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The Promise of Salvation: A Theory of Religion. By Martin Riesebrodt. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010. Pp xiv + 228.

Martin Riesebrodt's *The Promise of Salvation: A Theory of Religion* has too many virtues to enumerate in this short review. Yet, there are problems too. This is a well-written, persuasive, and serious piece of work in an area that has attracted more than its share of noisy bloviators. Let me begin then by saying that despite my overall pleasure with Riesebrodt's work, it seems curiously abstract. A fair rejoinder to my comment would be that theory books – above all – are meant to be just that – 'abstract.' But Riesebrodt's book remains curiously abstract because it remains abstract in places where it might be advised to be less so. While Riesebrodt registers his dissatisfactions, and even a good deal of disdain, for other kinds of theoretical talk about religion, Riesebrodt does not, I shall argue, articulate the problem to which his theory proposes to provide an answer. As Terry Eagleton argued, theorizing arises from becoming aware of those alarming "small bumps on the neck" – "symptoms that all is not well." Riesebrodt does not, I think, tell us quite enough about what is so 'unwell' that we should theorize religion as he wishes us to do. What are those concrete "bumps on the neck" that occasion Riesebrodt's theorizing?

Part of an answer may be first found in Riesebrodt's understandable irritation for theorizing religion as an intellectual matter – as "a theologically normative system." Religion would better be theorized as an "institutionalized complex of practices." (77) The "meaning of religious practices" can only be understood "on the level of institutionalized practices or 'liturgies'." (72) Riesebrodt is an "action" guy, not a thought guy.

A second part of what bothers Riesebrodt about current theorizing about religion is its rejection of the universality of religion. While religion is not universal by virtue of anything conceptual, Riesebrodt counters that religion is universal because it names “certain types of meaningful action” – actions which are themselves universal. (21) All religions, says Riesebrodt, seek to “avert misfortune, overcome crises and produce or mediate salvation.” (148) Religion should thus be conceived in terms of distinctive “interventionist” practices – “sacrifice, prayers, formulas and chants” (86) – that are themselves universal human phenomena.

In asserting the universality of religion, Riesebrodt offers a refreshing departure from its post-modern critics. Deconstructionism “hinders serious research and has confused a whole generation of students.” (6) Post-modern and post-colonial discourse have “often degenerated into simplistic theories of power struggle and conspiracy.” (7) Post-colonialism, in particular, treats “Western modernity” as if it were “the only real actor” in history, and as if the “Others” were doomed to passivity. (15) Riesebrodt blunts Talal Asad’s critique of the universal pretensions of the “liberal-secular” conception of religion by retorting that such a notion of religion is not even universally accepted in the West! (9) If religion were not something cross-culturally comparable, why, asks Riesebrodt, do many of those things we call ‘religion’ recognize each other as competing over the same turf? (30) Why has there been recognition of the distinction between the ‘religious’ and non-religious across cultures and historical times? (44) Well and good. Riesebrodt offers us a spirited defense of a universal, action-based theory of religion.

But, here I think we can usefully problematize Riesebrodt’s distaste for recent faddish approaches to religion, as well as his rejection of our tendency to intellectualize

religion as a matter of having certain beliefs. Things begin to fall into place once we realize that Riesebrodt, like most behavioral or social scientists, is also a 'god' guy. Thus, for him, the "specific meaning" of the "social action" that is religion "lies in its relation to personal or impersonal superhuman powers." (71) The problem is why Riesebrodt has taken the theistic route, when others, as I shall show, are also available? In a way, of course, the entire book speaks to this question. But, it does so only by way of offering *confirming* evidence that Riesebrodt's theory is reasonable and plausible. But, granting this, we still might want to know why Riesebrodt's theory is *compelling* and *necessary*? Why have other options faded out of sight? What deeper reasons lie behind his having opted for defining religion necessarily in terms of a "theory of action" at all? And, why do so in terms of "a specific type of meaningful social action" that is "universal" and theistic?

The answers to these questions depend upon what Riesebrodt's imagines the "specific type of meaningful social action" that we call 'religion' to be. For Riesebrodt, religion's salience resides in its dwelling at the extremes in human life, in 'crises.' Riesebrodt is convinced that many, or most people, we might describe as 'religious' are in the grip of a sense of existential crisis. All religious people are thus on the edge, at risk of lurching into calamity. As such, it makes excellent sense to see religion as "interventionist practice" (89) that primarily offers a "promise of salvation" (89) from these extremes of "crisis", "calamity" and "catastrophe." The logic of religion thus understood, then dictates that salvation becomes the business of a god or some other higher power. Only a "superhuman power" is equal to the task of pulling people back from the brink of calamity. Says Riesebrodt: "the promise to avert misfortune, to

overcome crisis, to promise salvation, presupposes powers that can keep this promise.”

(148) A ‘cog-sci’ guy could not have put it better.

Yet, once seen in the light of its complete investment in crisis, does Riesebrodt’s theory of religion satisfactorily cover the field? Or, is it really an *a priori* effort – only one possible perspective on religion, readily *confirmed* by reference to only one set of religious facts, but not to others?

It should surprise no one who understands the classic theorists of our field to conclude that Riesebrodt’s alignment with Max Weber cries out for correction in a Durkheimian direction. Here I write not so much as someone long working within the framework of Durkheimian theory. (I have equally well fallen quite happily into the Weberian camp on numerous occasions.) I write, rather, as someone who has come to appreciate the profundity of the opposition of Durkheim to Weber as representing a good deal more than cheering sections on opposite sides of a playing field. Durkheim and Weber differ because they differ in fundamentals no one, to my mind, has yet overcome. Although there is much to say about Durkheimian theory of religion – and much, much more than Riesebrodt’s stiff representation of Durkheimian theory of religion allows – (62-5), I shall only make a point bearing directly on Riesebrodt’s theory.

In the simplest terms, whereas Riesebrodt only takes religion to be something wheeled in to ‘intervene’ in crises, a Durkheimian point of view develops the sense in which religion is the presumed nurturing basis for normal life. Yes, once, like Riesebrodt, we presume life to be a series of potential catastrophes, religion as engaging a superhuman being swooping in for the rescue becomes logically inevitable. But, what of

the rest of life – when we are not on the brink? What of our need for authority and value to inform what human flourishing means? Yes, there, it still *may* make sense to write of a “superhuman power,” such as a ‘god’ – but not in the “interventionist” role cast by Riesebrodt’s theoretical imagination. Instead of focusing on the interventionist superhuman being of the theistic imaginary, it may equally well make sense to write of the non-interventionist “sacred,” precisely as Durkheim did. As an abiding source of energy, legitimacy and purpose, the Durkheimian sacred lays the foundation for human flourishing. As a kind of language of transcendence, religion in the Durkheimian mode, offers a grammar facilitating ways ‘good to think’ about human flourishing. Here, then, for example, is that epitome of non-interventionism – Buddhist Nirvana – that Riesebrodt curiously – but not so curiously – leaves out of his discussions of Buddhism. The ideal of Nirvana has set the parameters of ultimate, sacred value that have given Buddhist civilization the core values that have informed its flourishing for well over two millennia. Buddhists leave the ‘interventionism’ to *devatas*. And, as students of Durkheim will recall, here is precisely where Durkheim chose to expand the definition of religion beyond the cramped quarters of (interventionist) theism by defining religion as the administration of the sacred. In this domain, Riesebrodt has little or nothing to say to religious folk. Other sorts of “bumps on the neck” occasion quite another sort of theorizing of religion.

A bibliographical note: this is an English translation of Riesebrodt’s original German text of 2007. For some unknown reason, the University of Chicago Press proceeded to simple publication of an English translation, bypassing the option of publishing an English *edition*, with updated attention to the raft of work done on theory

of religion in the interim. Thus, readers may be shocked to discover find that of the 400 or so references in the bibliography, only a handful date later than 2000! The cost to readers of theoretical work on religion has been understandably high. The loss is especially evident in Riesebrodt's critiques of post-modern thinkers, where, typically charges are made, but no names named. Skimpy, imprecise or outdated citations but, for the greater part, *none at all*, will be found to the work of the past decade's leading theorists or critical historians of theory of religion. Amazingly, this book is written as if Talal Asad, Michel Despland, Tim Fitzgerald, Tom Lawson, Mark Lilla, Russell McCutcheon, Tomoko Masuzawa, Robert Segal, Jonathan Z. Smith, Mark Taylor, Donald Wiebe, and your present reviewer, had had nothing to say about theory of religion.

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Endnote: