to think about their subject not as “static universals but as historically conditioned unfolding processes” in which we detect patterns, layeredness, or path-dependency (Josephson Storm 2021: 101). In line with this relational paradigm, historians have formulated comparative approaches to how “religion” is made real by a variety of agents and through a multitude of overlapping social strategies, many of them not exclusively religious but also entangled with cultural habits, mundane routines, and technological possibilities (Albrecht et al. 2018: 569). The latter, relational point, was also stressed fundamentally by the earlier mentioned Theo van Baaren, when he argued that the fundamental disciplinary question should not be “*Was ist Religion?, sondern muß heißen: Wie wirkt Religion?*” (Van Baaren 1989: 160, his italics). While I wholeheartedly agree with Krüger that times have changed in the study of religion\\$, I wonder whether this change fully amounts to what Kuhn considered to be a paradigm change.

Aristotelian paradigm	Relational paradigm
Based on classical Aristotelian rules of defining and Christian ordering of the universe.	Based on historiographical reflection and on deconstruction of our conceptual apparatus.
What religion is (“true essence”)?	How do people do “religion” in their lifeworld? Focus on interactions, communications, relationships.
Definitions must be uniform, logically consistent, not overlapping with other elements.	Constant debate about definitions, with critical questioning of who defines and why. Operationalisation of definitions as tools for specific research aims.
Generalisations with universal claims.	Strong move away from universal claims, explicit rejection of essentialist ideas about religion, as well as a de-centering of the experience of God and “the sacred.”
Etymology is presented as central to meaning.	“[...] understands concepts in the light of multiple social, cultural, and historical contexts.” (Krüger 2022: 85)
Typology, often associated with normative (western, Christian) ideas, and fundamentally based on the dichotomy religion/ nonreligion.	Many “turns”, shedding light on new fields of study, as well as fundamentally altering perspectives on existing fields. Co-constituency of religion/nonreligion, as well as religion/science.

Table 1. Abbreviated overview of Krüger’s two paradigms in the study of religion\\$.

Further philosophical reflection on the relational paradigm is found in Jason Ānanda Josephson Storm’s innovative *Metamodernism* (2021; discussed in Brand 2023), which offers an analysis of how deconstructive approaches have challenged master categories such as culture, religion, and art, and how shifting to a process ontology of the social world could be of benefit to scholars throughout the humanities. As a historian of religion\\$, I appreciate how he stresses the “mind-dependence” of much of the social world (i.e., the socially constructed nature of the concept of religion) without equating this with an anti-realism position (i.e., unmasking religion as only discursively constructed and thus “not real”).

Thinking through what he calls “process social ontology” offers, in my view, a relational way of theorising religion, in which social change, variety, and cultural differences are the default assumption whereas relative stability, continuity, and similarity require explanation. Josephson Storm accordingly states that,

“ [...] we can make certain generalisations while also recognizing that we are talking about processes in flux, and that whatever we say now can and will likely be subject to change in the future. Nevertheless, our observations can be incredibly useful – they can help us to gain a more accurate picture of the stage of unfolding we are in now, as well as those [stages] that have come before. (Josephson Storm 2021: 99)

As specialists in the layeredness of time, historians of religion\’s offer empirical and self-critical reflections on religion as one of these historically contingent “social kinds” (Josephson Storm’s term for socially constructed concepts and categories distinct from the natural world).

Returning to Krüger’s two paradigms, one might think that they have their direct representatives in Davidsen and Rakow. Davidsen’s call for a systematic study of religion centred around the use of an explicit definition of religion and attempts to structural comparison and theory formation can easily be misread for a return to universal claims and reified essences, albeit without the openly Christian normative agenda. Rakow’s position more aligns more closely to the relational paradigm, especially in her comparison of religio-therapeutic practices in religious and nonreligious contexts. However, since Davidsen’s target article contains no traces of essentialism and Christian normative typologies, his emphasis on definitions and well-developed typologies may be interpreted against a more relational background — taking into account historical and societal differences that can be approached through careful comparison. Within Krüger’s historiographical framework, moreover, both scholars are firmly located in the relational paradigm, which he claims has characterised our field for decades (2022: 81). If he is correct, Davidsen’s systematic-phenomenological and Rakow’s critical-relational approach are closer than initially perceived. They do not derive from different paradigms and should, therefore, also be able to find common ground.

4. Relational generalisations

If systematic-phenomenological approaches cannot be written off as resurrections of an unwanted past, it may be possible to bring comparisons and generalisations in conversation with the current paradigm (*Wissensordnung*) that is so profoundly characterised by relational dynamics, differentiations, and historicization. It may be helpful to identify what kind of relational generalisations can be made and how they differ from essentialised generalisations. I will summarise four principles for relational generalisations.

The first fundamental principle — which I also detect in Rakow’s criticism of Davidsen’s generalisations — is that generalised concepts and taxonomies should not be thought of as “natural” or universal, but as entangled in a net of (re)interpretations, including those in our

current academic context(s). Relational generalisations therefore differ from essentialised generalisations in that they acknowledge the complex entanglements of the *comparanda*. As a historian, I have argued for an explicit double contextualisation of our research: within the historical level of our sources and within the contemporary historiographical traditions and settings (Brand 2022; Bergunder 2016). As a result, a historical examination of a social, cultural, or religious practice is enmeshed in a web of practices, ideas, narratives, and experiences, while simultaneously grounded in empirical observations. In Josephson Storm's metaphor, "[...] if words are like a net used to trap fish, this means not forgetting the net (because if we do so the fish will slip away) or worse, mistaking it for the fish, but instead looking under the net [...]" (2021: 132).

Second, rather than treating the *comparanda* as clearly demarcated and reified units of analysis with universal validity, one could think about productive generalisations as temporary strategies of identifying locally coherent structures that exist in immensely complex entanglements (Josephson Storm 2021: 133–138). The patterns we detect in our research are not simply out there, but they depend on our specific questions and approaches. From this perspective, generalisations are not statements about eternal God-given truths, but temporary explanations of focused empirical observations of social phenomena in flux. In contrast to essentialised categories, generalisations provide us with preliminary hypotheses based on academic examination thus far.¹¹ At the same time, using explicit definitions, abstract general concepts, and classifications remain indispensable for interpreting, comparing, and explaining the world, as scholarship requires language to articulate observations on various levels of abstraction (Riesebrodt 2010: 5–20). Without such concepts and classifications, we may run the risk of employing implicit insider categorisations, as Jonathan Z. Smith stated:

“Many students of religion, with their exaggerated ethos of localism and suspicion of generalization, tend to treat their subject in an adamic fashion as if they were naming entities, often exacerbated by their insistence on employing native terminology which emphasizes the absolute particularity of the date in question rather than deploying a translation language which already suggests that they are part of a larger, encompassing category. (Smith 2000: 36)

Working within the relational paradigm requires taxonomic and definitional work, relating “native” and particular terminology to translated and theorised language on a higher level of abstraction.

Since contemporary comparative research practices include similarities and differences, they allow us to familiarise what appears to be alien and to contrast ideas and practices that run

¹¹ Quack 2014 offers one example how relational approaches can help to describe, compare, and theorize contingent historical and contemporary patterns of human action without essentializing them.

the risk of being swallowed by hegemonical sameness (Seligman/Weller 2019).¹² This third principle points towards an understanding of controversial religious practices within specific historical and societal contexts, without legitimising, defending, or celebrating them as part of our contemporary world. One important societal contribution of the history of religion\’s — and the humanities at large — is its emphasis on the fact that how Western-educated intellectuals see the world is not the only way of perceiving and conceptualising reality. Recent reflections on the role of the WEIRD (Western, Educated, Industrial, Rational, Democratic) in psychology have shown what historians have known for a long time, namely that the normative Western view of the world, including the distinct role of religion, is not the most common way to see the world (Henrich/Heine/Norenzayan 2010). Relational generalisations take into account such difference without giving up on their pattern-based claims for wider applicability.

Finally, relational comparative approaches based on empirical observations prioritise social processes and mid-level categories like imagination, legitimation strategies, appropriation, classification, hierarchy, social control, institutions etc.¹³ The advantage of comparing processes is that it is relatively clear that these are social constructions that we recognise in basic forms within the diversity and complexity of their empirical surroundings and networks. Legitimation strategies amongst the political far-right and within religious communities can be juxtaposed and compared fruitfully without creating the false impression that the observed similarities and differences go back to a reified essence. Rather, the focus is on historically contingent patterns that may emerge from the comparison, helping to understand one case in light of the other (illuminative comparison) and facilitating the development of more detailed critical terminology (taxonomical comparison). Once classified together, they can be examined in light of more general cross-cutting questions, like how historical narratives and emotional regimes facilitate religious and political violence (Fournier/Maier 2019; Brand 2021).

5. Publishing theorised generalisations

Since one of the main concerns about generalisations in comparative work pertains to a potential de-contextualisation, I would like to introduce a specific publication strategy designed to differentiate various levels of particularity within a large comparative anthropological project. Daniel Miller and his colleagues recently narrated their choice for different types of knowledge dissemination as a way of navigating the uniqueness of particular field sites and the need for generalisation. Their solution to the tensions between specificity and generality is not “trying to locate some ideal balance between generalisation

¹² Philosophically, Josephson Storm (2021: 117) suggests thinking about clusters within social kinds that produce similarity and difference. Freiburger (2019: 92–96) argues extensively against (postmodern) claims of incomparability.

¹³ Jensen (2022: 14) building on Robert Merton’s notion of “theories of the middle range” (1949: 39–53).

and particularity,” but retaining them on a spectrum and correlating the various levels of generalisation with different publication strategies (Miller et al. 2019: 284). In response to Krüger’s observations about encyclopaedia as specific publication practices tied to the Aristotelian “order of things” (2022: 67–70), I suggest that a relational paradigm asks for relational publication practices with a more thorough engagement with a larger section of society.

Daniel Miller and colleagues discern between a horizontal dimension on which various anthropological case-study field projects take place, and a vertical dimension in which the different levels of specificity and generality were tied to publication strategies. For their large comparison of social media practices in nine communities, they started with a base of “popular dissemination which relied on specificity,” while working their way up in generality through genres like open access book publications and academic journal papers (Miller et al. 2019: 289). On this spectrum, the most specific situations sketches were published as short YouTube videos in which individual people told their stories. The main ethnographic descriptions, in a next step, were published as open access volumes in an accessible style and linguistic repertoire, while the more generalised theorisations were published in journals aimed at a specific academic public. They place their theoretical work engaging with fundamental philosophical questions regarding what it means to be human at a final position on the vertical spectrum, which they describe as having “no empirical base” but deriving from top-down reflection (Miller et al. 2019: 294).

For the study of religion\’s, one could imagine a similar publication strategy, taking into account how Steven Engler and Mark Q. Gardiner have conceptualised the process of theorising (2022: 114–116). Like Miller and his colleagues, Engler and Gardiner speak about theorising as positions on a spectrum between specificity (which they call “data”) and generality (called “theory”). Visualised in figure 1, they approach theorising as a dynamic process in which researchers can move up (towards “theory”) when they generate concepts of applied categorisations, or down (towards “data”) when giving examples and testing hypotheses. Combining the visualisation of such theorising steps with a publication strategy in which empirical observations are highlighted for a general audience in particular genres (like YouTube videos) and academic models are published in academic journals, one could complement horizontal comparison across specific situations with a vertical structure corresponding to disseminations strategies (figure 2).

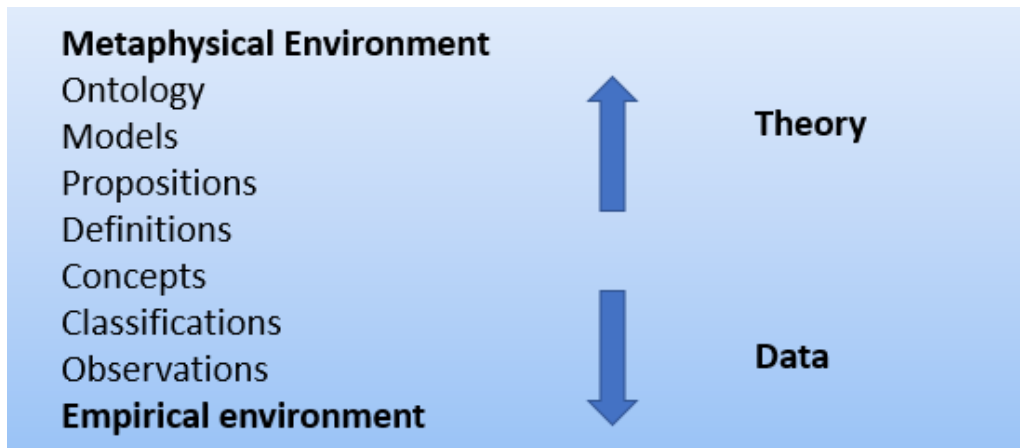


Figure 1. Data-theory spectrum (from: Engler/Gardiner 2022: box 1.7.2).

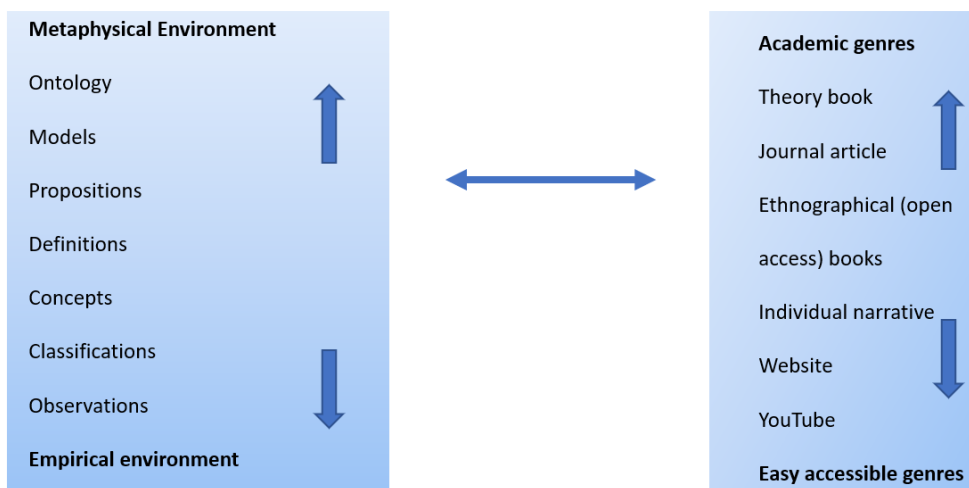


Figure 2. Proposal for vertical and horizontal structures facilitating comparative research practices in various types of publications.

Relational generalisations and comparative research practices cannot simply be placed on one side of these spectrums since comparison and theorising undergirds all levels of analysis (Brand 2022: 670, fig. 2). As Miller and colleagues stress, there is a constant movement and entanglement between theorising research steps. In the easily accessible genres, for example, “[...] we make general statements that summarise our findings, while nuancing them with findings from the individual field sites that both support and in some cases challenge these claims” (Miller et al. 2019: 296). The visualisation of how generalisations may relate to particular audiences (and associated aims), therefore, helps us to think about the interrelatedness of academic paradigms, societal needs, and publication strategies.

6. Conclusion

In the preceding pages, I have engaged Oliver Krüger’s perspective on the recent history of the study of religion\’s as providing a middle ground between two streams of scholarship. Rather than

identifying contemporary calls for systematic-phenomenological approaches as outdated returns to essentialism, universalism, and other academic evils, I placed them firmly within a relational paradigm. Drawing upon a recent exchange between two Dutch scholars of religion\,s, I highlighted the role of comparison and the associated generalisations as a chance for conversation about relational generalisations. Considering the conceptual and historiographical scrutiny of critical reflections in the study of religion\,s, helps us to see how scholars may pursue generalisations while taking into account the historical and historiographical networks of relations. Historians of religion\,s may, therefore, contribute to the identification of “propositions specifying that an empirical social process, pattern, or relationship among social phenomena has occurred more than once” and to the redescription of such empirically observable patterns in light of contemporary research questions and aims (Clark 2020: 418). This fundamental relationality of comparative work, combined with careful and temporary relational generalisations, may also affect our choices for publication strategies. With Miller and colleagues, I hope that such relationalities may facilitate an integration of specificity and generality, as Miller and colleagues express:

“ So, both the humanism of our stories, and the simplicity of our popularising discourse are protected as academic dissemination, because they are clearly linked to our evidence and to more theoretical propositions. They are thereby seen to be more than just anecdotes or mere positivist description. They become not just caveats expressing specificity, but also instances that speak to our discussion of typicality and normativity. Under these conditions, we can lose our fear of comparison. (Miller et al. 2019: 297)

If such hope is real, there may be space for — and in between — systematic-phenomenological and critical-relational approaches to the study of religion\,s in our departments.

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