

The Discursive Side of Sociological Institutionalism in the Study of Religion

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Abstract

This article introduces sociological institutionalism and proposes a discursive addition for enhancing its utility for the study of religion. The article reviews neoinstitutionalist social theorizing and underlines its argument that agentic actorhood is constituted by and embedded in a world-spanning culture. We point out that the potential of this line of scholarship for the study of religion remains unexplored partly because it does not say much about the actual discursive practices that motivate actors to behave in concrete situations. We illustrate how a discursive approach to sociological institutionalism can fill this gap by highlighting the relational context that all actors intuitively take account of. We then offer a brief programmatic agenda for the study of religion under the rubric of epistemic governance, indicating the potential for new theoretical insights into the category of religion, some methodological implications, and empirical studies.

Keywords

Sociological institutionalism, discourse analysis, epistemic governance, Foucault

1. Toward a Discursive Institutional Approach to the Study of Religion

Drawing on long-standing roots in phenomenology, the study of religion has recently embraced discourse analysis as an approach and a methodological tool (Hjelm 2020). In general, as a new overview points out, “recent handbooks and critical overviews of method and theory in the study of religion include a chapter that engages with discursive approaches” (Johnston and von Stuckrad 2018). An impressive array of empirical studies worldwide now stem from a “discursive approach” when understanding religious phenomena or enquiring into the very category of religion, already a tremendous development since calls only a decade ago for religious studies to “take talk seriously” (Wuthnow 2011).

This range of empirical studies into discourses of religion is complemented by an equally broad theoretical understanding of discourse. As the overview cited above notes, discrepancies may be seen in how the popular concept of discourse is defined or applied. Hjelm (2020) also comments on the “multiple directions” that discourse analysis has taken in religious studies, proposing a taxonomy to map them. For us, this only serves to reveal different aspects of this important term. As such, new turns in discourse analysis help broaden such usage and can bring new insights into the study of religion.

One recent direction in this vein has been the combination of discourse studies with neoinstitutionalism in sociology. Neoinstitutionalism puts forward a strong challenge to realist, actor-centered social theories that most sociology takes for granted, including the sociology of religion. By focusing on external structures of legitimation, it has helped redescribe and explain many domains of social action, from policy changes to political attitudes to practices, including those connected with religion such as conversion or female genital cutting. While much of the emphasis has been on explaining the similarity of seemingly unconnected local actions around the world, there is a strong element of discourse in this scholarship that has yet to be described fully. Explicating this discursive side to sociological institutionalism will greatly enhance its applicability to discourse analytic studies of religion, as we describe here. In this article we detail one approach to the discursive side of neoinstitutionalism as the theoretical framework of “epistemic governance,” which has been highly successful in explaining otherwise puzzling sociological phenomena. Although this framework has not been employed in the study of religion, we argue that it has much to offer the growing field of discourse and religion. That is largely because most discourse analytic approaches in religion are actor-centered and tend to brush aside worldwide categories of actorhood. On the other hand, sociological institutionalism begins from worldwide cultural categories but has largely not focused on discourse analysis. There are some notable exceptions to this, which we point out below, showing that a start is being made to bridge these two traditions.

Epistemic governance is one framework to formalize that bridge, starting from a sociological view that focuses on “the interplay and interconnectedness of words and things ... Discourses are not only words or mere things. They construct objects, be they deeds or natural objects, by providing the frames and viewpoints within which the members conceive of them” (Alasuutari 2004). Michel Foucault was a progenitor of this view of discourse, which inextricably ties together (a) “talk” with (b) structures of power that legitimize this talk, and (c) forms of knowledge that, in turn, legitimate power (Foucault 1980). Foucault’s understanding of discourse underlies the theory of epistemic governance and forms the theoretical backdrop for this argument.

This article unfolds as follows. We first describe the emergence of neoinstitutionalism, focusing on its sociological variant that radically challenges dominant, realist, and functional accounts of social action. We highlight the new insights that emerge from this challenge, particularly with reference to globalization. In the following section, we follow Schmidt (2008) to describe a discursive layer of neoinstitutionalism, and the further understanding this has brought to social theory.

We build on these to describe our theoretical framework of epistemic governance (Alasuutari and Qadir 2019). We highlight the relation between “talk” and the principles of perception that guide such talk. Finally, we propose a research agenda for the discursive study of religion in line with this framework. We concentrate on potential new insights into the conceptual problem of defining the category of religion, as well as further methodological tools that sociologists can deploy in their study of religion and some new empirical arenas such tools open up.

2. Sociological Institutionalism

The rise of the new institutionalisms (Hall and Taylor 1996; Schmidt 2008) can be seen as part of the same “linguistic” or “constructionist” turn that also resulted in the field of discourse analysis. As Powell and DiMaggio (1991) note, new institutionalism developed from several researchers’ observation in the 1970s that the world is inconsistent with the ways in which contemporary theories — rational choice and functionalism — asked them to see it. Empirical observations spoke against the assumptions that individuals and organizations make rational choices, or that they were driven purely by coercive threats: too many counter-instances amassed in various sub-fields of sociology to reasonably hold on to these premises (Schofer, *et al.*, 2012). Taking cue from these deviances, sociological institutionalism roots people’s actions in culture (Lechner and Boli 2005). As initiators and carriers of culture, institutions are shaped by historical factors that limit the understanding of and actual range of options open to actors in society. Besides, the institutional setup of society *constitutes* actors, providing them with the “frames of meaning” that guide their action (Meyer 2010). Because of this emphasis on culture and history, neoinstitutionalists do not conceive of societies as universal, machine-like entities that are governed by universal sociological laws. Rather, the objects of research are considered as contingent historical creations. Thus, neoinstitutionalism approaches contemporary society as a fulsome “realization of the global culture of moderns ... as a belief system” (Alasuutari 2016: 2).

This way of thinking about social action as driven by cultural models is in sharp contrast to mainstream realist theories, which take actors (individuals or groups) as pre-given, unproblematic entities, and seek to explain their actions. Neoinstitutionalism, by contrast, describes how the actors are constructed out of their cultural environment, how their actions are “rational” or make sense only because the broader culture legitimates them as such (Meyer and Jepperson 2000). It is grounded in the conviction that the social world and actors’ decision-making cannot be properly explained without taking into account the role of institutions in constituting the conditions under which actors make their moves and how they expect others to behave (Hwang, Colyvas and Drori 2019).

Sociological institutionalism directs attention to global isomorphism, evident in the spread of worldwide models even to countries for which they are not suitable in their present situation. In contrast with rational choice institutionalism, the sociological variant typically stresses that institutions constitute actors instead of just

constraining them and that interests emerge within particular normative and historical contexts (Powell and DiMaggio 1991). That is why sociological institutionalists argue that actors enact global scripts (Hwang, Colyvas and Drori 2019). For example, organizations adopt practices that look rational and are justified by efficiency, even if they are not beneficial but rather detrimental. Action can be characterized, in other words, as rationalistic, not based on measuring of pros and cons as assumed in rational choice theory (Meyer 2010; Meyer and Jepperson 2000).

Sociological institutionalism defines institutions in a much broader sense than the other two approaches. Here, institutions do not just stand for organizations, formal rules, procedures or norms, although all these are institutions as well. For this perspective, institutions are also symbols, scripts, and moral principles that provide the “frames of meaning” guiding human action (Hall and Taylor 1996). In other words, institutions — or the institutional infrastructure comprising organizations — inform the rules of engagement in society. This can be seen most clearly in one branch of sociological institutionalism called world polity or world society theory, which discusses the contemporary global institutional setup as *world society* and the cultural models and scripts that carry it as *world culture* (Boli and Thomas 1999; Lechner and Boli 2005; Meyer, Krücken and Drori 2009). This emphasis has helped world society theory to explain the puzzling isomorphism found in the world despite tremendous functional differences: societies in the current world, “organized as nation-states, are structurally similar in many unexpected dimensions and change in unexpectedly similar ways” (Meyer, *et al.*, 1997).

Sociological institutionalism stresses that rationalism and conformity are the core underlying reasons for actors’ willingness to enact the same worldwide models (Meyer, Krücken and Drori 2009). Rationalism creates a tendency for many actors to be overtly organized because it gives the outer appearance of being rational and efficient. Due to the great belief in, and respect for, rational planning, actors develop increasingly detailed plans, which policy makers also in peripheral states adopt though they have no need for or resources to implement them (Boli 1987; Meyer, *et al.*, 1997). Decoupling is an inevitable outcome: actors adopt inconsistent structures from different global sources and symbolic frames without substantive meaning. Hence, hypocrisy is prevalent (Pope and Meyer 2016).

It is worth pausing here to emphasize the potential impact this point has for the social study of any phenomenon, including religion. Much of sociology has embraced the common assumptions of actor-centric rational choice theory that people are pre-given, un-constituted actors (c.f., Meyer 2010; Meyer and Jepperson 2000 for a critique of this notion in social sciences generally). In this actor-centric or rational-choice tradition, action is construed as being instrumentally and, more or less, freely chosen by pre-given individuals or groups. By contrast, sociological institutionalism situates the actor herself as a socially constituted entity and analyzes her actions as being rationalized and legitimated by wider societal structures. Institutional scholar have amassed a wealth of empirical evidence that shows how actions are deemed rational even when they violate obvious self-interest, or are not coerced (Hwang, Colyvas and Drori 2019; Meyer and Jepperson 2000; Schofer, *et al.*, 2012).

For sociological institutionalists, then, action is “rational” to the extent that it is legitimated by the broader cultural environment in which we partake. Furthermore, they stress that what distinguishes contemporary times is the remarkable scale of common legitimation: our assumptions about what constitutes rationality, about the nature of the individual and so on, are *truly world-spanning* and presented as universally applicable (Boli 1998; Jepperson and Meyer 2011; Thomas 2009). Part of the world culture that legitimates all social action is that it labels certain actions “rational” and others “irrational.” Much of sociological institutionalist analyses are spotlights on how social action is rationalized and legitimated, and how the common bases of legitimation lead to structural similarities around the world. A common research design within macro sociological institutionalism has been to scrutinize the variables — such as membership in UNESCO — that explain the spread of a particular worldwide model to different nation-states, like school reform (Meyer and Ramirez 2000).

3. Epistemic Governance: The Discursive Side of Sociological Institutionalism

By regarding the global system as an institutional order ingrained in world culture, sociological institutionalism marks a stimulating departure from the conventional macro-realist view, which treats the world system simply as a battleground on which national states, blocs or civilizations fight each other while defending their interests. It offers intriguing, new macro-level insights into how the world is evolving when we think of it as a single society (Meyer, Krücken and Drori 2009). Of course, the theory’s emphasis on the constitutive role of culture is understandable as a corrective to decades of social theory founded on rational choice. To counter the deeply embedded idea of rational actors making choices, the bulk of world society theory scholarship continues to emphasize the role of world culture as constitutive of the actors — that is, agents enacting world cultural scripts (Meyer 2010).

However, this emphasis has meant that less attention has been paid so far to the study of views, understandings or aspirations of those actors. In that respect, many sociological institutionalists do not probe actors’ motivations, in order to focus on the institutionalized world culture that renders those actions meaningful. Some new institutionalist scholarship has stepped in to look more closely at the local enactment of global models, for instance Thomas’ (2019) study of how religious individuals strategically present themselves or Çevik’s (2015) analysis of religious meaning-making in institutionalized sites of interaction in Turkey. However, these few studies are not consolidated methodologically into a single discourse analytic approach.

These insightful starts on combining discourse analysis and sociological institutionalism in the study of religion beg for more in-depth explanations combining worldwide legitimacy and local meaning-making. Bringing it down to the level of action, however deeply individuals are constituted by their environment, that doesn’t change the situation at hand from an individual’s point of view. An individual actor still has to be convinced of how best to proceed in a given case, and how to convince others. And she still has her future projects, or intentionality. So, how can we retain

the valuable macro-insights of sociological institutionalism while incorporating the strategic motivations and moves by local actors? In other words, can we arrive at a better balance between social structure (institution) and social agency (individual)?

One way forward is to start with the position of a local actor herself and ask what the actual patterns of talk and institutionalized rules are that motivate actors in the modern world to behave so uniformly. Vivien Schmidt (2008) has dubbed this view of the relationship between actors and institutions as discursive institutionalism, although she admits that the scholars she lists as its representatives are a diverse group. Common to discursive institutionalists is a qualitative, case-study approach that zooms in on local processes through which global ideas are adopted, worked with, and enacted.

This does not mean that neoinstitutionalist sociology should take a step back toward a more actor-centric position, but rather that it takes a next step after the acknowledgement that world culture constitutes actors by asking how local actors utilize world cultural discourses. The discursive side of institutionalism can be brought out by scrutinizing and reconstructing the cultural logic of people's action. In particular, this side of institutionalism provides insight into "the role of ideas in constituting political action, the power of persuasion in political debate, the centrality of deliberation for democratic legitimation, the construction and reconstruction of political interests and values, and the dynamics of change in history and culture" (Schmidt 2008).

Both institutional theory and discourse analysis are concerned with the "rules of the game," or locating meaning making as exogenous to the organizations in question. Sociological institutionalism has tended to concentrate on the global spread and effects of these common rules. Indeed, institutions are seen in this literature as self-regulating mechanisms (Jepperson 1991) that both constrain and empower particular kinds of legitimate actions. One important line of research in this tradition has been on how embeddedness in world culture leads to isomorphic effects, whereby formal structures and espoused principles tend to look more and more similar across the world despite functional disparities. As considerable empirical investigation has proven, such similarity is generally better explained by the degree of embeddedness in world culture than by micro-contexts (Meyer, *et al.*, 2009). For instance, Boyle, *et al.*, (2002) find that participation in "modern," worldwide, institutionalized scripts such as schools, colleges, and mass media in five African countries reduce the probability that women will support female-genital cutting (FGC), a traditional norm in those societies. Moreover, they find that not only has FGC occurrence "coincided with Islam" in those countries (15), but that being Christian was negatively correlated with the practice primarily because those Christian women were more open to worldwide institutional scripts opposing FGC, for example college education (23, 26).

Yet, as Boyle, *et al.*, (2002: 15) note, there is no indisputable link between Islamic doctrine or praxis and FGC, nor is the practice widespread in Muslim majority countries in other regions. So, there is an open question as to how FGC became connected with Islam in these African countries. This is a question amenable to discourse analysis, which is concerned with "the processes of social construction

that underlie institutions” (Phillips 2003: 220). We can get to the connection by considering Foucault’s characterization of discourse as bodies of knowledge and “practices that systematically form the object of which they speak” (Foucault 1977: 49).

Another way of putting it is that while sociological institutionalism explores the ways in which shared meanings, social objects and subject positions are put to use, discourse analysis probes the processes by which meanings are produced, objects are construed, and positions are attached to discourses and institutionalized. In that sense, discourse is something like a processual layer to institution-making and rule-enforcing. As Phillips (2003: 228) puts it, “Where there is an institution, there must be a discourse.” Subject positions, social objects, and connections between categories (like Islam and FGC) are constructed in discourse over time; all of that is institutionalized in a particular field and, in turn, constitutes states, organizations, and individuals. In some sense, discourse describes how practices become institutionalized, which ones do and which don’t, and how those institutions then constrain and enable individual action. Moreover, diffusion takes place in the medium of language. As such, processes of textual reproduction, dissemination and debate are important in telling us how diffusion happens and with what local effects. Discourse “examines how language constructs phenomena, not how it reflects and reveals it [sic]” (Phillips 2003: 222). In most cases, all this is an empirical matter to unpack, from the construction of institutionalized rules to the spread of models. Epistemic governance, the framework described here, offers one way to describe and empirically analyze the discursive codes underpinning institutionalization and the spread of models.

A. Epistemic Governance

The interplay between individual and institution is what Michel Foucault had in mind when he introduced the neologism of governmentality, which depicts government that guides the comportment of others by acting upon their hopes, desires, or milieu (Foucault 1991; Inda 2005). According to Foucault, this kind of governance became increasingly crucial for the political elite as the sovereign power of monarchy was gradually replaced by a constellation in which the art of government consists in managing public opinion and the support of several factions of society (Foucault 2007; Foucault 2008). The same has been said about governance at a global scale: national states adopt global standards and policy models not because they are forced to do so but primarily because governments are convinced that it is good for them, and hence global governance works particularly through knowledge production and consultancy (Alasuutari and Qadir 2019; Buduru and Pal 2010; Radcliffe 2010).

We refer to this view as “epistemic governance,” based on struggles over meaning and over a hegemonic definition of the situation at hand. They are not just struggles that consist in facts and ontological claims because actors also appeal to values and principles; they justify policies by bolstering shared values and by suggesting what they oblige us to do. Epistemic governance thus works by acting

upon other people's view of reality and their conceptions of what is feasible, acceptable or desirable. But it does not mean that this analytic of governance only applies to subtle influence or "soft power" (Nye 2004). Rather, the epistemic governance analytic depicts an approach to studying governance, however rough, violent and easily discernible or "dislocational" (Foucault 1977) and subtle it is. Hence, governance can be approached as more or less unself-conscious ways by which actors work on people's conceptions of reality. This entails strategies that affect people's wishes and aspirations, but a threat or use of military force and economic constraints are also means to affect people's conceptions of the situation and hence make them adopt a particular line of action. Whether actors use, say, science, money or tanks as their consultants, the objective in utilizing those resources is to convince others of what they want, should or must do in a given situation.

Scrutiny of debates on political issues shows that actors are engaged in what can be called epistemic work, in which they do not only appeal to facts but also to commonly shared values, for instance "sacred orders" in Finnish parliamentary debates (Äystö 2017). Furthermore, they address their audience as a community with shared interests, such as the nation. Indeed, there seems to be an analytical unity in the techniques by which policy-makers generally get convinced of, and in turn try to convince others of, policy solutions. Epistemic work is targeted on three different aspects of the social world: what is the environment, who are the actors, and what is virtuous or acceptable. In actual practice these three objects of epistemic work appear in combination so that there is no epistemic work that does not entail all three objects. When, for instance, a politician in national politics promotes a reform, she or he would provide sources of authority aimed at convincing the citizens that the current state of affairs is unsatisfactory and that the proposed measures will be effective and in the best interest of the nation. Such an argument obviously appeals to claims about reality but arguing for a reform on that basis also includes a normative element. And to say anything about what must be done implies actors and what they identify with (Alasuutari and Qadir 2019).

Such a discursive institutionalist perspective on politics and power relations enables us to better understand why nation-states in their policies end up reacting to the same global ideas and buzzwords. It is because actors throughout the world share the same world-cultural values and premises, which means that the same arguments and discourses appeal to them. One of these globally shared premises is a strong belief in science and rationality, which is why actors justify their claims by referring to empirical evidence and to the authority of science (Drori, *et al.*, 2009; Meyer and Frank 2020). It may result at times in scientists as an epistemic community playing a decisive role in decision-making (Carayannis, Pirzadeh and Popescu 2011; Haas 1992; Miller and Fox 2001), but more generally it means that scientific evidence and authority are key weapons in the political battlefield.

One would think that increased use of research and evidence leads the way to increasingly scientific planning and organization of society, but in fact it drives the creation of policy fashions (Meyer and Frank 2020). In recent decades there has been a global trend to transform older social forms – traditional bureaucracies, family

firms, professional and associations – into the same standard format of a formal organization. For example, traditional charities are now “nonprofit organizations” (Meyer and Bromley 2013). From the perspective of political actors, what counts is not whether they believe in a new policy, concept or principle but whether they think that other actors and the so-called “public opinion” consider it important. Hence individuals who want to influence decision-making need to align with the other actors’ views and sentiments, influence others with their own moves, or affect the beliefs about what the “general public” thinks. In other words, politics is increasingly dependent on impressions and impression management, which leads to “signaling games” discussed in rational choice institutionalism (Hall and Taylor 1996).

B. Imageries of the Social World in Epistemic Governance

There is not an endless variety of signaling games: constraints stem from the fact that people use mostly unarticulated mental images to make sense of the world. Furthermore, they work with a notion that others also think in similar images. By relying on cultural/ discursive approaches to sociology (e.g., Brown 1989), we can readily identify the root metaphors of society that people tend to think and talk in. According to Richard Harvey Brown, all of social theorizing and popular discourse is built on root metaphors by which people naturalize the world around them, explain that world to themselves and others, and act within that world. Brown proposes that people think of society as either an organism or as a machine, and conceive of social conduct as either language, or a drama, or a game. For Brown, all of social discourse (including social theorizing) is constructed on these metaphors, which are the basis of model-building.

The notion of root metaphors is compelling, but they are not complex or rich enough to convince others of what to do. More often, discourses comprise these metaphors woven together with practical aims, or future projects, into narrative “imageries” (Alasuutari and Qadir 2016). This connection between how people think of the social world and how they act means in turn that those seeking to influence society through their talk take into account and make use of prevalent imageries. Painting an imagery of society explicitly, or indicating it implicitly, is a convincing way of arguing for a particular course of action. A convincing imagery typically involves well-developed substance on all three dimensions of epistemic governance: a picture of what the social world is, who we are as actors in that world, and what is good or necessary to do. Such interpretive model-building relies naturally on language, and both ordinary social actors and social theorists engage in such model-building constantly. We find considerable evidence that social imageries are prevalent worldwide, similar to the symbols circulated globally by contemporary media that act as “unspoken backdrop to our thoughts, actions, and messages” (Schudson 1989). They are also akin to Charles Taylor’s more philosophical concept of “social imaginaries” (Taylor 2004), although Taylor’s description is hard to operationalize in a social research design.

By contrast to such philosophical concepts, imageries of the social world are more identifiable symbolic sets common to modern culture. Actors draw on these sets to paint a convincing picture when arguing a case. The use of imageries in rhetoric appeals to people because they provide a simple and straightforward picture of the social world, otherwise often quite difficult to grasp. The self-evidence of an imagery invoked by some actors invites others to frame the situation in a certain way, thereby occluding other alternatives.

The prevalent imagery of humanity “obviously” progressing and leaving behind all “childish” fantasies like religion contributed greatly to a secularization thesis in the early to mid-20th centuries. We call this the imagery of modernization. For instance, when some political actor would refer to reforming school education in Europe, they would rely in their argumentation on the assumption that others could recognize the world in this way (whether they themselves believed in it or not), and that painting the reform picture in this manner would be a convincing way to separate religious education from the curriculum. They could, for instance, point to social science of the time by Freud or by Marx, both of whom also relied on this imagery to develop their theories. And even though modernization theory à la Parsons (1964; 1966) has been declared dead and buried many times over, the idea of national states independently following their own developmental trajectory bound by “functional requirements” of modernization is still very much with us today in mainstream social science. In fact, social theorizing is also very deeply embedded in the same imageries of society as is social action and relies on utilizing the same language.

The continuity and relationship between social action and social theory is equally evident in another prevalent imagery of the social world as divided into competing blocs like warring tribes, nations, or civilizations. Hence, Samuel Huntington’s (1996) infamous thesis offered a readymade answer to why the Danish cartoons sparked such a tremendous backlash and a clash along the lines of freedom of speech vs. respect of religion. By 2015, this thesis was already deeply embedded in everybody’s minds, and so media coverage and analysis of the Charlie Hebdo assassinations rapidly moved into that explanation without having to spend much time on justifying it (Qadir 2015a). The reason why Huntington’s thesis was so widespread is not because it explained anything very well—far from it. Rather, it became widespread because it was deeply embedded in this second imagery of competing blocs, or warring tribes, and people everywhere found it easy to accept. In the best tradition of self-fulfilling prophecies, the popular belief in the world as comprising warring tribes has generated as much of a clash as it predicted.

The third common imagery pictures society as a hierarchy, inviting actors to conceive of power as residing in those “higher up,” even in cases where there is no obvious high-up. As Foucault showed, social actors often define a situation in terms of higher-ups and lower-downs to establish their authority, and this definition is often coupled with the production and legitimation of certain types of knowledge in which that authority is legitimately exercised (Foucault 1980). Consider, for example, the case of the National Assembly of Pakistan declaring the (self-professedly Muslim) Ahmadiyya community as religious heretics by constitutional amendment in 1974

(Qadir 2014). In arguing for this globally unique step, parliamentarians relied extensively on the authority of clerics in Saudi Arabia and the Al-Azhar University in Cairo. It was never mentioned during the one-month parliamentary session that neither Saudi clerics nor Al-Azhar held any *de jure* position of authority over the Pakistani parliament, much less over individual Muslims. Yet, the imagery of Saudi and Egyptian clerics and Islamic scholars as being naturally “higher up” on religious matters was enough to carry the day and pass the Second Constitutional Amendment. The declaration that these authorities held “specialist” expertise was considered enough to justify their position of command in a situation where command didn’t factually exist.

The epistemic governance analytic hence offers a discursive institutionalist framework helpful in describing the ways in which social actors work on each others’ conceptions of reality by using imageries that respond to the three key objects of epistemic work. What is also important is that there is “work” involved: actors have to engage in more or less strategically motivated action, but this action is based on talk that has limited, institutionalized features captured in the notion of imageries. The reason why all these discourses above have been successful is that the arguments have built on imageries that are widely prevalent in modern society, in many if not all institutionalized domains.

4. A Discursive Institutional Agenda for the Study of Religion

One apparent implication from the above is that the discourse analytic framework of epistemic governance is most useful when applied to religion in politics. However, this seeming limitation is more due to a lack of research than anything else. There are hardly any studies to date on religion in society from a discursive institutionalist perspective. The epistemic governance framework, in particular, has not been applied in the study of religion as much it has been in other cases of political expression, and so there are few empirical examples to draw upon. When it has been used, as above, it is mostly in cases of overt overlap between religion and politics, resulting in new insights into complex phenomena. We outline below some further investigations using epistemic governance that might advance the study of religion.

An epistemic governance analytic would not help in formulating substantive definitions or criteria by which a group of human activities might be legitimately classified as religious, such as Wicca (Taira 2010), New Age spiritualities (Hanegraaff 1999), or nationalism (Hayes 1960). While such definitions and identification of new groups are revealing, an epistemic governance analytic is more helpful in a formalist extension of the element that all these authors discuss in their respective cases: the discursive construction or contestation of a group of activities as belonging to the category of religion. Epistemic governance offers us a tool by which to understand *how* this discursive construction is argued or contested. In each of these cases (and others), the discourse that promotes or contests inclusion in the category of religion can be rigorously analyzed to determine what ontology of the environment is being assumed, what kinds of actor identifications are being built, and what norms are

being promoted openly or opaquely. Furthermore, a classification of the imageries at work can help make sense of the cultural context that those involved in arguing the case assume their audience are part of.

Naturally, this emphasis on studying religious speech acts does not mean that we lose sight of religious phenomena or deny the existence of religion altogether. It only means that we stick to making interpretations of how actors construe and live religion as a globally spread concept. When, for instance, different groups claim the right to be called and treated as religions, comparable to well-established world religions, they appeal to the global, authoritative definitions of religion and perhaps also to the United Nations' declarations on religious rights. Likewise, analysis of religious speech acts may entail noticing how argumentation within a church bears resemblance with that found in the "secular world." For instance, in texts in which religious leaders tell the members of the church how they should behave concerning a particular question, they often base their views on interpretations of some holy scriptures, and hence engage in rational argumentation familiar from legal discourse. On the other hand, the way in which laws and other authoritative texts, such as international treaties, are used as moral principles in secular society, shows us how religion and society intersect.

Any conscious argument brings into discourse what was previously held unreflexively as what Bourdieu termed "doxa" (Bourdieu 1977), or similar to what Charles Taylor termed the amorphous "background understanding" (Taylor 2004). Epistemic governance unpacks *how* that unveiling into consciousness happens, and with what consequences. For instance, in the example above, bringing the issue of Ahmadiyyat as a heresy into Pakistani political discourse openly in 1974 brought out several features of Islam from unspoken doxa, such as the official discouragement of a widespread popular practice of spiritual initiation; this has inevitably led to further marginalization and victimization of groups based on initiation, like Sufi orders and Shi'as in the country (Qadir 2015b). These genetic imprints of a discursive act can be readily identified when we start examining more closely how a religious speech act is institutionalized. This is why we have referred throughout this article to epistemic governance as an "analytic" — Foucault's term for *how* something happens — rather than an analysis, which concentrates on *what* happens.

With this emphasis, discursive institutionalist studies of religion must evolve a more rigorous methodological apparatus to examine religious speech acts as part of broader social discourse. The epistemic governance analytic has been developed principally through the study of national policymaking. Most of the research has involved qualitative case studies through grounded analyses of individual instances of policy talk and institutionalization, such as formation of bioethics committees around the world (Syväterä and Qadir 2015) or the spread of children's rights institutions (Alasuutari, et al., 2016). However, the focus on institutionalized discourse and on objects of epistemic work, as well as imageries of the social world, offer new methodological insights also for the study of religion. Epistemic governance thus offers new dimensions on which to code qualitative data of religious speech acts and build a deeper picture of religion in society.

Consider, for instance, Boyle, *et al.*'s (2015) in-depth analysis of the spread of abortion liberalization policies between 1960 and 2009 with respect to how they were framed. They find, as expected, that actors associated with a medical/ scientific framing of the issue are consistently pro-abortion liberalization and, unexpectedly, that Catholic countries were as likely as others to adopt rape as grounds for abortion. This finding is consistent with world society theory and against modernization approaches. More to the point here, they find that "local actors are especially powerful when no single understanding holds sway" (907). This finding underlines the importance of paying attention to local discourse in contested cases, for instance when an entirely new model is being diffused. In this case, it would be instructive to see how people in countries where the Catholic Church is a significant actor, defend or object to abortion in different cases (for instance in allowances for rape victims, fetal impairment, etc.). By examining that discourse and situating it within different subject positions in the field (e.g., Catholic priests/ spokespersons, congregations, non-Catholic Christians and non-Christians in a Catholic-majority country) we can arrive at how contested positions are justified. Again, as a discursive dimension to sociological institutionalism, epistemic governance offers one way to unpack how local actors are negotiating their interests.

New empirical areas also open up when we look for the institutions at stake. For instance, parliamentary debates about various policy arenas is an interesting instant of social discourse, since parliamentarians talk not just to each other, but to their parties, other stakeholders, their national publics, and even to the wider world (Fairclough and Fairclough 2013). When a politician wants to convince her colleagues or the world about a course of action — like passing or rejecting a bill — she justifies her argument in a way that she thinks will appeal to this very wide audience. In that way, parliamentary talk offers a very revealing window into the assumptions that social actors have about how others perceive the world and their role in it. Parliamentary debates have been rigorously analyzed from a discursive institutionalist perspective of epistemic governance in many fields, such as the implications of cross-national comparison (Alasuutari and Qadir 2014), constructing national exceptionalism (Alasuutari 2016: 94-115), or invoking a moral authority of science (Qadir and Syväterä 2021). However, there has been surprisingly little attention to parliamentary discourse about religion, despite some research on hereticization in Pakistan (Qadir 2015b), and sacred orders of ethnicization in Finnish parliamentary talk (Äystö 2017; Prindiville and Hjelm 2018). We believe that further analyses of religion talk in parliaments would reveal fascinating new lessons into the assumptions people make when justifying their arguments about religion, mostly about how to separate religion from state.

Another arena of enquiry is the worldwide spread of religion talk. As Thomas (2004) shows in the context of world society theory, contentions over religious conversion and proselytization are framed in terms of universalized rights, specifically tolerance and anti-discrimination, and these framings travel globally by way of authorized, voluntary associations. However, there is more to the spread of rights discourse, in which similar patterns of talk also travel and appeal to worldwide

audiences. Those patterns of talk build on and reinforce different imageries of the social world in different circumstances with different consequences, which need to be mapped.

In the example about Ahmadi hereticization, the parliamentary exclusion of the community from Islam in Pakistan reinforced that community's victimization by Muslims around the world. The same patterns of talk emerged in distant South Africa (Qadir 2016). Sparked by a relatively innocuous legal case, there was no urgent reason for the small community of Muslims in the Western Cape to declare Ahmadis as heretics. Indeed, the community was struggling with a double disadvantage: the basic problem of Apartheid in South Africa (since most Muslims were of South Asian origin) and the minoritization of Islam in a dominant Christian polity. Yet, Cape Town Muslims and then the rest of the country, went out of their way to persecute and marginalize Ahmadis after the community had been targeted in Pakistan. Field research shows that this diffusion was strengthened by incendiary speeches delivered by Pakistani clerics visiting South Africa specifically for this purpose and by two cases heard by the Supreme Court of South Africa, where textually presented evidence from Pakistani authorities cemented public opinion of most Muslims against Ahmadis. Moreover, the South African representative body, the Muslim Judicial Council, referred specifically to numerous, earlier judgments by the famous international NGO, Muslim World League (*Rabita al-Islami*) when declaring Ahmadis irretrievably "beyond the pale of Islam." This carried over to exclusion of "Ahmadi-sympathizers" and to the declaration of new principles of faith to complement the five pillars of Islam with additional requirements to defend a specific interpretation of finality of prophethood. Now, this institutionalization of hereticization in South Africa can best be explained by the diffusion of the practice in the broader institutional field of Islamic organizations dominated by the MWL and OIC. However, the manner in which it took place, the local effects it had, the differences in South Africa from other countries, etc., can be described in detail by discourse analysis as in the theory of epistemic governance. For instance, the extensive use of the imagery of competing camps led to a discursive formation of an in-group of Sunni Muslims that turned its attention after the Ahmadis to other "competing" blocs of Shias and then Sufis, for which there was no immediate, global justification.

The Danish cartoon controversy and Hebdo assassinations are also prime examples of how religious talk spreads around the world with serious consequences (Eide, Kunelius and Phillips 2008). Again, this spread was not a *result* of worldwide institutionalization of norms but, rather, a *cause* of such institutionalization. Yet, we need to know more about why some instances of religious talk spread effectively but others do not. Is there a discursive-analytic pattern to which religious contests become truly world-spanning, and which do not? What patterns of talk and imageries are more shared worldwide than others when it comes to religion? And, how does the globally shared nature of an institution like a parliament or court affect this spread? Epistemic governance is especially well suited to studying such questions and probing the worldwide similarity of forms of religious talk that lead to institutionalization.

Typical research designs probing these points would zoom in on justifications in religious talk, claims and contests, for instance around heresy, blasphemy, conversion, and so on. Analyzing these justifications in terms of epistemic governance would reveal the underlying discursive similarities and differences in particular instances and how they lead to differentiated, worldwide institutionalization.

A primary insight of the discursive institutionalist framework of epistemic governance is how talk around religion reveals commonly held assumptions in a society or community. Such assumptions are typically deeply rooted in society and are very often institutionalized as formal or fast-held, informal conventions about the “correct” way to talk about religion. Yet, the same assumptions about how the world works are at the same time very broadly held and appear in all sorts of social discourse. One feature of religious speech acts, then, is apparently to hide these broader societal connections, for instance by suggesting that there is something socially unique about religious talk or action, or by holding religion as somehow separate from the rest of society. However, as critical religion research amply shows, the separation of religion from politics is a discursive construct (e.g., Fitzgerald 2015), so further investigation is required into how this division has been institutionalized in ways of thought and in social structures to affect the way people talk of religion. One crucial area where such a perspective can be immediately relevant is religious education and its reform in Western Europe in light of growing numbers of children from “new” religions entering schools and the resulting senses of “otherness” (Zilliacus and Holm 2013). While some of the challenges in this realm have been exposed in a few comparative studies (Hella and Wright 2009), much work remains to be done to understand how globally shared assumptions about society are invoked in globally linked school reform efforts.

Of course, any religious talk or act is not the same as any talk or act about, say, investing in natural resource mining in the Arctic. But the language used is the same in both cases, the ways in which arguments are made is the same in both cases, and the assumptions that speakers think their audiences hold in each case are also similar. In other words, the conventions of talk are similar, including the convention of obscuring that similarity. Interrogating how, and to what local effect, such similarities are underscored or obscured can lead to much clarity on how the global script of separation of religion and politics is actualized in local discourse. Indeed, we have shown in this paper more generally that combining sociological institutionalism’s identification of worldwide ontological categories with discourse analytic probes of conventions of religious talk can lead to insightful new research designs to study religion. Epistemic governance offers one route to formalize this connection and cement the discursive direction some sociological institutionalist scholarship has begun to explore in the study of religion.

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