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# Metamodernism

## Provincializing American Theory

### METAMODERNISM: THE FUTURE OF THEORY

By Jason Ānanda Josephson Storm.  
Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2021  
Pp. xiii +328. Hardcover, \$63.80, Paper \$26.68.

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*metamodernism, theory of religion, hermeneutics, Gadamer*

Let me begin by saying that I experienced Joseph Ānanda Josephson Storm's *Metamodernism* as a breath of fresh air blowing through a room filled with cobwebs, phantoms, and dusty furniture. It opens windows that let new light come in and give us a glimpse of distant horizons and possible new futures for the study of religion, the humanities, and even humanity as such. In spite of its global aspirations, *Metamodernism* is also a deeply American book about a deeply American phenomenon. As the author reminds us in his opening chapter, the cluster of theories known as *Deconstruction*, *Poststructuralism*, *Postmodernism*, and *French Theory* (or, to further expand the list, *Critique*, *Theory*, or *Critical Theories*) is, in fact, "an American invention" or even "an American subversion or parody" rather than a simple import from Europe (10, and literature in note 23; see Cusset 2008). With an obvious nod to the well-known volume by Dipesh Chakrabarty (2000) and Josephson Storm's own stated intention to "subtly provincialize Euro-American thought" (25), my short response is meant as a modest yet serious contribution to the global emancipatory project of *provincializing America* as regards theory and method in the study of religion and the humanities. As a scholar from the Netherlands who has spent his academic career studying "Western" traditions and ideas, my particular focus will be on how European intellectual traditions may contribute to a positive, re/constructive metamodern perspective that can give new life and inspiration to our field (Hanegraaff 2020).

It would be pointless here to summarize Josephson Storm's diagnosis of what is wrong with religious studies and the humanities. It may suffice that his book is written for readers who, after having been fed a one-sided diet for decades, finally found themselves "sick of Theory" (7, for diagnostic symptom lists, see

also 1, 8-9, 50-51, 213, 240, 242). In terms of an influential key analysis by Rita Felski, who wrote a blurb for the back cover, two central qualities of Theory or Critique are particularly problematic: the fact that *critique is negative* and that it *does not tolerate rivals* (Felski 2011, 2015, 127-34, 147-50). Against the pervasive cynicism of the former perspective, Josephson Storm's metamodernism aspires not just to be positive, creative, re/constructive, and forward-looking, but even to promote human flourishing, compassion, and love (ix-xi, 4-7, 235-43, 255-72). And against the arrogant exclusivism of the latter perspective, its ideal is a "humble, emancipatory knowledge that recognizes the existence of multiple modes of the real" (4, 41-42, 215, 222, 229, 277, 281, 285). It is significant that Josephson Storm's young daughter Athena receives this book as a "love letter" from her father (xi): he understands that as academics, we have a responsibility to leave something more positive and hopeful to the next generations than just a desolate post-structuralist landscape of fallen idols and post-metaphysical ruins, a place where just power and domination reign supreme while nothing new and positive will ever be allowed to grow. Josephson Storm reminds us, and I concur, that we have not reached the end of history: "Our brains are 'plastic.' Our bodies can be trained. Our minds expanded. Our virtues can be cultivated. We can become better people. We can learn to live more meaningful lives. ... We can make progress toward humble knowledge of ourselves and others. The human sciences can help us get there" (280).

Based on an expert "critique of critique" and "deconstruction of deconstruction," Josephson Storm does *not* exactly seek to reconstruct the humanities and the study of religion. We cannot regress from postmodernity back to modernity, and so we should not expect the metamodern to (re)introduce some new kind of "structure" miraculously immune against deconstruction. As metaphysical stability is gone forever, along with essentialisms of any kind, the future alternative in the humanities must be a *Process Social Ontology* grounded consistently in "dynamics, change, transformation, impermanence, creation, destruction, entanglements, emergence, interdependence, and interrelation" (87)—in short, not in Being but in Becoming. But please note that this can only mean there *is* no such thing as "reality"—in fact, we cannot even say that "it" (reality) therefore "exists" in a state of becoming, nor that only "becoming" really *is*. Josephson Storm refers to Heraclitus in a footnote, next

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to a range of further European, American, Chinese, Indian, and even Aztecs references (309 nt 14); but still, I wondered how deeply he grasps the dazzling paradoxes implied by his proposal—after all, even the word *ontology* itself refers to Being, and therefore begs the very question...

Rather than opening this very deep (or rather, bottomless) can of metaphysical worms concerned with Being and Becoming, it seems that Josephson Storm wants to promote a slightly more pragmatic principle in the study of religion and culture: if *panta rhei* is the rule, it follows that “social phenomena,” too, “are heterogenous and subject to constant variation and transformation” (89). But here comes my first objection. To a European scholar like myself, for whom the study of religion has never been a theory-driven pursuit but must always be a bottom-up enterprise grounded deeply in historicity and the study of sources (Rudolph 1994), this frankly strikes me as a wide-open door. I am perfectly on board with a “Process Social Ontology,” but cannot see that it amounts to more than the eminently reasonable (or rather, to my mind, unavoidable) recognition of *radical historicity* as the bedrock principle on which our work must be based, even in studying contemporary phenomena (Hanegraaff forthcoming). I find it perfectly self-evident that if anything needs to be “explained” by scholars in the humanities, of course, it is not “social change or cultural differences” but precisely their counterparts: “relative stability or similarity” (90). With respect to that point, I agree that “a whole generation of theorists got it exactly backwards” (*ibid.*), and so we may indeed be forced to refute this fallacy in considerable detail, as done in this book. And yet, I cannot help thinking that the supposed “problem” is little more than a triviality that never existed anywhere else than just in the minds of theoreticians. As I formulated ten years ago (with reference, at that time, to Kocku von Stuckrad’s discursive approach),

... much of current American debate in the study of religion ... assumes that “theory” (and metatheory) trumps historiography. Only on that basis can one claim that, for example, the subjectivities of the scholar make it “impossible” for him to write a convincing historical narrative, the “recursion of contingency” traps him in an infinite hermeneutical regression, authorial intent is a chimaera, or there are no such things as “facts,” “evidence,” or “proof.” Even where these arguments are philosophically cogent, they still remind one of an archer who claims that one need not even try to hit a target because Zenon’s paradox proves that the arrow will never reach it. (Hanegraaff 2012, 366)

I want to insist on the relevance of that metaphor. Problems of logic should not be confused with problems in lived reality, although they constantly are. Arrows reach their targets! Likewise, there *is* such a thing as communication; historians can get quite good at understanding their sources; some things are true while others are not, and ultimately there “is” nothing but flow—a succession of perceptual phenomena of which we as human beings

are conscious in time. Only strict theoreticians find these realities hard to accept, but the rest of us are getting along just fine. To some extent, therefore, it seems to me that even Josephson Storm still remains (as yet) under the spell of Theory and its claims of hegemony over reality. We need to ground our research in a Process Ontology *only* if we assume that historicity (Becoming) is somehow subservient to ontology (Being). I would turn the argument around: *radical historicity* is the core empirical fact about whatever we are studying in the humanities. Historiography, therefore, trumps theory and not the other way around. The logical conclusion, I want to suggest, is that our work should be approached consistently from a bottom-up perspective of radical empiricism (Hanegraaff 2022a, 4-5), not from a top-down perspective that prioritizes theory over lived reality.

If I quibble with Josephson Storm about this point, that is only because I so warmly support what I understand his broader agenda to be. As a European scholar of religion, I further suggest that, rather than focusing all our energies on “mapping the discursive battles of the uses of religion” (as has become common in what Americans refer to as “Critical Religion”), our primary task is to actually *study* “the cultural structures, collective practices, and social performances that the term *religion* is used to refer to” (Watts and Mosurinjohn 2022, 15-16). But how should we go about it? This leads me to my second critical point: Josephson Storm’s understanding of hermeneutics. Like most American scholars of religion, he seems to have missed the tragical divorce between hermeneutics and critique that took place during the 1970s and after. Very briefly (see longer discussion in Hanegraaff 2022b), this development can be traced to Paul Ricoeur’s *De l’interprétation* (1965), the English translation of which became quite famous as *Freud and Philosophy* (1970). Ricoeur introduced the notion of a “hermeneutics of suspicion,” and placed it in sharp contrast against hermeneutics as the “recollection of meaning” associated with such Eranos luminaries as Gerardus van der Leeuw or Mircea Eliade. As the latter was not just going out of fashion but became deeply controversial in the wake of the “Eliade scandal” of the 1980s, the hermeneutics of suspicion emerged victorious and has kept dominating the milieu of Critique ever since.

The tragedy of this development is that only briefly *after* publishing his seminal book in 1965, Ricoeur himself discovered that by far the most profound alternative to suspicious hermeneutics was actually *not* this “religionist” type of Eliadian phenomenology, but the hermeneutics of Hans-Georg Gadamer (whose *Wahrheit und Methode* became famous only in its second edition, published in 1965, the same year as Ricoeur’s French book). This development was lost on the American readership of *Freud and Philosophy*; and as noted by Rita Felski, “thanks to a lingering aura of Teutonic fustiness, not to mention its long-standing links with biblical interpretation, hermeneutics was never able to muster the high-wattage excitement that radiated from poststructuralism” (Felski 2015,

32). An iconic non/encounter between Gadamer and Derrida in 1981 (Michelfelder and Palmer 1989) finally sealed the fate of Gadamerian hermeneutics. It was never actually refuted by any critical argument (revealingly, Derrida simply refused to even engage in dialogue: see Hanegraaff 2022a, 342-51) but just went out of fashion as scholars in the humanities lost interest and turned toward those exciting new theories that were coming from France. In this regard, too, my experience as a European scholar is rather different from the typical American one. In sharp contrast with American academic culture, the essentially a-historical Eliadian perspective confusingly labeled “history of religions” (!) always remained rather alien to most European scholars of my generation—probably, to be perfectly honest, because we were used to *really* “historicizing” rather than just claiming that we did (Hanegraaff 2022b). As I was a student during the later 1980s and early 1990s, Gadamerian hermeneutics was still an important presence in academic debate for reasons that made perfect sense in a European academic milieu: it was obvious that any serious “bottom-up” study of historical sources depended on interpretation, and it just so happened that nobody had been remotely more successful than Gadamer in explaining *theoretically* how that works.

If *Metamodernism* has any serious blind spot, it consists precisely in a rather typically American neglect of hermeneutics in the Gadamerian tradition as a viable complement of the hermeneutics of suspicion. The only straight error that I encountered in what is otherwise an extremely well-informed book occurs in the chapter on Hylosemiotics, where we read that “The hermeneutical circle is supposed to be a paradoxical circularity rendering interpretation impossible ...” (156). I was amazed to read that sentence because nothing could be further from the truth: the Hermeneutic circle, as theorized by Gadamer, is precisely what renders interpretation *possible*, and that is the whole point about it. This somewhat spectacular mistake does, however, reflect the deeply depressing poststructuralist/deconstructionist key assumption that (in spite of all evidence to the contrary, see again my Zenon metaphor) interpretation, communication, translation, or understanding are all “impossibilities.” Josephson Storm’s reference is to an old article by Charles Taylor (1971) written in the immediate aftermath of Ricoeur’s *Freud and Philosophy*; but while Taylor paid lip service to Gadamer on his first page, he never quotes him and was clearly not familiar with his work. This neatly exemplifies the American “divorce” that I highlighted above.

My closing suggestion is, therefore, a simple one. I think that Josephson Storm’s *Metamodernism* project has enormous potential for breaking open the theoretical debate, especially in the United States. But for the moment, its Achilles’ heel still lies in a neglect of the intimately related dimensions of *historicity* and *hermeneutics*. In other words, Josephson Storm still remains a bit

too strongly indebted to the perspective he criticizes. There is an element of true conflict that should be clearly formulated: while Gadamerian hermeneutics is strictly incompatible with the theoretical but ultimately *pre*-theoretical key assumptions of post-structuralism and deconstruction (Hanegraaff 2022a, 345-7), the latter have always dismissed history as “the enemy of theory” (Herman 2003, here 7). Ultimately, one has to make a choice. Josephson Storm presents Metamodernism as “the Future of Theory,” but I suggest the compelling logic of his own argument points ultimately toward a future *beyond* Theory—or, more precisely, beyond its totalizing claim of hegemony over historicity and hermeneutics.

For all its high ambition, Josephson Storm’s project is premised on a refreshing stance of epistemological modesty, a radically agnostic ideal (as I would call it: Hanegraaff 2022a, 4-5) of “knowledge without certainty” that he calls *Zetetic* (209-35). Even much more than he might realize himself, this is a perfect fit with the very nature of interpretation (hermeneutics) as an infinite *process* in which finite conscious minds seek to expand their horizons of knowledge under conditions of historicity.

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