

Philosophy of Religion after »Religion«

Edited by
MICHAEL CH. RODGERS
and RICHARD AMESBURY

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Mohr Siebeck

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Michael Ch. Rodgers and Richard Amesbury

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Preface

The chapters of this book represent answers to a question posed by Professor Richard Amesbury and myself. Our question was and remains this: in the face of criticism of the category of religion from a variety of academic disciplines, what are we to make of the philosophy of religion? With few exceptions, philosophers of religion have largely ignored these criticisms and continued on with other topics in their field. By inviting the authors included in this volume, our goal is to generate a greater awareness of the criticisms of the category of religion as well as explore responses from the field of philosophy of religion.

The idea for the volume was conceived while Professor Amesbury was Professor of Theological Ethics at the University of Zurich, Switzerland, where he led the university's Center for Ethics and directed the Institute for Social Ethics. This book would not be possible without the support of the Center and Institute. We could not hope to find a better publisher than Mohr Siebeck for this topic. I am grateful to Dr. Ziebritzki and his staff for their support and diligence in seeing this book through publication.

Michael Ch. Rodgers

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Introduction: Making the Reflexive Turn in Philosophy of Religion

RICHARD AMESBURY

Philosophy of religion is currently in a time of self-examination and transition. Long preoccupied with the claims of so-called »classical theism«, it is today expanding to encompass a much wider, more diverse range of religious topics. Yet in so doing, it faces an array of theoretical challenges, including questions about the category of *religion* itself.

A field that has tended to be viewed with some suspicion by philosophers in other areas of study – and which in parts of Europe remains a branch of Systematic Theology – philosophy of religion occupies an ambiguous place in the academy, its Christian history and perceived apologetic aims placing it in tension with the norms of both Philosophy and Religious Studies. Open a college textbook on the topic and one is likely to encounter a now familiar roster of topics, including the attributes of the omni-God, arguments for that God's existence, the problem of evil, and the tension between faith and reason. Some introductory texts conclude with the acknowledgement of »many religions«, but few present these religions as anything more than a »problem« to be dealt with in terms of the now familiar, if criticized, tripartite distinction between »exclusivism«, »inclusivism«, and »pluralism«. Seldom indeed are these religions accorded the respect paid the philosophical construct of »classical theism«; one searches usually in vain for serious philosophical engagement with Zen Buddhism or Advaita Vedanta, to say nothing of Shinto, Candomblé, Salafism, or Pentecostalism.

That, however, is beginning to change, as newer generations of philosophers of religion challenge the assumed boundaries of their field. Much of the impetus here comes from the world of Religious Studies, and in fact Wesley Wildman has proposed rebranding the field »Religious Philosophy« – a term deliberately modeled on »Religious Studies« and designed to distance philosophy of religion from philosophical theology and Christian apologetics. Religious Philosophy, as Wildman conceives it, is »religious« in

the same way that Religious Studies is »religious« – i.e., it is *secular*. Religion belongs not to its methods, but to its subject matter.¹

But what exactly is this subject matter? Scholars of religion will not be surprised – although some philosophers might – to learn that the concept of religion, while ubiquitous in popular discourse, is the subject of sustained analysis and critique within the field of Religious Studies itself. Over the past several decades, the study of religion has taken a reflexive turn, toward the study of »religion« – i.e., of the organizing categories in terms of which the field is itself structured.²

Contextualizing the Religious and the Secular

»Religion«, it turns out, is a comparatively recent innovation. More precisely: what »religion« means today is not what the term (or its analogues) used to mean. On the modern understanding, »religion« names a sphere of society, or of individual life, which is analytically distinguishable from so-called *secular* domains, such as the state and the market. As a matter most

¹ W. WILDMAN, *Religious Philosophy as Multidisciplinary Comparative Inquiry: Envisioning a Future for the Philosophy of Religion* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2010), xiii–xiv.

² For a sampling of this growing body of literature see, e.g.: T. ASAD, *Genealogies of Religion: Discipline and Reasons of Power in Christianity and Islam* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993); L. BATNITZKY, *How Judaism Became a Religion: An Introduction to Modern Jewish Thought* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2011); D. CHIDESTER, *Savage Systems: Colonialism and Comparative Religion in Southern Africa* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1996); D. DUBUISSON, *The Western Construction of Religion: Myths, Knowledge, and Ideology*, trans. William Sayers (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2003); T. FITZGERALD, *The Ideology of Religious Studies* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000); J.Ā. JOSEPHSON, *The Invention of Religion in Japan* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2012); T. MASUZAWA, *The Invention of World Religions* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2005); R. T. MCCUTCHEON, *Manufacturing Religion: The Discourse on Sui Generis Religion and the Politics of Nostalgia* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003); B. NONGBRI, *Before Religion: A History of a Modern Concept* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2015); J. Z. SMITH, *Relating Religion* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2004); G. G. STROUMSA, *A New Science: The Discovery of Religion in the Age of Reason* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2010); and T. WENGER, *We Have a Religion: The 1920s Pueblo Indian Dance Controversy and American Religious Freedom* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2009).

fundamentally of *belief*, religion is ideally – if not always actually – private. So conceived, religion is a human universal – a dimension of what it means to be a person and an ingredient in every great civilization – but it takes many forms, the most significant of which are the »world religions«.

Scholars of the category's history disagree as to precisely when the term acquired its modern meaning, which is not surprising, given that the composite sketch offered above comprises a number of different lineaments. Tomoko Masuzawa has argued that the concept of »world religions« – which has grown over time to include some eleven or so »great traditions« – is a product of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. By contrast, the idea that religion is separable from politics and the state developed in the early modern period, and the emphasis on belief – with its corresponding deprecation of ritual and material culture – is arguable attributable to Protestant theology.

In antiquity, the term *religio* was used quite differently, in reference to binding duties, including, but not limited to, cultic rites.³ In *De Vera Religione* (»On True Religion«), Augustine used the term to mean *worship*. As William Cavanaugh points out, »Augustine's subject is not ›Christianity‹ as a – or the – true religion alongside other religions understood as systematic sets of propositions and rites.«⁴ Rather, *true* religion is worship of the triune God. As recently as the late middle ages, the word »religion« was used infrequently and never in the quasi-sociological sense with which we are today familiar. Even in the early modern period, the convention was to speak not of *religions* (like Judaism and Islam), but of *peoples* (like Jews and »Mohammedans«).⁵

Precisely how these usages changed is the subject of a growing and impressive body of contemporary scholarship, which seeks to understand the complex relationship between discourse about religion and the practices to which that discourse belongs. Shifts in the latter – the Protestant Reformation, the rise of nation-states, colonialism, etc. – enabled new conceptual developments, but the latter in turn helped to bring into existence new social realities. Commenting on these developments, the anthropologist Talal Asad famously concluded that »there cannot be a universal definition of religion, not only because its constituent elements and relationships are historically specific, but because that definition is itself the historical product of discursive processes.«⁶ Religion, on this view, is not a timeless,

³ DUBUISSON, *Western Construction*, 15.

⁴ W.T. CAVANAUGH, *The Myth of Religious Violence* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 63.

⁵ MASUZAWA, *Invention*, 61.

⁶ ASAD, *Genealogies*, 29.

universal phenomenon for which modernity at last bequeathed us a name; rather, it is itself a distinctively modern, western formation.

Indeed, Daniel Dubuisson suggests that *religion* is »the West's most characteristic concept, around which it has established and developed its identity, while at the same time defining its way of conceiving humankind and the world.«⁷ A product of the West, religion came, ironically, to be associated above all with the East – as characterizing that which was *not* Europe. Paradoxically, those lacking the concept were assumed to be the most religious, deprived of the sort of critical distance necessary to wrestle religion into view as a discrete, limited phenomenon. If people in the »advanced«, differentiated, secularized societies of Europe and North America *had* religions, people in other parts of the world were had *by* them, their subjectivities and social institutions awaiting emancipation from religion's all-pervasive and despotic grip.⁸ Orientalist discourses about religion thus helped to underwrite the colonial encounters of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. To be fully modern, a society needed to circumscribe and contain religion, disentangling it from knowledge and power and making of it a repository of wisdom and value, on which individuals could electively draw for inspiration, guidance, and moral orientation. Distance from this ideal was a measure of cultural backwardness.

By means of these encounters, the concept of religion found its way into novel cultural contexts, where it was taken up in ways that contributed to the disciplining and remaking of the larger social world. Whether celebrated or lamented, tolerated or feared, the »world religions« with which we are today familiar – Judaism, Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism, Zoroastrianism, Jainism, Sikhism, Confucianism, Taoism, Shinto – are assumed to be tokens of the same type, species of a common genus. Although often imagined as recognizing ancient or timeless »traditions«, this schema and its taxa are thoroughly modern. One reason, it might be argued, that we are apt to discover family resemblances among the world religions is that only those phenomena have been allowed to count as »religious« – or to merit the honorific »world« – which conform to roughly Protestant criteria of true piety. When »religions« transgress these boundaries – when, for example, they are perceived to be too political, or to take an unseemly interest in money – they are said to be mixing illicitly with the secular. The empirical argument for essential similarity among the so-called world

⁷ DUBUISSON, *Western Construction*, 9.

⁸ Cf. W. BROWN, »Subjects of Tolerance: Why We Are Civilized and They Are the Barbarians«, in *Political Theologies: Public Religions in a Post-Secular World*, ed. H. de VRIES and L.E. SULLIVAN (New York: Fordham University Press, 2006), 299.

religions would seem, in other words, to draw covertly upon a stipulative definition of »religion« that disqualifies disconfirming evidence *ab initio*.

Among scholars of religion, the study of the cultural history of *religion* has been paired with a corresponding interest in the larger imaginary within which the term functions, the background against which religion can be identified as an object of interest, anxiety, and academic study.⁹ We might call this background *the secular*, if we are careful to note the ways in which *this* use of the term – as a name for this frame of reference – differs from its use *within* that frame, where it denotes, *inter alia*, the non-religious. Indeed, this ambiguity offers an important clue to understanding what is distinctive about a certain modern present. Like »religion«, the term »secular« has undergone important shifts in meaning over time. Whereas an earlier use of the term – preserved, for example, in the Italian and Portuguese terms for »century« – denoted the *temporal* structure of chronology as distinct from eternity and kairotic time, secularity today tends to be conceived of *spatially*, as the shared domain of publicity, from which religion is excluded – the negative space of religion as a distinct phenomenon. As the earlier distinction between the secular and the eternal faded from view, secularity re-emerged temporally as *history*, the homogeneous progression of events within what Charles Taylor calls the »immanent frame«. ¹⁰ Bereft of any obvious contrast case, secularity as temporal structure was rendered virtually invisible by virtue of being naturalized, thereby allowing the label »secular« to be transferred into the domain of space. In its self-sufficiency, history is conceived as a domain of facticity, the neutral baseline for adjudicating religious difference. As Saba Mahmood observes, »secularity flattens religious incommensurability, forcing religious traditions to confront one another in the uniform space of history, all equally vulnerable to the questioning

⁹ For a sampling of this literature see, e.g.: T. ASAD, *Formations of the Secular: Christianity, Islam, Modernity* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003); L.E. CADY and E.SH. HURD, eds., *Comparative Secularisms in a Global Age* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010); CAVANAUGH, *The Myth of Religious Violence*; T. FITZGERALD, ed., *Religion and the Secular: Historical and Colonial Formations* (New York: Routledge, 2007); J.R. JAKOBSEN and A. PELLEGRINI, eds., *Secularisms* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2008); S. MAHMOOD, *Religious Difference in a Secular Age: A Minority Report* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2016); J.L. MODERN, *Secularism in Antebellum America* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2011); CH. SMITH, ed., *The Secular Revolution: Power, Interests, and Conflict in the Secularization of American Public Life* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003); and CH. TAYLOR, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, Mass.: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2007).

¹⁰ TAYLOR, *A Secular Age*, 543.

power of the secular.«¹¹ To call history »secular« – to thematize it as part of a distinctive and contestable (if hegemonic) imaginary – is to recognize that discourse about religion (and its others) belongs to a particular epoch, while acknowledging the paradox (and methodological inadequacy) of attempting to historicize »history« itself.

To be sure, every category has a history, and to subject a concept to genealogical analysis is not necessarily to criticize or reject it, as though we were discontent with anything less than eternal forms. But such analyses can shed light on the regimes of power to which knowledge belongs, which can in turn prompt reflection on the role our own work as scholars plays in reproducing these regimes and/or putting them in question. Genealogy is thus an exercise in taking responsibility.

To appreciate the point of these critiques is not necessarily to deny that religion *sans* quotation marks is »real«. Here an analogy with critical race theory might be helpful. Racial categories, like religious ones, are culturally constructed, contextual, and contingent, but race is *real* in the sense that the employment of these categories has real effects in the world. To attempt to counter these effects simply by rejecting the category – to pretend to be »color-blind« – would in many cases only re-entrench prevailing racialized dynamics of power. Similarly, it can be observed that the modern category of »religion« has taken on a life of its own. It is entrenched not simply in scholarship, but also in law, public discourse, and the broader liberal imaginary and, as noted above, has been appropriated well beyond the contexts of its origins, remaking other cultures and in turn being remade through this contact. It is too late in the day to simply abandon the field. Claiming, disclaiming, granting, and refusing the status of religion are inherently political acts – as, arguably, is failing to acknowledge it. The reality of religion, like that of race, is revealed in the lives to which this discourse belongs: the discursive practices anchor the reality. As a result, though, religion and race are inherently contestable; their reality does not prevent the revision of our practices. Indeed, it might be thought to demand it.

Moreover, discourse about religion cannot neatly be disentangled from language about race, gender, and other forms of difference. The connection with race noted above is more than simply analogical: religion and its taxa are racialized and gendered. The same is true of secularity: as Vincent W. Lloyd has recently put the point, »whiteness is secular, and the secular

¹¹ MAHMOOD, *Religious Difference*, 207. Note, for example, the distinction commonly made by New Testament scholars between »the Jesus of history« and »the Christ of faith«.

is white.¹² Both categories function – often interchangeably – as the »default« or »baseline« in relation to which *difference* is determined and managed.¹³ Furthermore, because religion tends to be viewed as optional – as a matter of voluntary belief – criticism of religion (or more specifically, of certain *religions*, like Islam) can function as a respectable proxy for sentiments that would be taboo if expressed in racial categories. In this way, race is reimagined as quasi-biological, and religion as choice.¹⁴

New approaches to philosophy of religion seek to move the field beyond the preoccupations of Christian theology and philosophical theism, toward an appreciation of a fuller range of religious phenomena. But if the concept of religion is itself the product of extrapolation from modern, Western, Christian understandings, does the new philosophy of religion – in its ambition to do justice to the *whole range of religion* – simply reproduce the deficiencies of the old, under the guise of a universalizing, albeit particularistic, category? And does the effort to conform to the secular canons of the modern university – to approach religion as it were from »outside« – reinscribe the boundaries of »religion« as a discrete phenomenon? To put it the other way around: does the identification of specific phenomena *as* religious – and so as suitable topics for philosophers of religion – presuppose and thus leave unexamined a distinctive regime of knowledge – the secular – which ought itself to be put in question?

¹² V.W. LLOYD, »Introduction: Managing Race, Managing Religion«, *Race and Secularism in America*, ed. J.S. KAHN and V.W. LLOYD (New York: Columbia University Press, 2016), 5.

¹³ A similar point can be made about maleness relative to gender, and heterosexuality relative to sexuality. It should be noted in this connection that secularity tends to be associated with rationality and contrasted to religious irrationality and emotion.

¹⁴ For example, in responding to widespread criticism of claims he made deprecatory of Islam, Richard Dawkins wrote, »The concept of race is controversial in biology, for complicated reasons. I could go into that, but I do not need to here. It's enough to say that if you can *convert* to something (or convert or apostatize out of it) it is not a race.« R. DAWKINS, »Calm Reflections After a Storm in a Teacup«, *Richard Dawkins Foundation for Reason and Science*. Accessed at: <https://richarddawkins.net/2013/08/calm-reflections-after-a-storm-in-a-teacup-polish-translation-below/> In an explicit attempt to address the anticipated objection that »Race is not a biological concept at all but a socially constructed one«, Dawkins appeals to »the dictionary definition: ›A limited group of people descended from a common ancestor.« He adds: »You can define naked mole rats as termites if you wish (they have similar social systems) but do not blame the rest of us if we prefer to call them mammals because they are close genetic cousins to non-social mole rates and other rodents.« Ibid.

The Contents

The present volume is organized around the question of what it would mean to do philosophy of religion – or something resembling it – *after* »religion« – i.e., in the wake of the kind of genealogical, post-colonial critique briefly described above. Is »religion« a load-bearing category for philosophy of religion? If so, what work does it do, whether ideological or explanatory? What would happen were the category to be withdrawn as an organizing principle and treated solely as an object of study? Can philosophy of religion be reconfigured in new and perhaps more illuminating ways, freed from the logic of »religion«? Should the term be rehabilitated, its extension differently imagined? How might philosophy benefit from, and contribute to, critical examination of the concept of religion?

In the opening essay, »Religion« under Erasure: Why the Concept is Problematic and Why We Still Need It«, Sonia Sikka begins by noting the pedagogical challenges of teaching philosophy of religion, given ambiguities surrounding its subject matter. The category of »religion« and the topics commonly addressed in the field reflect Eurocentric biases, and efforts to redress these deficits by expanding the category to include non-Western traditions can ironically have the effect of distorting the character of these traditions and naturalizing formations of Western colonial power. But Sikka is skeptical of the suggestion that we ought simply to abolish the »religion« in philosophy of religion, since this might in practice leave untouched the secularist assumptions that structure much academic inquiry. On Sikka's view, the postcolonial critique of »religion« as a distorting, occidental category must be carefully distinguished from reductionist critiques of religion that serve an anti-theological agenda. The latter, she argues, rest upon (often unguarded) metaphysical and epistemological assumptions that are appropriate objects of philosophical analysis. Sikka thus argues for retaining the field of philosophy of religion, albeit with a critical focus on the various problems associated with the category of religion.

Timothy D. Knepper's contribution, »Why Philosophers of Religion Don't Need ›Religion‹ – At Least Not for Now«, reaches different conclusions from similar premises. Knepper makes two central arguments: first, that the category of religion cannot simply be discarded, and second, that philosophers of religion do not actually need the category for most of what they do. On behalf of the former claim, Knepper argues that eliminativist views – according to which the category of religion ought to be abandoned – are *unrealistic*, insofar as they neglect linguistic change; *unimaginative*, insofar as they neglect linguistic context; and *unaware*, insofar as they neglect linguistic ideology. The meaning of »religion« has changed over time and is used differently in different contexts. Some of these uses

are empowering for minority groups. Nevertheless, Knepper argues, philosophers of religion need not ordinarily invoke the concept in their scholarship and should not be limited by it. The category of »ultimacy« might be more illuminating. What matters for philosophy, he concludes, are the phenomena, not the labels, even if the latter are implicated in the former.

The next two essays zero in on the question of definitions. In »An Essentialist in Critical Religion Land«, Dwayne Tunstall endorses the critical study of religion associated with scholars like Timothy Fitzgerald as of value for philosophers of religion seeking to avoid ahistorical understandings of what religion is. Discourse about religion has been instrumental to colonialism and paved the way for the flourishing of modern market ideologies, but – Tunstall argues – philosophers today need not be bound by these past uses of the term. Drawing on Robert Brandom's pragmatism, Tunstall argues that the semantic content of a concept normatively outruns its history of application and can be taken to commit users to refined, more fitting uses. As an example of a nuanced and potentially useful definition, Tunstall cites Kevin Schilbrack's suggestion that religion be understood as a constellation of »social practices authorized by reference to a superempirical reality«. ¹⁵ Handled with care, an essentialist definition of religion, selected with an eye to scholarly concerns, can cast light on a range of phenomena, such as nationalism and free-market fundamentalism, that might elude folk definitions.

J. Aaron Simmons, in his contribution »Vagueness and Its Virtues«, argues for a different approach: rather than crisply defining a stable object of inquiry, the philosopher of religion ought to appreciate *religion's* inherent vagueness. According to Simmons, this vagueness is due not simply to linguistic inadequacy; the latter might reflect an underlying vagueness in what the term names – an »ontic vagueness«. Engaging with the work of critical theorists of religion like Jonathan Z. Smith, Russell McCutcheon, and Donald Wiebe, Simmons argues that while it is probably hopeless to attempt (other than stipulatively) to formulate necessary and sufficient conditions of application for the category, this fact points to something important about what religion is: ironically, vagueness is *essential* to religion. Sustained attention to the question »What is religion?« might help to renew philosophy of religion, moving it beyond parochialism and intellectualism.

One reason »religion« is such a slippery category is that it overlaps significantly with other categories by means of which difference is articulated. In »Race and Religion in the Philosophy of Religion«, Vincent Lloyd draws attention to entanglements between the genealogies of race and

¹⁵ K. SCHILBRACK, »What Is not a Religion?« *The Journal of Religion* 93:3 (2013), 313.

religion and argues that philosophy of religion becomes distorted when race is not thematized. When they allow whiteness and Christianity to function normatively, philosophers of religion are complicit in the normalizing of racialized power: philosophy of religion is thus an inherently political field. What might it look like to take race seriously in the philosophy of religion? Lloyd begins by considering the work of two contemporary philosophers – Jacques Derrida and Giorgio Agamben – who have raised questions of race in relation to religion. While each provides a model for how to think philosophically about the intertwined genealogies of race and religion, Lloyd argues that their work does not go far enough, inasmuch as they fail to give sufficient critical attention to the secular, multicultural frameworks in terms of which race and religion are today managed. Here Lloyd turns to the work of the Jamaican writer and feminist theorist Sylvia Wynter, which examines the violent dynamics of theological and racial exclusion that have given rise to the figure of »Man«. These dynamics cannot be overcome simply through the incorporation of minority voices into the discourse; rather, Lloyd argues that the discourse itself must be radically reconceived.

Jin Park's essay, »Nothingness and Self Transformation: Kim Iryōp, Tanabe Hajime, and Jacques Derrida on Religious Practice«, represents the effort to engage in comparative, cross-cultural philosophical analysis unconstrained by western understandings of religion. Since, as Park notes, the genre of »philosophy« and the concept of »religion« were first taken up in eastern Asian contexts via the translation of Western-language documents in the nineteenth century, they do not always map easily onto pre-existing categories, and »the problems of transplanting Western expressions to the East Asian intellectual world through translated words are not insignificant«. Park's essay seeks to compare ideas about nothingness and the self in the work of Kim Iryōp, a Korean nun in the Zen Buddhist tradition, and Tanabe Hajime, a Japanese philosopher who studied with Husserl and Heidegger and was familiar with Shin Buddhism. Both, she demonstrates, exhibit the thought that self-transformation occurs through the mediation not of ultimate being, but of nothingness – a theme Park finds echoed in the writings of Jacques Derrida. Park argues that our concepts of both philosophy and religion can be renewed through engagement with traditions that proffer alternative understandings of ultimacy, thereby provincializing the onto-theological assumptions central to much modern Western philosophy of religion.

Indeed, Robert Cummings Neville argues that the concept of ultimacy, rather than any particular conception of it, is what ought to anchor philosophy of religion. Defining »religion« as »human symbolic engagement of ultimate realities in cognitive, existential, and practical ways«, his contri-

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