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NORMATIVE ENCOUNTERS: A RADICAL PROPOSAL FOR PHILOSOPHY OF  
RELIGION

There is now an academic industry devoted to diagnosing and remedying philosophy of religion (of which I am an active participant). Over the last decade, this industry developed on the basis of the general idea that while philosophy of religion may be a bustling subfield in the realm of Philosophy, in the wake of the anthropological and historical turns in the study of religion, it is quite useless in the realm of Religious Studies. Philosophy's awkward fit in the academic study of religion stems from two related sources. First, there is the suspicion that philosophy of religion is a code word for theology, and thus an interloper in a field determined to disentangle itself from its Christian origins.<sup>1</sup> What interests me in this essay is the second problem plaguing philosophy of religion: the question of normativity. Lawrence Whitney nicely summarizes this issue, and its entanglement with the idea that philosophy of religion is really cryptotheology:

In a related vein, philosophy of religion appears to be too normative, evaluating which beliefs are rational and which are not, in a field that purports to be descriptive in nature. Insofar as philosophy of religion is indeed normative, this would seem to place it in the camp of theological studies as opposed to religious studies more broadly.<sup>2</sup>

There's a basic axiom in the academic study of religion that goes something like this: Religious Studies investigates the historical, anthropological, sociological, psychological, ethnographic dimensions of religions through the lenses of gender, sex, race, power, economics, nationalism, transnationalism, colonialism, and so on. Whatever Religious Studies is, it *is not about determining which religion(s) is true or truthful, rational or irrational, verifiable or not*. Religious Studies is descriptive, not prescriptive. This makes the following definitions of philosophy of religion untenable:

Philosophy of religion is the philosophical examination of the central themes and concepts involved in religious traditions.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> I have attended to this issue elsewhere, and so have many other scholars. See Bradley B. Onishi, "The Beginning, Not the End: On Continental Philosophy of Religion and Religious Studies," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 85:1 (March 2017): 1-30. The essays in this Special Feature by Patrice Haynes, Mary-Jane Rubenstein, and Tamsin Jones also attend to this issue.

<sup>2</sup> Lawrence A. Whitney, "Institutional Dimensions of the Future of Philosophy of Religion," *Palgrave Communications* 4: 67 (2018).

<sup>3</sup> Charles Taliaferro and Elsa J. Marty, eds. *A Dictionary of Philosophy of Religion* (New York: Continuum, 2010), p. xi.

Philosophy of religion is the philosophical study of the meaning and nature of religion. It includes the analyses of religious concepts, beliefs, terms, arguments, and practices of religious adherents.<sup>4</sup>

The key words here are “examination” and “study”. What do philosophers do when they examine and study religion? On what basis does their “analysis” proceed? If philosophical studies, analyses, and examinations of religion are meant to offer prescriptive diagnoses of religious traditions and beliefs, how can philosophy of religion have a vibrant role in the decidedly descriptive enterprise of the academic study of religion?

In what follows I briefly outline the responses to this question in the work of Timothy Knepper, Kevin Schilbrack, and Thomas Lewis. I then offer my own proposal to the conundrum of philosophy of religion. In my view, the problem is not the normative nature of philosophy of religion. The issue is that hitherto philosophers of religion have envisioned the object of their normative examinations as the religious traditions they study – or hypothetically study – rather than their own philosophical conceptions of the human, world, and cosmos. Following the work of Tyler Roberts and Robert Orsi, I propose that philosophers of religion should emerge from their encounters with religions with the perspective to shape and re-shape their own normative assumptions regarding truth, reality, and the human condition.

#### I. DIAGNOSING THE PROBLEM: THREE RESPONSES

During the last decade, numerous works have appeared that attempt to diagnose philosophy of religion’s maladies and offer pathways for envisioning its healthy future in the academic study of religion. In his 2014 work *Philosophy and the Study of Religions*, Kevin Schilbrack recognizes the insularity and impotence of the sub-discipline. In response, he argues that philosophy of religion must expand in three ways. First, it must become more global. Schilbrack recognizes that a student who enrolls in a philosophy of religion course is most likely to learn about theistic arguments for the existence of God or approaches to the problem of evil, but nothing of religious philosophers beyond the Abrahamic religions.<sup>5</sup> This myopia is unacceptable in the contemporary academic study of religion. Schilbrack identifies the second problem of philosophy of religion as its narrow attention to religious elites (such as philosophers), which prevents attention to religious rituals, ceremonies, garb, foods, pilgrimages, and objects: “Philosophers of religions should therefore move away from an exclusive focus on the intellectual work of literate elites to develop the tools necessary to study the full range of religious teachings.”<sup>6</sup> Finally, Schilbrack argues that philosophers of religion should insert themselves in the disciplinary debates surrounding the theories

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<sup>4</sup> Chad Meister, “Philosophy of Religion,” in the *Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. <https://www.iep.utm.edu/religion/>, accessed 2/1/2019.

<sup>5</sup> Kevin Schilbrack, *Philosophy and the Study of Religions: A Manifesto* (Oxford: Wiley Blackwell, 2014), pp. 10-11.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 15.

and methods of Religious Studies by asking the “philosophical questions” involved in the study of religions.

In the end, according to Schilbrack, “philosophers should exclude no religions,” “should give proper recognition to the centrality of religious practice to religious communities,” and “should expand its conversations with the other branches of philosophy and the other disciplines in religious studies.”<sup>7</sup> In other words, philosophy of religion should be comparative, conduct multi-faceted analyses, and engage in debates about the theories and methods used in the field.

While I do not disagree with any of these ideas, they do not seem to offer a vibrant future for philosophy of religion in the context of Religious Studies. They instead sound like prescriptions for catching up with the rest of the field. Scholars of religion have been working to expand the field’s purview from the Abrahamic religions for well over a century. This has included significant reflection on the most effective frameworks for cross-cultural comparison and critique. Moreover, anthropologists, historians, sociologists, and scholars of material religion have long been attending to the non-philosophical dimensions of religions. It’s not clear what philosophical examinations of those aspects of religions, or the ongoing debates surrounding scholarly approaches to them, will add to the academic study of religion. Finally, there has always been rigorous critique of the theories and methods of religious studies. One of the preoccupations of Religious Studies is its methodological and theoretical parameters. Schilbrack’s desire for philosophers to join the fray is welcome, but again, it’s not clear what unique or decisive perspective they might contribute to an already robust and rigorous debate. In the end, his proposals make it seem that if philosophers of religion are just willing to do what their colleagues have been doing for more than a half-century, then maybe they can retain their seat at the table.

Timothy Knepper’s diagnosis and proposal for the future of philosophy of religion are similar to Schilbrack’s.<sup>8</sup> I have written on Knepper’s approach at length elsewhere, so I will not rehearse it in full here.<sup>9</sup> In sum, Knepper agrees with Schilbrack that philosophy of religion is too narrow in scope, too preoccupied with religious elites, and impotent when it comes to the theories and methods of the academic study of religion. In response he offers a more ambitious vision for the future of the subfield. In Knepper’s view, philosophers of religion should attend to the intricacies of many religious traditions, including their non-philosophical components, in order to engage in thick description and cross-cultural comparison. Then, the philosopher will be able to offer normative evaluations of religious truth-claims. In a proposal that goes a step beyond Schilbrack’s, Knepper maintains that if philosophers can prove to their colleagues that they too do the work of ethnography,

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid., pp. 10-11.

<sup>8</sup> Timothy D. Knepper, *The Ends of Philosophy of Religion: Terminus and Telos* (New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013).

<sup>9</sup> Onishi, “The Beginning, Not the End.”

history, and anthropology, and if they do such work across multiple traditions, they will earn the right to evaluate the truth-claims of those traditions. This is not a qualitative change to how philosophy of religion has operated in the past. It does nothing to rectify the issue of normativity plaguing the sub-field. Instead, it hopes that if philosophers do a little more listening and a little more comparing then they will have earned the right to do what they have always done—figure out which religious beliefs and practices are true, verifiable, and coherent, and which are not.<sup>10</sup>

In his 2015 work *Why Philosophy Matters for the Study of Religion and Vice Versa*, Thomas Lewis attends more carefully to the issue of normativity than either Schilbrack or Knepper. Lewis is well aware that many scholars inside and outside of Religious Studies suspect that the field “remains tainted” by its liberal Protestant, and thus theological, past.<sup>11</sup> Lewis sees a direct line from this suspicion to the hyper-attentiveness scholars of religion bring to keeping theological, and thus normative, presuppositions outside its disciplinary bounds. However, Lewis’s response is not to offer a proposal for how philosophy of religion might balance its seemingly inherently normative philosophical commitments with its location in the field of Religious Studies. Instead, Lewis points out that all theory is normative: “We are also making normative claims when we interpret a particular religious practice as an expression of a universal human need—for community or solidarity, for instance. Such theories typically, if often implicitly, make the satisfaction of such needs normative for human beings.”<sup>12</sup> Lewis is making an important point, one that often goes overlooked: the theories that guide the methods of religion scholars are normative in the sense that they are prescriptive of how we can, and should, approach religions in order to understand, analyze, and compare them most effectively and insightfully. Lewis then goes a step further by showing that the mission to rid Religious Studies of theological presuppositions is itself a normative endeavor: “to transform religious studies in part by ridding it of pervasive theological presuppositions—it itself thoroughly normative and concerns more than the norms of inquiry itself.”<sup>13</sup>

I do not have substantive quarrels with Lewis’s diagnosis of the ineluctable normativity of theory. Every theory is an argument as to how we can and should conduct our investigations into religions. However, in ways similar to my readings of Knepper and Schilbrack, it doesn’t seem to me that Lewis’ approach offers a vibrant path forward for philosophy of religion in the

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<sup>10</sup> As Tamsin Jones points out, it’s not clear any scholar could attain the linguistic skills necessary to even do such work: “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.” Tamsin Jones,

“Is Academic Theology an Answer to the Problem of Philosophy of Religion?” (submitted to the JCRT for review).

<sup>11</sup> Thomas A. Lewis, *Why Philosophy Matters for the Study of Religion & Vice Versa* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), p. 43.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 48.

<sup>13</sup> Lewis, *Why Philosophy Matters*, 50.

context of Religious Studies. In fact, he winds up at a similar conclusion to Knepper and Schilbrack despite taking a slightly different path of arrival:

Scholars with expertise in particular areas – such as contemporary Protestant thought, early Taoism, medieval Islamic thought, and so forth – will contribute to a common conversation about the topics at hand – such as the nature of ethical obligation itself, accounts of human flourishing, habituation, and more specific topics such as issues in just war theory. To describe this as a common conversation is not to say that we are all already in apposition to understand each other well; that is an ongoing and constantly evolving task. Rather, it is simply to say that we are dealing with a single, larger but variegated field of inquiry, not several different fields.<sup>14</sup>

In this passage, Lewis concludes that what is known as “religious ethics” can be a comparative enterprise that spans religious traditions. He hopes that philosophy of religion can create this type of dialogical setting in order to engender reflection on normative commitments and an expanded understanding of approaches to normative claims on human behavior.

As with Knepper and Schilbrack, Lewis has tried to carve out a place for philosophy of religion in Religious Studies by promising an expanded and less dogmatic approach. He offers to other scholars of religion the commitment to questioning his own normative suppositions as long as they will do the same. In the end, however, the constitutive function of philosophy of religion seems to be evaluating religious truth-claims and commitments in a comparative context in order to determine their validity and coherence, this time with an emphasis on ethics.

All three thinkers propose changes to the scope and method of philosophy of religion while leaving untouched the assumption that the normativity in question pertains to the religions scholars study. The religions are the object. The scholar, or philosopher, is the subject. The task is for the latter to determine the coherence, rationality, and/or validity of the former. While this is not a qualitative change in the method of philosophy of religion, Knepper, Schilbrack, and Lewis are hopeful that a commitment to comparative work and thick description will buy philosophers the academic capital needed to enact their role as truth-evaluators and argument-deconstructors.

## II. *NORMATIVITY AND ENCOUNTER*

In contrast to these approaches, I want to offer what may seem to be a radical methodological proposal for philosophy of religion. In the first instance, the philosopher of religion engages religions in order to provide insight into the logic, function, and formation of religious institutions, communities, subjectivities, and so on. They are not simply mining religions for their own benefit. They offer critical analyses of text, events, figures, and so on.

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<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 111.

However, the next step is not to take a macro view of several religious traditions in order to do a comparative analysis of religious truth-claims or evaluate doctrinal coherencies. Instead, in the course of such analysis, the philosopher of religion gains new perspective on their own normative philosophical assumptions based on insight derived from such an encounter. In other words, the philosopher of religion philosophizes *with* religion in order to gain a critical perspective on their own truth claims from an enlarged, transformed, and deepened vantage point. In what follows I draw upon the work of Tyler Roberts and Robert Orsi to demonstrate how this might work.

In his 2014 work *Encountering Religion*, Roberts offer a humanistic approach based on the premise that broadly conceived the humanities are about “responding to texts, ideas, visions of the human, artworks, and values, that is, about encountering and engaging the claims and visions embedded in them to ask what they mean for *me* or *us*.”<sup>15</sup> For Roberts, the humanities enable reflection on the *human* and its entanglement with all things. This means neither an unreflective humanism, nor an unaware anthropocentrism. It means quite simply that one of the main functions of humanistic scholarship is to reflect, inherit, imagine, and critique, “to work from the knowledge of the past and the insightful interpretations it produces,” so we might “reflect on what it means to be human in the present and what it might mean in the future.”<sup>16</sup>

I agree with Roberts that the humanities are the theatre in which we project our ontological, existential, communal, and ethical questions through literary, philosophical, historical, classical, and religious sources in order to be “actors in, not just observers of, the process of social and cultural formation.”<sup>17</sup> For many, removing the existential dimension of humanistic inquiry would make it difficult to imagine why it would be worth undertaking. There are many reasons to read literature, study philosophy, analyze history, or engage with art, but one of them—especially for students—seems inevitably to respond to the condition of our being-here—whether individually, communally, institutionally, or in some other register.

Roberts’ model for the humanistic study of religion proceeds directly from his vision of the humanities. For him, the scholar of religion stages an encounter with religious texts, communities, and/or actors wherein “the scholar acknowledges that he or she shares something with his or her subjects.”<sup>18</sup> Thus, rather than locating herself outside the realm of religion in order to function as both a comparative historian and truth-evaluator, Roberts follows scholars like Robert Orsi and Saba Mahmood who, in his view, “are willing and able to put their own experience on the line, to make their own

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<sup>15</sup> Tyler Roberts, *Encountering Religion: Responsibility and Criticism After Secularism* (Columbia University Press, 2014), p. 91.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.* p. 92.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 117.

<sup>18</sup> Roberts, *Encountering Religion*, p. 108.

experience of the people they are studying part of the study.”<sup>19</sup> What can result through such encounters is the re-creation and enlargement of the scholar’s worldview. Roberts points to Saba Mahmood’s work in Egyptian mosques as an example:

[T]hrough her encounter with the women of the mosque movement, she comes to question her own theoretical commitments, placing the work her subjects perform on their religious worlds in dialectical relation to her own politics and sense of self by identifying and grappling with the lack of fit between the two worlds. Mahmood, in other words, disrupts the dichotomy between the us and them of the locativists by reflecting on how the subjects of her studies, in what they say and do, challenge her to rethink and reimagine herself.<sup>20</sup>

Rather than emerging from her encounters with the mosque movement by evaluating the coherence and pattern of their truth claims in comparison to other religious phenomena, Mahmood returned from her work in the Egyptian mosques with a newly formed lens with which to view her own assumptions, beliefs, and identity. The encounter between her and the Muslim women she studied didn’t result in a conversion of one to the other. Instead, the view from inside the mosque opened up new vistas for Mahmood to view herself and her understanding of the world, even if she did not adopt or appropriate the beliefs of her subjects.

As Roberts notes, Robert Orsi proceeds in a similar vein in *Thank You St. Jude*. While the work is ostensibly an ethnography of immigrants from south and southeastern Europe who pray to St. Jude as a guiding light during hard times, it is also a reflection on the function and purview of Religious Studies. In place of a comprehensive analysis of the text, I will limit my comments to two axioms drawn from Orsi’s reflections on the role of the researcher and their relationship to the religions they study.

First, Orsi quotes Jean-Paul Sartre when he writes that “*research is a relationship.*” For Orsi, this means that the scholar must always recognize that “our lives and our stories are not simply implicated in our work; they are among the media through which we scholars of religion encounter and engage the religious worlds of others.”<sup>21</sup> There is no way, in other words, of removing our own horizons of experience and knowledge completely from our work. Roberts, commenting on Orsi’s approach, puts it this way: “the assertion of a common humanity makes it possible to identify and come to some understanding of many of the differences that divide us, precisely by understanding as differences between *human* beings.”<sup>22</sup> While we must, according to Orsi, do everything possible to act with responsibility, rigor, self-awareness, and discipline, we cannot imagine ourselves as ever absolutely

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<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., p. 107.

<sup>21</sup> Robert Orsi, *Thank You St. Jude: Women’s Devotion to the Patron Saint of Hopeless Causes* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998) p. 3.

<sup>22</sup> Roberts, *Encountering Religion*, p. 99.

separate from the process of investigation. Every act of scholarly research is a unique relationship between the researcher and the object of study based on their common humanity.

However, this does not mean that we must subsume ourselves into the religions we study. As Orsi says, *participation is not identification*. Orsi quotes Gananath Obeyesekere in order to make this point: "Participation is participation in dialogue, not identification with the other culture."<sup>23</sup> For Orsi this means above all recognizing that the researcher and the practitioner share a "common human project, within the framework of different histories and different ways of being in the world."<sup>24</sup> Thus, the dialogue between them is based on imagination and empathy.

In *Thank You Saint Jude* this is set in motion when Clara, a woman at the church, asks Orsi if he has ever prayed to Saint Jude. When he replies he has not, she asks, "Then how do you expect to understand what we're doing when we pray to Saint Jude?"<sup>25</sup> Despite the ambivalence this question stirred in him, when Orsi later found himself in a state of despair, he thought of Clara. Orsi didn't pray to Saint Jude, but, as he explains, "I shifted the ground of the experiment and instead of actually praying to Saint Jude I tried to find some analogue to this act in my own emotional and behavioral repertoire on the basis of what I already knew of the nature of women's prayers."<sup>26</sup> While Orsi did not pray to the Saint, or even pray in the way that Clara does, his analogous action/belief/practice opened up imaginative and empathetic spaces within him and enabled him to reimagine both his world and his situation.<sup>27</sup> Later in the book, Orsi comes to radical conclusion as a result of this experience: "The point is not to make the other world radically and irrevocably other, but to render one's own world other to oneself as prelude to a new understanding of the two worlds in relationship to one another."<sup>28</sup> For Orsi, as for Roberts, the researcher must be willing to expose their own self-conceptions and worldview to scrutiny in the process of imaging and empathizing with the religious worlds they study. This vulnerability, as destabilizing as it may be, is the conduit of scholarly insight.

Practicing this type of empathy requires the willingness to eliminate the distance between the two worlds. Crossing borders demands neither identification, nor otherness. According to Orsi, research is held in the tension between them:

Difference is not otherness, in other words. To understand something about another time or place does not necessarily mean claiming to own this other world, to efface it by insisting that one's own representation

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<sup>23</sup> Ibid., p. 174.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., p. 148.

<sup>26</sup> Orsi, *St. Jude*, p. 172.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 202.



is definitive, to speak *for* this other world . . . to emphasize sameness, or to accept everything about this other world as good.<sup>29</sup>

The onus is on the researcher to enter into the world of practitioner in order to, as Orsi says, “balance carefully and self-reflectively on the border between familiarity and difference, strangeness and recognizability, whether in relation to people in the past or in another cultural world.”<sup>30</sup> This requires the type of thick description and scholarly dedication to various dimensions of religions called for by Schilbrack, Knepper, and Lewis. Yet, it is done in service of a different end. In this case scholarly examination and analysis are not steps on the way to making normative evaluations about religions. Here, venturing into religious worlds leads ultimately to a reshaping of the scholar’s own world. If everything goes to plan, it is their normative assumptions come under the view of the analytical gaze.

On the whole, Roberts’ and Orsi’s approaches open a pathway for addressing the normativity question in the philosophy of religion. Philosophy of religion is normative, because it is a form of philosophy. Philosophy, in its barest form, is an evaluative practice that probes, critiques, and responds to claims regarding truth (and beauty, justice, and so on). However, on my view the philosophical normativity in question does not concern the religions we study. The normativity in philosophy of religion is the account of the human condition, the cosmos, and anything beyond or below them *as a result of the encounter with religions*.

Philosophers of religion working in Religious Studies have rarely considered this option, and up to this point for the most part the critical gaze has been turned the wrong direction. Instead of worrying about how to balance comparative description and truth-evaluation— that is, with being good describers and truth-evaluators of religions— philosophy of religion should extend Roberts’ and Orsi’s approaches by taking the bet that encountering religions will result not only in critical and creative analyses of religious texts, communities, rituals, and so on, but in the transformation, enlargement, and re-creation of the philosopher’s vision of themselves and their world. What the philosopher of religion gains through such encounters is perspective: depth to philosophical visions and insight into the logic of the philosophical task at hand through engagement with religious subjects, communities, and rituals on their terms.

As I argue in *The Sacrality of the Secular*, this approach is evident in Mark Taylor’s work on complexity and aesthetics, Jeff Kosky’s vision for enchanted secularities, Thomas Carlson’s approach to posthumanism and mystical subjectivity, and Mary-Jane Rubenstein’s work on the multiverse.<sup>31</sup> However, hitherto those trying to rescue philosophy of religion from the fringes of

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<sup>29</sup> Ibid., p. 162.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., p. 3.

<sup>31</sup> Bradley B. Onishi, *The Sacrality of the Secular: Postmodern Philosophy of Religion* (Columbia University Press, 2018), Chapter Five and Conclusion.

Religious Studies have been so concerned with preserving their role as normative truth-evaluators that they have failed to recognize the deep theoretical resonances philosophers of religion can, and in many cases already do, share with figures like Orsi and Mahmood – two thinkers who regularly appear on theories and methods syllabi in religious studies departments all over the world. In the end, my proposal is that we do philosophy of religion by doing *philosophy with religions*. As I have argued, to do philosophy *about* religions is to remain in the dead-end of acting as truth-evaluators in a discipline – Religious Studies – that no longer finds such evaluation useful.

Moreover, to do philosophy *for* religions is to wade explicitly and intentionally into theological terrain. Even if, as I maintain elsewhere, the borders between Theology and Religious Studies remain more blurred than many would like to admit, philosophers of religion working in Religious Studies have a different purpose than those working in Theology.<sup>32</sup> The former encounter religions in which they are a participant in order to reshape the normative doctrinal, ritualistic, or other dimensions of those religions. They enter religious worlds, as religious actors, with the explicit intention of developing, shaping, or reforming those worlds. While theologians may encounter religions through anthropological, historical, sociological, or other disciplinary means, their purpose for doing remains to provide normative commentary on their own religious traditions.

By contrast, to do philosophy *with* religions is to stage such encounters in order to both provide scholarly analysis of various aspects of religions and to gain the vision to displace, reshape, and reassemble their own normative assumptions. As Orsi says:

This alternative – which I think of as a third way, between confessional or theological scholarship, on the one hand, and radically secular scholarship on the other. . . . It has no need to fortify the self in relation to the other; indeed, it is willing to make one's own self-conceptions vulnerable to the radically destabilizing possibilities of a genuine encounter with an unfamiliar way of life. This is an in-between orientation, located at the intersection of self and other, at the boundary between one's own moral universe and the moral world of the other.<sup>33</sup>

Orsi's third way is largely coherent with philosophers of religion from Heidegger, Bataille, and Nancy, to Taylor, Carlson, Kosky, and Rubenstein. They all encounter religions in order to transform their own secular – if not secularist – conceptions of the human, the cosmos, and so on.

### III. IMPLICATIONS

In conclusion, I would like to reflect on two implications of my proposal related to how we teach and train students in Religious Studies.

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<sup>32</sup> Onishi, "The Beginning, Not the End".

<sup>33</sup> Orsi, *St. Jude*, p. 198.

First, my vision for the philosophy of religion means that a philosopher working in Religious Studies must always be two things at once. In methodological terms, I mean that if a scholar is going to execute the process of encountering religions, analyzing their object of study, and then reflecting on what such an encounter means for their own normative suppositions, they will have to be trained to engage in such an encounter. These days it is rare to see an academic position in Religious Studies listed under the heading “Philosophy of Religion”. In some sense, the field has been slowly suffocated by choices made by hiring committees. But that doesn’t mean it is dead. In my view, those who wish to *philosophize with religions* – rather than about religions or for religions – must do so as part of a bicameral process that includes training in history, ethnography, expertise in a set of sacred writings, or some other practice. On one hand, there is no other way to exist in the contemporary academy without such training, since there are very few faculty positions in non-confessional Religious Studies departments for philosophers of religion. On the other hand, it is methodologically required, since there is no possibility of encounter unless one has been trained to do so. The process I’ve outlined above demands other forms of training in order to enact the *with* of philosophy of religion. In order to effectively and responsibly train graduate students, this set of dynamics must be recognized. We cannot train people for a discipline that no longer has an institutional home.

Second, scholars of religion in general, and philosophers of religion in particular, should not underestimate our roles as humanists in the modern university. If the humanities are the site where we respond, inherit, and reflect on what it has meant to be human in the past and what it might mean in the future, then this is for many students their most important function. I have spent my career teaching undergraduates at liberal arts colleges, vocational schools, fine arts programs, and public universities. When I teach on death, sex, love, race, or secularity, my students are interested in engaging the material at hand – whether it be the burial rituals of the Tana Torajans or the layers of meaning in James Baldwin’s fiction. They are eager to enter the religious worlds of the people and communities we are studying. Empathy and imagination are the first virtues we develop and practice. But my students are also interested in what such encounters mean for their own understandings of the world. In a time when many decry the crisis of the humanities, it seems the best way to explain their value, if not their use, is an investment in the future of humanity. By training students to practice the type of reflection and responsibility Roberts speaks of we are equipping them to think critically about how to respond to the crises of their time. Teaching and funding the humanities are thus long-term investments in the future of the planet. Philosophy of religion can, and *should*, be a locale where this practice is enacted in departments of Religious Studies.

However, this does not mean disseminating, whether by dint of laziness or persuasion, our own ideologies. To do so would be to efface the vulnerability and openness demanded by the model itself. It means opening a space, a tense space, where engagements with religious worlds can lead to reflection

and adjustment for both teacher and student. I recognize that the possibilities for this type of teaching differ at each institution. My intent is not to overlook the logistical challenges instructors, teachers, and tutors face in different ways – especially in light of the adjunct crisis in the modern academy. My hope, rather, is that we might reflect on the fact that for many of our students the space of the classroom is unique in the way it opens up possibilities for self-transformation and reflection. In this sense, philosophy of religion may be one of the most important aspects of teaching religions in non-confessional institutions – a place where encounters based on vulnerability, openness, understanding, and overall, a shared humanity may still take place.