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IS ACADEMIC THEOLOGY AN ANSWER TO THE PROBLEM OF
PHILOSOPHY OF RELIGION?

Introduction

The problem with philosophy of religion, and one of the reasons for its waning influence within religious studies departments, has to do with the perennial suspicion that the field harbors a fugitive theological agenda; it remains too Christian and focuses too narrowly on an analysis of the elite production and reception of Christian doctrine. There are two distinct approaches to confront this concern: either to define a new complementary relationship between philosophy and theology, or, to root out all vestiges of crypto-theology remaining within philosophy of religion. The first approach comes from Christian philosophers seeking a denouement between philosophy and theology in two different contexts – analytic and continental – but both sharing the same assumption: namely, that philosophy is here to rescue an increasingly defunct theological discipline. The second approach is more common amongst religionists who remain invested in an examination of the variety of reason-giving found in the religions of the world, but who are also sick and tired of being accused of trying to sneak theology in through the back door. An examination of both of these approaches demonstrates, I will argue, a continued misconstrual of theology. More tentatively, however, in this essay I propose to consider a radical thought experiment: could it be that theology, at least a particular understanding of “academic theology,” is a solution to the perennial problem of philosophy of religion? This is clearly a surprising argument to make, having just identified philosophy of religion’s problem as the continued suspicion of its hidden theological intent. However, even if such a thought experiment is prone to failure, following it through will clarify, at least, the precise confusion in the original charge. In order to consider such a hypothesis, I will first very briefly discuss the relationship between philosophy and theology, from the perspective of philosophers. However, the main thrust of my investigation will focus on the vision of philosophy of religion that is promoted within religious studies departments.

Philosophy and Theology, or, Philosophy of Religion within Philosophy

The two very distinct trajectories of contemporary philosophy – analytic and continental – share a common characteristic when it comes to philosophy of religion: an engagement in Christian apologetics. The first crop of analytic philosophers such as Alvin Plantinga and Nicholas Wolterstorff were explicit in their apologetics with the creation of a discipline called Christian

philosophy.¹ The continental philosophers, on the other hand, who famously were accused of engineering a “theological turn” in phenomenology,² were more insistent in drawing a boundary between philosophy and theology, refuting the phenomenon of a “Christian philosophy,” and claiming to remain firmly within the immanent boundaries of philosophy.³ Nonetheless, as Christina Gschwandtner has persuasively argued, the project of these continental thinkers remains fundamentally apologetic.⁴

A second generation of thinkers from both sides of the pond have more recently emerged with more nuanced iterations of the supportive relationship between philosophy and theology. On the analytic side, under the leadership of Michael Rea and Oliver Crisp, we have seen the establishment of a new discipline, analytic theology – the offspring of an arranged union between analytic philosophy and theology – through publications, a journal, and an annual series of conference workshops at the University of Notre Dame.⁵ On the continental side, a new network of philosophers, theologians, and scholars of religion, has emerged under the direction of Emmanuel Falque, the International Network of Philosophy of Religion. Falque has also published a clear manifesto of his vision for the relationship between philosophy and theology.⁶ These two books, *Analytic Theology: New Essays in the Philosophy of Theology* and *Crossing the Rubicon: The Borderlands of Philosophy and Theology*, provide a good representation of the current view of philosophers interested in theology from the analytic and continental perspectives respectively.

Both books seek to negotiate a more complementary relationship between philosophy and theology. Rea and Crisp do so by defining the new discipline of analytic theology as a mode of doing theology which benefits from the “style and ambitions” of analytic philosophy.⁷ Crisp’s gloss on the assumed starting point of analytic theology is “that there is some theological truth of the matter and that this truth of the matter can be ascertained and understood by human beings (theologians included!)”.⁸ On the continental side, Falque seeks to define the methodological particularities of philosophy and theology precisely – philosophy, he argues, proceeds heuristically, “from below”, to

¹ The most obvious evidence of this is the establishment, in 1978, of a Society of Christian Philosophers with its own scholarly journal, *Faith and Philosophy*.

² See Dominique Janicaud, *Phenomenology and the ‘Theological Turn’: The French Debate* (New York, Fordham University Press, 2000). Janicaud included Paul Ricoeur, Jean-Luc Marion, Jean-Louis Chretien, and Michel Henry in his corporate accusation.

³ For example, Marion articulates the distinction – “Between phenomenology and theology the frontier passes between revelation as possibility and revelation as historicity” – and claims his work remains strictly phenomenological. See Jean-Luc Marion, “Metaphysics and Phenomenology: A Summary for Theologians,” in *The Postmodern God: A Theological Reader*, ed. by Graham Ward (Oxford: Blackwell, 1997), 293.

⁴ Christina Gschwandtner, *Postmodern Apologetics? Arguments for God in Contemporary Philosophy* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2012).

⁵ See Oliver D. Crisp and Michael C. Rea (eds.), *Analytic Theology: New Essays in the Philosophy of Theology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009); *Journal of Analytic Theology* (Center for Philosophy of Religion at the University of Notre Dame and Baylor University); Logos Workshop (every year annually since 2009) at the Center for Philosophy of Religion at the University of Notre Dame.

⁶ Emmanuel Falque, *Crossing the Rubicon: The Borderlands of Philosophy and Theology in Perspectives in Continental Philosophy Series*, trans. by Reuben Shank (Fordham University Press, 2016).

⁷ Rea, “Introduction” in Crisp and Rea, *Analytic Theology*, 7.

⁸ Crisp, “On Analytic Theology” in Crisp and Rea, *Analytic Theology*, 35.

consider *possible* objects, while theology proceeds didactically and dogmatically, “from above,” to consider objects taken or claimed to be *actual* – in order to facilitate the “crossing” between the two disciplines. In this way Falque characterizes theology as a “discourse beginning with God” whereas philosophy (of religion) is a “discourse on the God-phenomenon appearing to the human”.⁹

One assumption that both these continental and analytic philosophical approaches share is their providing a gift of justification to theology, specifically by providing the tools of superior argumentation and utilization of reason to elucidate doctrine which theologians proclaim ‘on high’ without understanding properly. I will argue that this attempt to rescue theology, perhaps from itself, involves a misconstrual of what theology is. Furthermore, in neither analytic nor continental philosophy do you get the sense that theology is done in any tradition outside Christianity. As we shall see, this is the primary critique of philosophers of religion who are peddling their trade from within religious studies departments dedicated to the pluralistic and comparative study of religious traditions in all their historical and regional specificities.

Philosophy of Religion within Religious Studies

In the past few years there has been a renewed interest in re-defining the field of philosophy of religion coming from scholars within religious studies departments. In chronological order this crop of new books includes: Knepper’s *The Ends of Philosophy of Religion: Terminus and Telos*;¹⁰ Schilbrack’s *Philosophy and the Study of Religions: A Manifesto*;¹¹ and Lewis’s *Why Philosophy Matters for the Study of Religion & Vice Versa*.¹² One of the common elements of these thinkers is that none identify as analytic or continental thinkers per se, though some may be more or less sympathetic to aspects of those traditions. Likewise, they share a similar critique of traditional philosophy of religion. The critique can be summarized as follows: 1) traditional philosophy of religion is too narrowly focused on a specific version of Christianity (a thinly-veiled Protestant theism in the case of analytic philosophy of religion or ecstatic/mystical experience in the Catholic tradition in the case of continental philosophy of religion), and 2) it is both too elitist and too “intellectualist”¹³ as a result of its narrow focus on doctrines and arguments for the existence of God without proper attention to the ethics, politics, ritual and material practices in which religious people engage. These weaknesses are due, in part, from the discipline’s connection to theological *apologia*: as Knepper puts it, philosophy of religion too often resembles a defense of Christianity – “not a religiously impartial examination of reason-giving in the many different religions of the world, but a religiously motivated apologetic of the reasonableness or usefulness of some one religion or kind of religion”.¹⁴

These problems with traditional philosophy of religion boil down to “the simple fact that philosophy of religion is largely uninformed by, and therefore

⁹ Falque, *Crossing the Rubicon*, 126- 127.

¹⁰ Timothy D. Knepper, *The Ends of Philosophy of Religion: Terminus and Telos* (New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013).

¹¹ Kevin Schilbrack, *Philosophy and the Study of Religions: A Manifesto* (Oxford: Wiley Blackwell, 2014).

¹² Thomas A. Lewis, *Why Philosophy Matters for the Study of Religion & Vice Versa* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015).

¹³ This is Schilbrack’s term, but the same idea is found in all three. See Schilbrack, xii.

¹⁴ Knepper, 9.

has very little to contribute to, one of its parent fields: religious studies".¹⁵ Indeed, all three thinkers agree on the general vision for an improved discipline of philosophy of religion: it needs to internalize the lessons learned from religious studies in order to better respond to the plural material particularities of the global religions.¹⁶ This shift represents a move to the critical engagement with a variety of religions rather than an apologetic demonstration of the coherence and rationality of one.

There is also agreement amongst these three books regarding what philosophy of religion might gain from a closer alignment with the broader field of religious studies: 1) a more complicated range of religious phenomena to analyze – not simply conceptual examples of reason-giving found in the elite production of doctrine, but also the rich array of rituals, material phenomena, and ethical practices involved in any religious tradition;¹⁷ 2) the ability to defend the role of evaluation and normativity within philosophy of religion despite, or even because of, the fact that religious studies as a field is less interested in an apologetics of the sort that, ironically, one might encounter in a philosophy department; and 3) the thorough historicizing of the discipline.

While all three philosophers of religion argue that the discipline is best located explicitly within the field of religious studies, Lewis is the most emphatic and clear in his articulation of what this means and the gains brought by this location. He begins by defining the academic study of religion as follows: "the disciplined examination of religion, including religious thought, people, movements, practices, materials, etc., as well as reflection on the conceptions of each of these terms, without presupposing the validity of or privileging the study of any particular religion or group of religious phenomena," which neither presupposes the truth nor the falsity of any particular religion or even religion in general.¹⁸ In other words, one of the particular demands of religious studies is that it cultivates a self-conscious intellectual practice of openness – generous in its attempt to be fair to an account of otherness (inevitably encountered within the study of religion) and yet critical in its constant methodological self-reflection and questioning. A couple of observations follow from this description of the disciplinary training of religious studies.

First, according to Lewis, the discipline of theology is too varied and diverse to state universally whether or not it belongs within religious studies. Some theology does – what he calls "academic theology," whereas clearly some

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Schilbrack expresses it in this way: "Philosophy of religion ought to evolve from its primary present focus on the rationality of traditional theism to become a fully global form of critical reflection on religions in all their variety and dimensions, in conversations with other branches of philosophy and other disciplines in the academic study of religions" (xi).

¹⁷ Like Knepper, Schilbrack identifies philosophy of religion by its focus on reason-giving; however, with Lewis, he conceives of reason-giving in a way that is more expansive than simply doctrine or belief. Thus, both Lewis and Schilbrack argue that philosophy of religion must move beyond the study of doctrine and belief in order to include "the philosophical study of worship practices, sacrifices, spiritual disciplines, liturgies, rites of passage, contemplative exercises, and ceremonies" as these are "the performed dimensions of how ordinary people live their religious commitments" (Schilbrack xii, xiii). See Schilbrack, Ch. 2, "Are Religious Practices Philosophical?" for further details.

¹⁸ Lewis, 7.

does not—that which “excludes itself by making conversation-stopping appeals to authorities conceived as unquestionable”.¹⁹ I will return to this distinction in a moment; for the time being it is sufficient to note that there are a variety of ways of doing theology and to recognize that for Lewis any theology which proceeds “from above,” through an appeal to the authority of revelation of a sacred text or the magisterium, does not belong within the academic study of religion. On this same point, Schilbrack observes that a surviving misconception about the teaching of religion (on the part of those not involved in it) is that “philosophy tends to undermine religious belief and that religion departments ‘teach religion,’ but the truth is that one is much more likely to hear an argument that God exists in the philosophy department philosophy of religion courses than in those from the religious studies department”.²⁰

Secondly, this location within the academic study of religion in no way precludes the ability of philosophers of religion to make normative claims, or offer evaluative judgments about the varieties of reason-giving they investigate. Indeed, Schilbrack, Lewis, and Knepper agree that making evaluative/normative judgments is one of the specific roles of the philosopher of religion. Schilbrack argues that, on this point, one can learn something from the “style” of doing philosophy of religion found in philosophy departments—a style he identifies as analytic, in contrast to the “hermeneutical or phenomenological” approaches more common to religious studies departments: while agreeing with philosophers of religion in religious studies departments that “the meaning of religious phenomena depends on its cultural and historical context,” Schilbrack, nonetheless, concurs with the philosophers in the philosophy department that “the distinctive contribution of philosophy of religion has to do with the evaluation of truth claims, which means the assessment of reason-giving and arguments”.²¹

While both Schilbrack and Knepper agree that evaluative questions and judgments are a distinctive feature of their vision for philosophy of religion, Schilbrack thinks that this is *the distinctive* feature which is a legitimate and inevitable complement to the descriptive approaches found in other methodological approaches in the study of religion, whereas Knepper will claim that the task of philosophers of religion is descriptive, comparative, *and* evaluative.²² It is Lewis, however, who devotes a chapter to the defense of the role of normativity in religious studies. His primary argument here is that normativity is “inevitable” whether the scholar is considered a “caretaker or a critic” of religion, and furthermore, that normativity is not unique to the study of religion, but is central to many fields of study, not least of which are philosophy and political science.²³ Lewis claims that one of the reasons normativity is so suspect in the study of religion (and tied to theology, which bears the weight of most suspicions in the field) is that it is assumed that “religion cannot be argued about—that it is, in essence, ‘reason’s other’” and thus is a matter of faith not debate.²⁴ Lewis observes that this assumption

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 7-8.

²⁰ Schilbrack, 24.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 25.

²² See Schilbrack, xvi and Knepper, 12-20.

²³ Lewis, 46-53, and 44. The language of “caretaker” or “critic” references the well-known position of Russell T. McCutcheon that has been challenged by Tyler Roberts, Atalia Omer, Paul J. Griffiths and Ann Taves, amongst others. See McCutcheon, *Critics Not Caretakers: Redefining the Public Study of Religion* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2001).

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 45.

means that, ironically, “adamant secularists unwittingly join forces with anti-intellectual adherents of religious traditions in supporting the idea that we cannot engage religious ideas constructively”.²⁵ But this is a mistake; if the cost of admittance in religious studies is “the principled willingness to submit all claims to scrutiny and questioning, to insist that no assumptions, doctrines, or authorities are beyond questioning” then normative claims made in the course of the philosophical study of religion are included, as long as they submit the same entry fee.²⁶ Again, part of the value of Lewis’ argument here is that, in the midst of his defense of philosophy of religion, he clarifies and corrects a common misconception under which theology is assumed to be normative while religious studies, including philosophy of religion, is merely descriptive.²⁷

A final benefit of any philosophy of religion that is found within religious studies, according to Lewis, Schilbrack and Knepper, is its historicism. Indeed, this methodological presupposition is what the philosophy of religion has most to learn from religious studies. Lewis charts the shift within religious studies in the past three decades from the predominance of philosophy of religion as the privileged method for studying religion, to history and genealogy. As is well documented, this turn to history included an interrogation of the historical processes through which “religion” has been conceptualized (by thinkers such as Talal Asad, Jonathan Z. Smith, Tomoko Masuzawa) and, thus, called into question the notion of a natural, or universal, ahistorical notion of religion.

Lewis argues that philosophy of religion, as a discipline, has to learn from the broader field of religious studies here; which is to say, philosophy of religion should become more self-consciously historical, tracing the arc and development of various doctrines or religious concepts.²⁸ Furthermore, despite their vast differences, the two camps of analytic and continental philosophy of religion are “united in their relative neglect of broader developments in religious studies”.²⁹ Lewis expresses his frustration with “the vast majority” of the recent scholarship in philosophy of religion (of the sort discussed in the first section of this article) which “has largely ignored the emphasis on sophisticated attention to history that has had such powerful effects in other subfields of religious studies”, including, I will argue, the subfield of theology.³⁰

Thus far in this collective consideration of how philosophy of religion might learn from its location within religious studies, I have isolated three specific lessons: 1) to become more pluralistic and material in the collection of data to describe, analyze, and evaluate; 2) to become more thoroughly historical in orientation; and 3) to be able to defend the practice of making evaluative and normative judgments. However closer examination of Knepper’s proposal for

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 61.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 8.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 44 and 46.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 11.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 15.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 28. By referring to theology as a “subfield” of religious studies, I am placing theology on the same level as other approaches to studying religion—eg. the sociological, the ethnographic, the literary-textual, etc—under the broader category of religious studies. This is not to denigrate theology, which remains a valued, indeed a necessary, way to investigate a religious tradition; it is simply an acknowledgment of the interdisciplinarity that is found in most religious studies departments.

philosophy of religion will uncover a tension amongst these lessons: between the drive for pluralism and historical specificity, on the one hand, and the aim of establishing general patterns of reason-giving, on the other.

As with Lewis and Schilbrack, Knepper begins with a critique of the current state of affairs. Specifically, his complaint is that the problem with philosophy of religion is that it is not really philosophy of *religion* in all its rich complexity and diverse forms and instantiations. In contrast, Knepper argues that analytic philosophy of religion ought really to be called “philosophy of ahistorical theism” and continental philosophy of religion, simply refers to a “philosophy of religionized postmodernism” – neither of which, for their narrowness, offer the field of religious studies very much.³¹ When philosophy of religion – in either its analytic or continental form – claim to provide universal accounts of religion, Knepper counters they are actually simply echoing a fairly specific and narrow intellectual lineage.³² Note, however, that he does not complain about their claim to provide a universal account of religion, but simply their means of approaching and arriving at that account.

Knepper provides his own account of the direction philosophy of religion ought to take within religious studies. He outlines five criteria, or “ends,” for a more robust philosophy of religion: 1) it must be religiously diverse in order to avoid the risk of mistaking a part for the whole (as previously iterations of analytic and continental versions have done); 2) there must also be a diversity of subjects (in terms of race, gender, class, and especially, creed) engaged in philosophy of religion to guard against the biases of any one investigator; 3) it *begins* with “thick description” of religious reason-giving; 4) it must be comparative; 5) it will culminate in the explanation and evaluation of these instances of religious reason-giving – a task which can only come *after* thick description and comparison.³³ I will focus on the mechanics of the latter three of these ends.

Knepper faults analytic and continental philosophy of religion for rushing too quickly “to judgment about the truth or value of some religious belief or practice to be bothered with the hard work of gaining hermeneutically sensitive and ideologically aware understanding of that which is under investigation”.³⁴ Thus he wants to begin with a “*thick description of religious reason-giving in all religions for the sake of critical understanding*” in a way that is inclusive of both formal reason-giving (theological, exegetical and legal traditions) and informal (mythological, narrational, and ordinary discourse); such description should be both synchronic and diachronic.³⁵ Subsequent to

³¹ Knepper, 23.

³² Knepper is pretty cutting about this, especially when it comes to continental philosophy. For example, he talks about one continental philosopher’s attempt to uncover the universal structure underlying all religious traditions in the concepts of infinite love and responsibility which are then “located in the infinite and therefore unattainable demands of justice and responsibility that Derrida reads out of Levinas’s reading of Kierkegaard’s reading of the myth of Abraham’s attempted sacrifice of Isaac” (12). Analytic philosophy of religion is, at least, more explicit and upfront about the self-reflexivity of their discourse; they simply suppose it to be the one true discourse.

³³ *Ibid.*, 3.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 7.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 75 (emphasis original) and 80, 83. Furthermore, Knepper adds that a thick description “includes the grounds and ends, authors and audiences, proponents and opponents, settings and trajectories, and non-discursive embodiments and enactments of religious reason-giving” (86) using hermeneutical, phenomenological, ethnographic methods and speech-act, semiotic, and genealogical theories (87).

such a robust descriptive production, philosophers of religion are in the position to compare them, and further, “only after philosophers of religion have come to a critical understanding of *many* different instances of religious reason-giving from *many* different religions of the world are they in a position to proffer general claims about the overall patterning of religious reason-giving”.³⁶ Finally after thick description and comprehensive comparison, the philosopher of religion is in the position of “explaining the comparative patterning of religious reason-giving and evaluating the truth and value of religious reason-giving”.³⁷ This step of explanation and evaluation must come last. Restraint is required; the philosopher of religion should not rush to evaluate before the hard and time-consuming work of description and formal comparison has been made.³⁸

In an important critical response to Knepper’s argument, Bradley Onishi first critiques Knepper’s reductive view of continental philosophy of religion, before turning to offer a more nuanced historical account of the variety found therein.³⁹ Onishi takes Knepper to task for his overly simplistic treatment of continental philosophy, in particular for choosing John Caputo as the best representative of the field. While sympathetic to Knepper’s (and others’) concern to guard against theological vestiges in the field, Onishi tracks an important divergence therein between those scholars who he would identify as doing continental philosophical theology and those doing continental philosophy of religion. Onishi differentiates these through a “*distinction of purpose*”; the former “seeks to defend, improve, or advance (Christian or Jewish) theology by way of philosophy,” whereas the latter “is dedicated to exploring the potential resonances and dynamisms between philosophy and religious phenomena, particularly as they bear upon scholarly approaches to secularity”.⁴⁰ In the former camp Onishi would place thinkers like Kevin Hart, Catherine Keller, and even the “Christian atheist,”⁴¹ Caputo; whereas in the latter, one might find thinkers as diverse as Mark C. Taylor, Thomas Carlson, and Mary-Jane Rubenstein (the primary subjects of Onishi’s argument), as well as Jeff Kosky, Tyler Roberts, Sarah Hammerschlag and Ryan Coyne. These latter thinkers, argues Onishi, draw on continental philosophy primarily “to refine and critique the theories and methods of religious studies”.⁴²

³⁶ Ibid., 99 (emphasis original).

³⁷ Ibid., 120.

³⁸ Ibid., 136.

³⁹ Bradley B. Onishi, “The Beginning, Not the End: On Continental Philosophy of Religion and Religious Studies,” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, Vol. 85, No. 1 (March 2017), 1-30.

⁴⁰ Onishi, “The Beginning, Not the End: On Continental Philosophy of Religion and Religious Studies,” 2 (original emphasis).

⁴¹ Onishi, 14. Though Onishi doesn’t explicitly say it, one gets the sense that there is a way in which Caputo’s crypto-theology is more insidious and damaging to the reputation of continental philosophy of religion than the explicit theological stances of Hart and Keller who are, at the very least, transparent about their own projects’ aim. As Onishi says, the problem with Caputo’s approach is the following: “By dirempting Christianity, and religion in general, of its doctrinal, historical, and ritual particularity, Caputo’s work, unlike Hart’s, offers little more for philosophical theology than a deconstruction of Christianity and translation of religion into a religiosity of hope. However, Caputo is also vulnerable to Knepper’s claim that philosophy of religion is crypto-theological, because his translation of Christianity into a religion without religion sets up philosophy of religion as a field constituted by the Christian hope for the kingdom of God” (15).

⁴² Ibid., 3.

To Onishi's argument, I would add two things that are significant to observe regarding Knepper's proposal: first, Knepper's vision for philosophy of religion is a vastly ambitious project which, taking into account the language training (as a minimal requisite to embarking on such a study), would seem impossible for any one philosopher to perform.⁴³ Secondly, I would draw attention to the fact that the end or *telos* of this project remains the uncovering of a system of "overall patterning" – a trend towards giving a universal account of religious reason-giving. This is the reason for comparison in the first place – "for the sake of understanding general patterns of religious reason-giving".⁴⁴

Ironically, such a vision opens Knepper up to very objections he seeks to redress: if Knepper's understanding of the "telos" of the philosophy of religion is a general pattern of religious reason-giving which the philosopher of religion is ultimately to evaluate in terms of its truth and viability, then aren't we returning to the kind of grand-narrative assumed to be the telos of an uncritically ambitious theology? To be fair, there is no step of Knepper's project that is not accompanied by critical stop-gaps to continually question and correct its own assumptions, to guard against biases by the collection of more diverse data to compare and diverse subjects making the comparisons. Nonetheless, it is striking that the end of Knepper's vision of philosophy of religion remains the evaluation of the viability and truth of general patterns of religious reason-giving, implying not merely normativity, but one universally applied.

This is an interesting place to end up, because, as I will argue below, the sort of theology which one would most likely encounter in an institution dedicated to the academic study of religion – that is, a properly historicized theology – is unlikely to make such a claim to universality. Theology is, de facto, always regionalized; it is always defined and constrained by the boundaries of its own tradition.⁴⁵ In other words, there is no such thing as "theology", but only Hindu theology, or Christian theology, or Muslim theology. While theology accepted (some might say too meekly, others might say appropriately⁴⁶) the limitations of its own discourse – its regional specificity, and historical contextualization – philosophy remains more ambitious in scope, ever attempting a universal theory or understanding. Thus, the perennial concern that philosophy of religion harbors a hidden

⁴³ Knepper acknowledges as much and states that "due to the paucity of thick descriptions of religious reason-giving in many of the religions of the world" most philosophers of religion will be devoted to that original step of the overall project (101). However, he does not indicate how philosophers of religion might work together to produce his own vision of the field's end: an evaluation of such general patterns of religious reason-giving.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 101.

⁴⁵ This statement ignores the reality of the porosity of the borders between religious traditions and the overlapping paths of inter-religious definition in the ongoing construction of religious identity. Nonetheless, it stands as a statement of the domain a theologian *claims* to investigate: i.e., a Jewish theologian claims only to speak authoritatively within the domain of Judaism, and not, for instance, about Buddhist doctrine.

⁴⁶ I recognize that there is a real debate between those thinkers who believe theology rolled over too quickly to the demands of the secular academy in order to keep its foot in the door, and those who would argue that theology is hard-wired to accept such a humbling diminishment of its domain as the nature of its study has always required it. I will leave that judgment for others to fight over. My argument here is less about how theology ought to be, than about how it actually *is* taught and studied within institutions that study religion more generally.

theological agenda needs to be probed with greater precision.

Academic Theology and Religious Studies

Returning to Falque's depiction of the possibilities of encounter between philosophy and theology, he begins his book with a remark that the "relationship between philosophy and theology in France has recently shifted". In France, policies of *laïcité*, which forced theology out of the public university setting, are being challenged, and "locked doors have already given way".⁴⁷ What I am suggesting is that, in the North American context, we might observe a self-imposed *laïcité* within, at least, academic theology. To explore this question, I will consider two centers of theological training in the US, the University of Chicago Divinity School and Harvard Divinity School. These institutions are interesting to consider not only because of their place of influence in the field of philosophy of religion,⁴⁸ but more specifically, because both operate on a model which would seem, at first glance to have interesting parallels to Falque's vision of the crossing of disciplines: they are institutions in which students can train for either ordination or for academia, and are centers of research in which the philosophy of religion, religious studies, and theology meet.

At both of the divinity schools at Harvard and Chicago one can pursue a terminal graduate degree in theology either for the purposes of ordination or ministry (an MDiv), or for preparation in academic research and teaching (a PhD). Both degrees are pursued in the same set of buildings with the same faculty teaching and advising in the programs. This dual identity distinguishes these institutions from others, like Yale and Princeton, both of which *institutionally* separate theological training from the academic study of religion—they are geographically located in different schools or departments, with separate faculty teaching and advising the programs.

The study of theology in these institutions is also distinguished from the study of theology in either a Catholic seminary or Protestant seminary, both of which can assume a uniformity of religious identity and confession that is not possible in a more pluralistic setting such as Chicago or Harvard. Depending on the order of the Catholic seminary, philosophy may play a smaller or larger role in the curriculum; whereas in most Protestant seminaries, philosophy will be emphasized less than cognate disciplines such as biblical studies in theological formation. A third possible setting in which we can consider the relationship between theology and philosophy would be larger Catholic universities such as Villanova, Fordham, Boston College, or Notre Dame, which have both strong theology and philosophy departments. These institutions might be more sympathetic towards a complementary relationship between those disciplines for two reasons: on the one hand, these large Catholic universities historically have been more favorably disposed to

⁴⁷ Falque, 16.

⁴⁸ Of the figures which Onishi identified as leading thinkers in philosophy of religion, most either received their PhDs from, and/or remain members of the faculty teaching in, one of these two institutions. Significantly, Ryan Coyne, Tyler Roberts, and Thomas Carlson all have PhDs in Theology, Jeffrey Kossky and Sarah Hammerslag have PhDs in Philosophy of Religion, whereas Amy Hollywood graduated from one institution (Chicago), and is a member of the faculty in the other (Harvard) teaching in the following fields: History of Christianity, Philosophy of Religion, and Theology. At the very least this would seem to confirm a blurring of the lines between philosophy of religion and theology.

the continental tradition within their philosophy departments,⁴⁹ and on the other hand, their overarching Catholic identity welcomes the contributions of the theology departments in a way that goes absolutely against the trend in public universities and private, non-sectarian universities which have increasingly forbidden anything that smells suspiciously theological. However, these Catholic institutions are also, unsurprisingly, less interested in the theological (or philosophical) study of religions outside of Christianity.

Again, on this point, Chicago and Harvard seem to occupy a unique and significantly different position as non-sectarian research institutions that continue to hold a place for the study of theology. However, I would argue that this has been accomplished only through a shift in the understanding of how theology is done. On its website describing the PhD programs of study, the University of Chicago Divinity School structures the possible trajectories of study into three committees and eleven areas of study. We are concerned here with the committee on the “constructive studies in religion” which includes the three areas of Philosophy of Religion, Religious Ethics, and Theology. Within this structure, theology is defined as a “concern with the *historical study of the self-understanding of a religious tradition and with the interpretation of its meaning and truth for the contemporary world*”.⁵⁰ Note the framework of the area is necessarily historical, while there is no specification of which religious tradition can be studied theologically. Faculty teaching on this committee work in Chinese religions, Judaism, Tibetan and Indian Buddhism, as well as Christianity. The PhD at Harvard is jointly offered by Harvard Divinity School and the Graduate School of Arts and Sciences and is administered by the Committee on the Study of Religion (which is comprised of members of the faculty from both schools). There are many different areas of study into which one can apply to pursue a PhD including Theology, Philosophy of Religion, Religious Ethics, Islamic Studies, Religions of the Americas, Jewish Studies, African Religions, Buddhist Studies, Greco-Roman Religions, Religion, Gender and Culture, and so on. However, if one is applying to study Ethics, Religion and Society, Philosophy of Religion, Religion Gender and Culture, or Theology, the applicant must specify “the religious tradition(s) and/or approximate geographical range(s) or temporal period(s)” upon which the applicant intends to focus.⁵¹ In other words, here too, there is no assumption that one is studying Christianity when one studies theology, while at the same time, there is a recognition that one doesn’t study theology generally, but only within a specific religious tradition, region, and historical period.

My doctoral advisor at Harvard Divinity School, Sarah Coakley, occasionally would voice a concern that the study of theology had become a study of “theologology” – that discourse on God had become, in other words, discourse on the discourse on God, a second-order study. If I understand Falque correctly, what Coakley meant by “theologology” is something akin to a process of what Falque calls “vulgarization” – the process of clearly identifying and communicating historical lines of influence and the transmission of evolving interpretations of theological (or philosophical)

⁴⁹ The University of Notre Dame is the exception here; however, one might argue that in its marriage of analytic philosophy and theology in the formation of “analytic theology” it follows the same pattern.

⁵⁰ The University of Chicago Divinity School, <https://divinity.uchicago.edu/constructive-studies-religion> (emphasis added).

⁵¹ Committee on the Study of Religion webpage, <https://studyofreligion.fas.harvard.edu/pages/research>.

concepts, which is to be explicitly distinguished from the act of philosophical “thinking”.⁵² The point I am making here is that, again for better or worse, this portrait of the pursuit of academic theology is fairly accurate.

Academic theologians have as their object of study not “*theos*” directly but “discourse on *theos*” – a discourse which is, of course, a human phenomenon and always necessarily placed within its historical context. Moreover, the term “discourse” here is cast most broadly to capture, not merely doctrinal and creedal statements, but also liturgy, hagiography, hymns, poetry, art and architecture, ethical and legal precepts, mythological narratives, etc. Relatedly, one might delineate the characteristic of what makes academic theology *academic* thus: the primary audience of the academic theologian is the academy, and the academy is also the authoritative body determining what counts as evidence and legitimating the discourse as such. In other words, the academic theologian does not speak from, or to, a specific confessional body or institution. While the identity of the academic theologian may be confessionally specific, it also may not. In either case, however, the academic theologian is trained not to rely on a specific confessional identity as the foundational authority for his or her argument. Rather arguments are defended and adjudicated based on grounds that are held in common with other disciplines: historical responsibility or acuity and the overall persuasiveness of the theological argument – something which may be judged by a variety of criteria including the ethical and pragmatic implications of the argument, its internal logical coherence, or its use of evidence, etc.

In other words, the study of academic theology, at least as it is found in the two major centers of theological study in the US, proceeds very much “from below,” rather than dogmatically from above. Theology is, to borrow Heidegger’s term, a “positive (ontic) science” – the disclosure of a given being, a *positum*, which is objectified in its study.⁵³ According to Heidegger, in the case of the science of Christian theology, its *positum* is faith, or “Christianness”.⁵⁴ I would characterize it more precisely as the intellectual history of thinking about the divine, and the rich varieties of doctrine and practice that represent such thinking, found within a specific religious tradition.

Heidegger’s definition of theology is especially constructive to consider in relation to his understanding of philosophy. Philosophy is differentiated from theology and other positive sciences by its ontological, rather than ontic, status: philosophy doesn’t study a concrete being (like the historically specific traditions of Christian faith); it studies Being generally. As such, according to Heidegger, philosophy trumps theology because one can always go beyond a historically specific ontic concept such as Christian “sin” to the more primordial ontological concept of “guilt”.⁵⁵ Embracing this distinction, and in the context of the historical bent of religious studies, here theology seems to

⁵² Falque, 17.

⁵³ This definition of theology is found in a lecture by Heidegger, “Phenomenology and Theology” which was originally given on March 9, 1927 and subsequently translated and published in *Pathmarks*: James G. Hart, John C. Maraldo, and Martin Heidegger, “Phenomenology and Theology (1927)” in *Pathmarks*, edited and translated by William McNeil, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 39-62.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 52.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 58.

be more historically responsive than philosophy. Let me restate the problem of the philosophy of religion to see whether any clarity has been gained.

Religious studies, which historically was born out of departments of theology, has for the most part banished its parent: theology has been pushed out of most departments of religion.⁵⁶ Up until fairly recently philosophy of religion still held a prominent place within religious studies. However, as Lewis demonstrated, with the material turn to “lived religion” in the 1990s, and the concurrent radical and thorough historicization of the field which problematized any natural, universal, or ahistoric notion of religion, philosophy of religion also increasingly came under suspicion as a subfield which was seen to be sneaking theology in by the back door. Precisely what is entailed within this suspicion, however? In this context what does the term “theological” reference specifically?

I would argue that there are three things that people mean when they qualify discourse as “theological,” and as such, suspicious within academic settings: 1) it makes claims about how things *ought* to be, i.e., it is normative; 2) it makes claims about the truth in a singular or universal way; 3) it is confessional – which means not only that it speaks from and to a particular tradition, but also that it claims that this tradition grants sufficient authority to proclaim dogmatically certain truths *as* true. However, as we’ve seen in the defenses of philosophy of religion that eschew any connection to theology, the first two of these can be said of philosophy of religion as well. The ability to make and evaluate normative judgments is explicitly defended (especially by Lewis) as an inevitable *telos* of the field and not dissimilar to the kinds of judgment that occur in philosophy departments, or political science, or environmental science. The second meaning of theological lurks more opaquely in the background, but can be uncovered, nonetheless; philosophy of religion inevitably tends towards singular, universal accounts of reality, in part because there are no geographical, temporal, or tradition-based boundaries to distinguish the scope of philosophy of religion. Philosophy of religion, as sophisticated and attuned to the problems of history and hermeneutics as it is in the hands of Lewis, Knepper, and Schilbrack, still strains at least implicitly towards the universal. This ambition is most explicit in Knepper, but haunts all philosophical projects whose horizon is defined ambitiously as the human, or the secular world, or Being. Ironically, according to this measure, philosophy is more “theological” than theology.

The third concern about theology is that it is always confessional – i.e., taught and studied by practitioners for whom that confessional identity is a source of authority for what they teach, study, or write about. There are many sub-fields within theology. Traditionally, introductory textbooks on theology would distinguish between historical theology, systematic theology (and the distinct, but overlapping) philosophical theology, biblical theology, and pastoral theology.⁵⁷ Given my established criteria for academic theology – that it is second-order discourse which speaks to and from the academy (as opposed to a religious community), I would argue that in descending order of likelihood all of these *could* qualify as academic theology which the exception

⁵⁶ This can be seen in the cases of other prestigious centers of philosophy of religion within Religious Studies such as UC Santa Barbara, Columbia, and Brown (where Thomas Carlson, Mark C. Taylor, and Thomas Lewis respectively teach).

⁵⁷ The last few decades have seen the emergence of constructive theology, apophatic, liturgical, ecological, and political theology, not to mention, post-colonial, feminist, womanist, latinx, and queer liberation theologies – all of which likewise could be pursued as academic theologies.

of pastoral theology which, by definition, must be addressing a faithful community primarily.

The criterion for academic theology is not whether the thinker is a believer or non-believer, insider or outsider, caretaker or critic; academic theology does not require either supernaturalist or naturalist explanations. All variations of these possibilities exist. Rather, the criterion has to do with who is authorizing the discourse, and in so doing, establishing the rules of procedure (eluded to by Lewis in his requirement that all inquiries into religious phenomena – whether philosophical or theological – remain open to debate and reasoned argument). Is it the academy or a religious community?⁵⁸ Theology is academic when its audience and authorizing body is the academy. Thus, “confessional” is less accurate to define academic theology than acknowledging that it is always regionally and historically specific, and this specificity, moreover, may turn out to be a boon.

It was perhaps an overstatement to claim that theology can save philosophy of religion, yet it may remain the case that the champions of philosophy of religion are not helping themselves by the continued rebuttal of problematic theological overtones. Those theological overlaps are there – in some ways that philosophy of religion itself wants to embrace (eg. normativity), whereas its specificity (the fact that theology is always Jewish, or Christian, or Hindu) paradoxically prevents theology from making universal claims in the way that philosophy of religion remains somewhat seduced by. A more explicit understanding of the claims to authority of academic theology might make it a support for philosophy of religion, not in the way that the philosophers (either analytic or continental) envisioned it, however, by providing the truth “from above”. Rather, the support arrives far more humbly by proceeding not only from below, but from a regionally limited and historically specific domain – a specific historical instantiation of a religious tradition. In this way, academic theology might complement philosophy of religion by providing the kind of thick descriptions Knepper envisions as the first stage of philosophy of religion, but also by reminding the latter of the limits of its reach.

⁵⁸ This is not a new distinction that I am drawing. Interestingly Oliver Crisp himself cites a similar distinction being made by no less evangelical a theologian than Alistair McGrath. McGrath defines “doctrine” as the work of a particular community, the Church, and “theology” has something that individuals may engage in “with no commitment to a particular ecclesiastical body”. Crisp, 34, footnote 7.