After This Strange Starting: Method, Theory and the Philosophy of Religion(s)

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Abstract

This paper argues for the ineluctably philosophical nature of "method and theory" in the academic study of religion. More to the point, it encourages a significant re-consideration of what passes for the "Philosophy of Religion," a sub-field whose concentration on mediaeval and contemporary Christian philosophical theology has impeded the development of an effective philosophical treatment of global human religious behavior. The paper seeks a History of Religions that is more informed by and about philosophy as a tradition and as a method and which therefore includes a disciplinary Philosophy of Religion(s) that is more relevant, practical, far-ranging, and productive.

Keywords

philosophy of religion, method and theory, theology, critical theory, definition

My proposal is obvious and simple, and I hope that it provides some warrant for methodological action. Nonetheless, this modest proposal will likely meet with considerable resistance (although many people with whom I have discussed it reluctantly recognize that it has merits and the participants in the roundtable generally, and with extreme caution, seemed to approve). I have no desire to provoke *irritation*, but I do hope to provoke some *action*. The simple fact is that there is a damaging and unjustifiable divide between philosophers of religion and critical theorists of religion and there is a great deal of potential in encouraging them to work together much more closely—to reintegrate philosophy into the study of religion and to restore the philosophy of religion to a more significant position in the academy of religion in a form that more closely resembles contemporary philosophy of science, or philosophy of mind.

I need to make an important caveat before I continue. I do not take Western philosophy to be the only, much less the best, way to think about religion

or indeed about anything else. However, this tradition is *in fact* the most highly operative single tradition of thought in the history of the study of religion in the Western academy. J. Z. Smith has demonstrated that the historian of religion's "primary expertise" is "self-consciousness" (Smith 1982: *xi*). It is a simple truth that we need to be more self-conscious of our roots in and our debt to philosophy. Similarly, Kocku von Stuckrad's paper agrees that "self-reflection is part and parcel of discursive and post-structuralist approaches in the study of religion." This being true there is a certain basic honesty to openly confessing our relationship to Western philosophy, and this is not entirely a bad thing: we should not forget that it was this tradition that gave rise to Western science (however one evaluates that) through "natural philosophy." Nonetheless, it must be recognized that these traditions have their inherent faults and that there are other, differently effective ways to think, talk, and act. Again von Stuckrad reminds us of Richard Rorty's observation that "everybody is ethnocentric when engaged in actual debate" and I do not pretend to rise above that (Rorty 1989: 13). On the other hand, I do not mean to imply that conclusions reached by other than "philosophical" means are thereby invalidated but simply that the philosophy of religion could and should have a different and more active role in our academy.

I have identified what I take to be a problem and I will suggest a solution. One part of the problem is that "philosophy" is misunderstood and misrepresented among many theorists of religion to the extent that their theorizing is hampered by that misunderstanding and their concomitant reluctance to fully engage, learn from, and employ the Western tradition of philosophy. This is closely connected to the fact that what is practiced under the title "Philosophy of Religion" is representative of neither contemporary Western philosophy nor academic religious studies. Clear symptoms of this malaise are evident in publications from both fields. I suggest that correcting that misunderstanding could put the resources of a valuable tradition more effectively at the service of the study of religion. However, I must also be emphatic that no method can serve any purpose without reliable subject matter and the tendency to practice the method of philosophy in the absence of reliable data leads to the kind of speculative metaphysics that is repudiated by many theorists of religion as little or no different from a religious *practice* and therefore of little or no help to the *study* of religion. Neither philosophy nor the study of religion can afford to be "ahistorical," but, possibly because of an overly-enthusiastic drive to historicize the study of religion, many theorists of the 1950s have been rejected for any remaining "taint" of philosophy. To give but one example, when the Italian Historian of Religions, Raffaele Pettazzoni, was first translated into English the initial response was almost unanimously positive. S. G. F. Brandon,

for example, wrote that "Pettazzoni does present a most impressive case for believing that 'behind the one omniscient God of a monotheistic religion we glimpse the figure of the omniscient chief God of a polytheism'" (Brandon 1956: 73, Pettazzoni 1956: 437). Perhaps Samuel Hooke best represents the response when he wrote that Pettazzoni:

> rightly insists on the necessity of dealing with the problem of the relation of the Supreme Being to a particular type of culture on a 'rigorously exact historical basis'. Hence his book marks an important advance on those methods of approach which were dominated either by purely linguistic considerations . . . or by theological interests (183).

Hooke quotes Pettazzoni to the effect that "the idea of the Supreme Being . . . is a concrete historical formation which takes different shapes . . . according to the cultural environment in which it appears" (184). Robert Segal writes that such a historicizing initiative has been recognized of other "scholars in various fields intent on restoring history to the history of their fields . . . All oppose the ahistorical practices of persons professing to be historians of their disciplines" (Segal 1989: 2). On these grounds, Segal could have included Pettazzoni among those scholars. However, this did not prevent later critics from focusing on the relatively slight "phenomenological" component of Pettazzoni's work and dismissing him as an "essentialist" or "subjectivist." Pettazzoni may have finally concentrated *too much* on history. Had he been more sensitive to the philosophical aspect of his own "two interdependent instruments" (history and "phenomenology") perhaps he would have realized that the desire to uncover the *meaning* of religious phenomena would have been better served by a more careful application of Western philosophy. He might then have been able to elaborate that side of his discipline in a way that was not so easily dismissed (cf. Rennie, forthcoming). As it was, he fell before the tide in theoretical religious studies that has sought to sweep aside any scholarship that openly displays any philosophical component, as if any trace of philosophy reduces that scholarship to vacuous speculative metaphysics with unavoidable theological biases. Finally, I will argue, any productive study of religion must be a *history and philosophy* of religion along the lines of the very successful department of the History and Philosophy of Science at the University of Pittsburgh and further exemplified by the fact that the History of Science Society meetings are held jointly with those of the Philosophy of Science Association. The drive to "historicize" the humanities has pushed the pendulum too far in the direction of history, denying the ineluctably philosophical elements that remain in any theoretical study in the absence of any singular and clearly delineated methodical paradigm. I am profoundly sympathetic with the drive to consilience, the idea that the sciences, humanities, and arts can mutually inform and reinforce one another (Wilson 1998). However, many of

its advocates, for example, Edward Slingerland (2008) and other proponents of "the cognitive science of religion" would leapfrog straight over any "philosophy of" religion in an attempt to make its study into a science in and of itself. Yet the History of Science does not claim to be "the Science of Science."

What Is "The Philosophy of Religion"?

I hope that my use of scare quotes around "Philosophy of Religion" will eventually prove understandable and helpful and thus justified. I will use the "Philosophy of Religion" to refer to that academic discipline of long standing and consistent structure. It customarily focuses on questions such as: is there evidence to warrant belief in God or in the existence or immortality of the soul, is it rational to believe in God, does the evil in the world support or discourage such belief, can belief in miracles and life after death be rationally sustained in the light of modern science, what is the nature of God, etc.? This bears little or no resemblance to the work of contemporary philosophers or historians of religion, who are not interested in presenting the claims of some particular tradition of revelation in a philosophically articulate and justifiable way, but of coming to an articulate and justifiable understanding of the nature and function of all such claims. In fact, it can be readily seen that this "Philosophy of Religion" came into being in the earliest stages of the Western academy and, perhaps because historians of religion have never taken the discipline out of the hands of specialist academic "Philosophers of Religion" (some of whom do not appear particularly well-informed concerning the global history of religion nor concerned about philosophical critiques of metaphysics) it has remained essentially focused upon the role of philosophical argumentation as it has been employed in conjunction with (at its narrowest) the Christian Church and (at its broadest) the Western monotheisms. (On Islam as a "Western Tradition," see Oxtoby 2002: 4-6.)

This situation has provoked the disapproval of some philosophers. Mark Jordan, for example, writes:

> Medieval religious thinkers knew what "philosophy" meant to the ancients, who had invented the word and the thing. They admired and appropriated the ancient legacy, but they also held that the aims of ancient philosophy had been met and decisively superseded in divine revelation. To apply the name "philosophy" to the writings of those medieval thinkers is thus to ignore or undo what they made clear with such emphasis. Most medieval writing about God, nature, human knowledge, and human living is both philosophical and deeply religious, *but it is self-consciously not a philosophy of religion* (Jordan 1995: 761, emphasis added).

Yet, it is precisely those medieval thinkers whose work constitutes the core of what now calls itself "the Philosophy of Religion." No doubt there are exceptions, but that this is the rule can be seen from a cursory inspection of some major publishers in the field. The Blackwell series *Exploring the Philosophy of Religion* advertises itself as treating "some of the most important topics in the dynamic and growing field of philosophy of religion." The catalogue includes: *Philosophical Theology and Christian Doctrine* by Brian Hebblethwaite; and *The Divine Attributes* by Joshua Hoffman and Gary Rosenkrantz. The Routledge series *Studies in the Philosophy of Religion* indicates that its aim "is to publish high quality research monographs in the philosophy of religion." This includes: *Metaphysics and God*, edited by Kevin Timpe; *Theism and Explanation*, by Gregory W. Dawes; *The Metaphysics of Perfect Beings*, by Michael J. Almeida; and *Divinity and Maximal Greatness*, by Daniel Hill. This certainly seems to show an adherence to Western Theological interests that reflects neither the contemporary academy of religion nor any desire, philosophical or otherwise, to comprehend religion as a global human phenomenon. A more recent volume by Kevin Timpe (2009) is another excellent example of this discouraging pattern. The Routledge series *Arguing about . . .* dedicates a volume to religion. One might reasonably expect it to address arguments about religion in general, but the "volume is divided into 6 parts, helping the student get to grips with classic and core arguments. Topics covered include: methodological issues in philosophy of religion, God's nature and existence, evil and divine hiddenness, providence and interaction, the afterlife, religion and contemporary life," and, although Timpe's volume makes some effort to improve upon its predecessors, it nonetheless can be seen to exercise the same Western Christian Theological focus that characterizes the "Philosophy of Religion" as a whole. Jordan's point certainly seems to be borne out: this is primarily the philosophical theology of the Western monotheist tradition. In fact, *The Oxford Handbook of Philosophical Theology* (Flint and Rea 2009) includes a section on "Non-Christian Philosophical Theology" but one reviewer (Moser 2009) says that the volume might as well have been called "Christian Philosophical Theology" and that "a similar collection in the same series [Wainwright 2008] is *The Oxford Handbook of the Philosophy of Religion*." In other words, the so-called "Philosophy of Religion" has simply failed to distinguish itself from philosophical theology. It is as if the contemporary philosophy of mind were to concern itself almost exclusively with arguments concerning Cartesian substance dualism. There were six meetings of the "Philosophy of Religion" section at the 2009 American Academy of Religion conference: the theme of the first was *An Essay on Theological Humanism*; the next was on non-duality including consideration of the soul and substance dualism; one was on

liturgy; one on the analytic/continental divide; one on Judaism and political theology; and one on explorations of the secular. These are no doubt interesting topics but are clearly dominated by Western, theological, and "Judeo-Christian" concerns and do not constitute a discipline distinct from theology. One significant result of this is that the journal, *Religion*, "accepts papers on all religious studies topics, including the history, literature, thought, practice, material culture, and institutions of particular religious traditions and communities from a variety of perspectives such as social scientific, cultural, cognitive, ethnographic, economic, ecological, and geographic (*but excluding theology or philosophy of religion*)." It would be hard to imagine a comparable journal on, say, science, excluding the philosophy of science.

On the other hand, it must be recognized that some historians of religion accept both the importance of philosophy and the inappropriate restriction of conventional "Philosophy of Religion" to Western Theology and in this spirit numerous attempts have been made to "globalize" the philosophy of religion. However, most, if not all, of these have adopted a strategy of identifying elements of non-Western traditions that can be equated to the Western tradition (e.g., Eshleman 2008; Brannigan 2000; Smart 1999; Kessler 1999; Phillips 1996; Bonnevac and Phillips 1993). These are valuable works in their own right, which are informative and appreciative of both Western and non-Western traditions. However, this strategy applies a dubiously imprecise definition of "philosophy" that takes little or no cognizance of the specificity of the Western tradition, failing to do justice to the precise methodology and the essential identity of Western philosophy. Furthermore, it subordinates non-Western wisdom traditions such as Buddhist *prajñāpāramita* or Hindu *sāmkhya* or various Chinese *chiao* to Western categories, thus failing to do *them* justice as unique and independent cultural and religious traditions with their own agendas, methods, and identities.

What is wrong here is in part an equivocation on the complex term "philosophy," but it is also a symptom of "political correctness." The motivation to include the non-Western traditions on an equal footing is justifiable and admirable, however, it leads to a false assumption of identity—comparable to Steven Colbert's inability to "see color"—between these traditions and Western philosophy and an inability to apply accurate and precise definitions. A careful consideration of the senses of the word, of the nature of philosophy as a method, and of the data of the history of religion as a potential subject of that method opens the door to a philosophy of religion (without scare quotes) that looks very different from the conventional discipline and might, potentially, yield a greater inter-cultural understanding of religion than any currently available. For the purposes of this paper, I will identify this nascent discipline

as Philosophy of Religion(s). It is, of course, already going on, in some cases in the camouflage of "Method and Theory in the Study of Religion" or "Critical Theory and Discourses in Religion." One 2001 issue of *Numen* (#48), for example, was devoted entirely to the question of universals. Nonetheless, the forthright application of philosophy as a method to the data of the history of religion could be of much greater scope than that currently seen in "Philosophy of Religion" and could help clarify discourse on theories in the history of religion.

What Do I Mean By "Philosophy"?

The word "philosophy" has a plurality of senses, and one is never justified in claiming that any given singular sense is the "right" one. Philosophy *does* mean a personal, possibly very loose, system of beliefs relative to some identifiable class, as in "my philosophy of life." It can also mean speculative metaphysics, as in "The subject of the attributes of deity was until recent times reserved for the speculations of theology and philosophy" (Pettazzoni 1956: 1). The *Oxford English Dictionary* (OED) suggests as many as nine distinguishable definitions for the word:

1. "The love, study, or pursuit of wisdom, or of knowledge of things and their causes, whether theoretical or practical."
2. "That more advanced knowledge or study, to which, in the medieval universities, the seven liberal arts were recognized as introductory."
3. "Natural philosophy" is "the knowledge or study of nature, or of natural objects and phenomena; 'natural knowledge': now usually called science."
4. "Moral philosophy" is "the knowledge of study of the principles of human action or conduct; ethics."
5. "Metaphysical philosophy" is "that department of knowledge or study which deals with ultimate reality, or with the most general causes and principles of things."
6. "Sometimes used especially of knowledge obtained by natural reason, in contrast with revealed knowledge."
7. "'Philosophy of…' is the study of the general principles of some particular branch of knowledge, experience, or activity."
8. "A particular system of ideas relating to the general scheme of the universe; a philosophical system or theory. Also, more generally, a set of opinions, ideas, or principles; a basic theory; a view or outlook."

9. "The system which a person forms for the conduct of life. . . . the mental attitude or habit of a philosopher."

However, these are simply *lexical* definitions—that is, they accurately record the way that various people have in fact used the word. It would simply be wrong to *deny* any of these senses of the word. However, allowing one word to imply all of these homonyms without clarification encourages all sorts of fallacies of equivocation that disable the sound reasoning that is, I would insist, one of the hallmarks of the "thing" known to ancient and medieval thinkers as philosophy mentioned by Mark Jordan. One can, and one *must*, distinguish what one *means* by the word, and stick to that singular meaning unless otherwise indicated. That is, one needs to apply at least a *stipulative* definition in the hope of attaining an acceptable *theoretical* definition. In this case the understanding of philosophy would do well to pay careful attention to the historical and cultural milieu from which the term has come and the academic discipline in which it has found its most focused applications.

The specific tradition of Western philosophy indicated by the *OED*'s second definition—"That more advanced knowledge or study, to which, in the medieval universities, the seven liberal arts were recognized as introductory," is importantly connected to the *OED*'s sixth definition—"knowledge obtained by natural reason, in contrast with revealed knowledge." These are the two senses of philosophy on which I would like to focus: I will refer to *OED* #2 as Western philosophy, and *OED* #6 as philosophical method. Both need to be clarified.

A standard reference work on Western philosophy is W. K. C. Guthrie 1962, in which Guthrie's description of philosophy makes religion and philosophy inimical or fundamentally opposed from the outset. Guthrie defines philosophy in binary opposition to (poly)theism, as does Charles Sanders Peirce in the much anthologized "Four Ways of Doing Philosophy" (originally 1877). It is true that this needs to be very carefully related to recent critiques such as those of Ivan Strenski (2009) and Ananda Abeysekara (2009), who, through very different approaches, regard the contemporary Western "secular" academy as an outgrowth, a legacy, and in a way a continuation of Christianity. Such observations indicate that Western philosophy *is* inextricably intertwined with Christianity, but perhaps it is more accurate that it is inextricably intertwined with theological monotheism in contradistinction to mythic polytheism. Pettazzoni in the 1940s argued that monotheism most accurately can be seen as the opposition to polytheism. In fact, in its earliest stages there was a connection between philosophical discourse and polytheism, as with Parmenides and the gods that guided him, but Parmenides appears to have

been a transitional figure for whom the mythical realities of Homer and Hesiod combined with the rationalism of the new philosophy prior to their "separation."

One might reasonably argue that Western philosophy cannot claim its real identity until its consanguinity with religion is properly recognized. In fact, for Guthrie the key element of philosophy is the perception of the "world as an ordered whole" (28), which is precisely what William James identified as the defining feature of *religion* ("Religious life consists of the belief that there is an unseen order and that our supreme good lies in harmoniously adjusting ourselves thereto"—1902, 69) so the simple *opposition* of Western philosophy and religion is not self-evident. A clearer insight into Guthrie's understanding of philosophy can be derived from his words:

> The birth of philosophy in Europe, then, consisted in the abandonment, at the level of conscious thought, of mythological solutions to problems concerning the origin and nature of the universe and the processes that go on within it. For religious faith there is substituted the faith that was and remains the basis of scientific thought with all its triumphs and all its limitations: that is, the faith that the visible world conceals a rational and intelligible order, that the causes of the natural world are to be sought within its boundaries, and that autonomous human reason is our sole and sufficient instrument for the search (Guthrie 1962: 29).

Immediately thereafter Guthrie goes on to employ the standard practice of characterizing philosophy by describing its recognized practitioners and their texts: Thales, Anaximander, et al and so leaves us to tease out the implications of his thought for ourselves.

Clearly, though, one such implication is that philosophical method is distinct from religious discourse as rational thought is distinct from "mythical" thought. That is, religion and philosophy are respectively aligned with mythological and logical solutions, with *mythos* and *logos*. This, however, is a another difficult area fraught with baggage as Bruce Lincoln's *Theorizing Myth* (1999) indicates and it cannot to be taken to be a self-evident distinction. Lincoln was primarily concerned with theorizing myth as his title indicates, but his argument nonetheless provides informative insight into myth's counterpart, logos. Lincoln seems inclined to conclude that logos is "mythos with footnotes" (his actual words are—"I now respond: 'If myth is ideology in narrative form, then scholarship is myth with footnotes,'" Lincoln 1999: 209) and, following Guthrie's classical mythos/logos divide, this distinction can be extremely enlightening in developing an understanding of philosophical method as concerning "knowledge obtained by natural reason, in contrast with revealed knowledge" (*OED* #6).

Lincoln repeatedly has had to answer questions like, "Isn't logos just a repackaged mythos?" and he recognizes that "I don't know that I've ever answered them successfully" (Lincoln 1999: 207). Both *logos* and *mythos* are narrative forms. What appears to be at work here is the Romantic/postmodern/non-Western position of "non-duality," invoked frequently by Mircea Eliade in his use of the phrase "*il n'y a pas un solution de la continuité entre…*" (which I usually translate as "there's no resolution to the continuity of…"). The idea that "*il n'y a pas un solution de la continuité entre…*" two apparently distinct categories appears as a constant theme in Eliade's writing. It implies both the absence of a break in the continuity between the two and also the absence of a solution to the riddle of the exact nature of the continuity. The two things do not stand in a simple relationship of continuity with one evolving out of the other. Rather, they are not discontinuous, the double negative serving to remind us of the complexity of their simultaneous distinction and connection. (I have made some attempt to explicate some of this in Rennie 2002.) They are distinct modalities of the same form, different species of the same genus, which is the narrative legitimation of discourse, the location and identification of its authority. Just as *mythos* is not fully distinct from *logos*, Western philosophy is not fully distinct from religion and I take Strenski's and Abeysekara's arguments to be evidence of a growing awareness of that fact. (In fact, that Strenski and Abeysekara are only a small tip of a large iceberg is indicated by for example Mandair 2009, De Vries 2007.) Nonetheless, as I say, the two remain distinguishable—especially if one is pedantically precise about what one means by each. In the end one *can* see, so to speak, what difference is made to mythos by the addition of "footnotes" (and I fully recognize that footnotes per se are a relatively recent piece of scholarly apparatus, I am using them, as I believe Lincoln did, in a more or less symbolic role). What Lincoln has been doing throughout his analysis, and his career, is logos rather than mythos. It is that "critical cross-examination" (Lincoln 1999: 208), which he calls "scholarship" but which (following that distinction assumed by the likes of Guthrie) is characteristic of philosophical method. This partly explains Kevin Schilbrack's position on "Bruce Lincoln's Philosophy"—those

> who develop theories about religion always also develop philosophies…the difference between the scientific study of religions and philosophy is…between those who hold such positions implicitly and uncritically and those who hold them explicitly and critically…philosophers of religion have the responsibility to explicate their presuppositions systematically (Schilbrack 2005: 44, 45).

But Schilbrack, with whom I am in broad agreement, does not distinguish the *method* of philosophy (implied in OED's #6) with the *product*—some kind of "system" (*OED*'s 8th and 9th definitions).

Lincoln finds it "essential" to maintain that, no, *logos* is not just repackaged *mythos*, and this is not only necessary for his "tattered individual self-respect." He "not only grant[s] but insist[s] that scholarship—like human speech in general—is interested, perspectival, and partial and that its ideological dimensions must be acknowledged, ferreted out where necessary, and critically cross-examined" (Lincoln 1999: 208), and it is that critical cross-examination that renders it distinct, and one of the things that empowers and is symbolic of this process is the humble footnote:

> Ideally, footnotes mark the fact that a scholarly text is not a discourse of free invention, wherein ideological interests escape all controls. Rather, they serve as a visible reminder that scholarly texts result from a dialectic encounter between an interested inquirer, a body of evidence, and a community of other competent and interested researchers, past, present, and future. All who participate are committed to a sustained engagement with the data and also with one another, their engagements being mediated by shared principles of theory and method, which—like the evidence and its interpretation—are subject to renegotiation in the space of their texts and conversations. Scholarship implies and depends upon debate wherein one experiences the scrutiny and criticism of others who are able to point to data and invoke established principles of method. In so doing, they act as a check on ideological manipulation. This check is important, even though it is never entirely effective, since critics also have their ideological interests and themselves must be subject to scrutiny and critique (Lincoln 1999: 208).

That is, footnotes do more than restricting the authority of the discourse to a limited community of the competent, they:

> go beyond offering their results to an audience of consumers. They also *display the processes through which they arrived at those results* for an audience of would-be critics, whom they accept as peers and superiors consistent with their control over the knowledge and principles that constitute the field...[and] agree that if any challenges are forthcoming to their data, methods, or results, they will consider them thoroughly, defending or revising their positions as necessary, learning and/or teaching in the process (Lincoln 1999: 209, emphasis added).

This aspect of "displaying the processes" is also to be seen in the development of literacy, which was roughly coterminous with the development of Western philosophy and which made the processes of discourse more readily available for display and interrogation than in oral traditions. It can be seen again, later, in the triumph of the algebraists (who chose Arabic numbering) over the abacists (who stuck to Latin numbers and the use of the abacus), which likewise made the *processes* of mathematical calculation similarly available for display. That the constitutive features of rational, *logos*-style discourse were themselves worked into a *mythos* which sought to legitimate the hegemony of a particular discourse community (Plato's philosophers and their heirs) is a legitimate

caveat. The inner processes of even written discourse are never *completely* transparent, nor *entirely* self-contained, nor ever *wholly* displayed to the reader. As I said, *logos* is not in the end of a different order than mythos but a somewhat constrained modality of the same thing and liable to similar abuse. Nevertheless, the creativity of that discourse community and the power of the method they arguably abused must be recognized. Sustained inspection of the internal processes of discourse is the chief source of that scholarship that Lincoln rightly prizes, as well as of modern science.

Lincoln's analysis tellingly reveals that the authority of the *mythos* is external to the discourse itself—a man of power, a source of revelation, a divine voice, the hawk rather than the nightingale, give voice to the myth. These Lincoln refers to as "extralinguistic factors" (Lincoln 1999: 26). *Logos* on the other hand is empowered solely (or, more accurately, mainly) by its internal characteristics, its intralinguistic factors, which are precisely what can be subject to critical scrutiny. No matter the relative weakness of its source, *logos* must be convincing (or not) in and of *itself* (and this was initially thought of as its vice rather than its virtue—it allowed even the weak to produce seemingly authoritative discourse). This point of maintaining the source of authority to be inherent in the discourse itself is crucial in distinguishing the philosophical approach as a viable method distinct from the mythic but remains unspecified by any more precise paradigm. It is what distinguishes "knowledge obtained by natural reason [from]...revealed knowledge." During a conversation on the topic, Ann Taves suggested that, in this way:

> the "method" of Western philosophy could be seen as a means of transferring the propositional functions to the conscious mind in the form of verbalized rules of behavior (especially in Aristotelian logic) so as to maintain discursive coherence while encouraging the free play of implicational subsystems, that is, to maximize "good guessing" in terms of pre-paradigmatic theorizing that might lead to productive paradigms, which themselves would be seen as primarily behavioral rather than epistemological.

In Lincoln's case, he speaks of "two shifting regimes of truth: that of scholarship and that of myth" (Lincoln 1999: 211) and so, albeit somewhat modified, he perpetuates the *logos/mythos* distinction. "Those who would dispute within the mythic regime of truth do so by retelling, reinterpreting, or simply ignoring a bard's tale, those who do so within the scholarly regime check an author's citations and ask to examine the evidence" (Lincoln 1999: 211). "Footnoted discourse" can triumph over myth because it permits, encourages, demands, the kind of inspection for error and the interrogation of the internal coherence of the text which are the identifying characteristics of *logos*/scholarship/philosophical method and constitute the first effective interrogation that

identifies the "good guess." The characteristics of fallibilism and constant cross-checking are the very constitutive factors of logos and Western philosophy, and the history of Western philosophy (including its undeniable contribution to the development of Western science) is at the root of our "scholarship."[1] This is what I mean by philosophical method and it is the most valuable—although occasionally neglected—characteristic of that specific cultural tradition to which I refer as Western philosophy. It also characterizes Western philosophy by its *method*, a procedural *style* of discourse, rather than a specific discourse or theory. This is what enables the various philosophies of…science, language, mind, and, it is to be hoped, philosophy of religion(s).

What amounts to the same thing, according to philosophers like Guthrie and Peirce a characteristic of Western philosophy is the deliberate cultivation or application of doubt. That is, the attempt to prove things wrong rather than right, or at least, the refusal to insist dogmatically upon any verbal construct as accurate based only on its "authoritative" source, and the deliberate employment of the discomfort of doubt rather than the comforting fixation of belief. Of course, Socrates is the narrative—mythic—embodiment of this characteristic whose constant discomfiting interlocutions led eventually to his execution. Deference to the source of *mythos* discourages doubt and encourages the fixation of belief. The (always only attempted) derivation of the authority of logos solely from characteristics internal to the discourse means that it should be critiqued regardless of its source, and that it remains constantly open to doubt. Its internal qualities can be checked and rechecked by checking the relations of the terms of the argument.[2] As a final caveat to this part of my

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[1] There also seems to be a common misrepresentation of the generative properties of philosophical discourse based on a fallacious argument by analogy; as if philosophy may have been the "grandparent" or "ancestor" of current scientific methodology but, like a biological grandparent, it must now be spent and infertile. However, as an epistemology or methodology, philosophy itself does not "age" and does not outlive its own fertility but is more durable than biological organisms. It is capable of renewal with every new generation that chooses to apply it.

[2] One wonders if we might distinguish a "categorical" from a "hypothetical" epistemology (noting the etymological homology of epistemology and *wissenschaft*) comparable to Kant's categorical and hypothetical imperative? The method of doubt that characterizes the philosophical method, the method of seeking error rather than courting certainty, could result in hard line cynicism and skepticism; but only if one pursues a kind of "categorical epistemology" in which knowledge is seen as certain, irreducible, and of a wholly different order than opinion. However, such skepticism can be avoided if one employs a "hypothetical epistemology" in which knowledge is recognized to be based on the assumption that *if* this is known, *then* other knowledge is realistically available, but remains always uncertain, reducible, and finally of the same order as opinion no matter how much more strongly warranted. This is consistent with the claim that logos is not finally of a different order from mythos.

argument, allow me to state that I am aware of the perils of logocentrism and the phallogocentric word. In an article on "Art, Religion, and Material Culture: Some Reflections on Method," John E. Cort (1996) makes an excellent case against the logocentrism of the academy and draws attention to the logocentric bias of art history, as discussed by Donald Preziosi (1989: 44-53, 95-121). All I can say at this point is that the unquestionable logocentric bias of art history has not caused the academy to reject it *en bloc* and the flaws of the historical discourses of Western philosophy should not estrange historians of religion from its potential virtues and unquestionable influence. Flaws call for care and improvement not wholesale rejection. However, to ignore justifiable criticisms would be to allow the phallogocentric word to penetrate one's mentality entirely and become, as it were, phallocephallic.

A Philosophy of Religion That Requires No Scare Quotes

Thus armed with a traditional but carefully considered understanding of what is meant by Western philosophy and philosophical method in this context we can consider a Philosophy of Religion(s) free of scare quotes and of philosophical theology. What are the implications of these claims for a philosophical study of religion? What is within and what is beyond its remit? What are its potential outcomes? To what sort of data does it apply? How does it apply to (the study of) religions? To what particular problems/ issues/ questions in religion does it apply? What potential solutions/answers might it yield? There are many questions about religious traditions and religious behavior that can be dealt with by means of philosophical method so conceived: the implication and evaluation of the plurality of religious traditions, for example; or the question where and when do we encounter "Buddhist philosophy" or "Chinese philosophy," etc. in the sense outlined. Are religion and philosophy incommensurable or categorically distinct? What is the relationship of religion and violence (cf. de Vries 2002), or, more generally, can religion be accurately evaluated as a positive or negative contribution to culture? What is the relationship of religion and science; is there a "common core" to all religious traditions? What makes religious belief prevalent in human populations? What constitutes relevant evidence for religious claims? Silvia Mancini, a Professor of the History of Religion at Lausanne in Switzerland who teaches "Epistemology of the Study of Religions" might be seen as an example of this sort of approach. What is the relation of religion to other social constructions such as Marxist ideology (i.e., is Marxism "a religion")? Is the phenomenology of religion productive or indeed possible (cf. Jensen 2003)? What are the

implications of "neurotheology" and cognitive studies of religion (cf. Goldberg 2009)? Philosophers, such as Daniel Dennett, Owen Flanagan, and the Churchlands, have played an important role in the rise of cognitive science, by helping to think through concepts and helping experimentalists to refine their research. The efforts of Ann Taves in her *Religious Experience Reconsidered* can be seen along the same lines, although the role of the philosophical tradition is not emphasized there. It is worthy of comment that *Rethinking Religion: Connecting Cognition and Culture* (Lawson and McCauley 1990), which has been said to have launched the cognitive science of religion, was the "fruit of the exemplary collaboration between philosopher Robert N. McCauley and scholar of religion E. Thomas Lawson" (Engler and Gardiner 2009: 23—another philosophy/religious studies team). But we must also investigate—philosophically—questions such as what role does the philosophy of time and history play in religious traditions? What are the possible or potential futures of religion? How does aesthetics—the philosophy of art and beauty—contribute to our understanding of religious traditions with their deep roots in representational creations? All such issues can only be effectively dealt with assuming an understanding of logic, discourse, and rational thought, and would be enormously abetted by a sound knowledge of the history of prior treatments (tempered by a contemporary understanding of their flaws) from David Hume's *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion* and Immanuel Kant's *Religion within the Bounds of Reason Alone*, to more recent work such as *On Religion* by Derrida, Vattimo, et al. (1998).

Consider, as another example, the question of the definition of religion, endlessly rehearsed in so many settings. It has been mentioned in all of the papers in this collection. It is central to the arguments of Robert Yelle, Ann Taves, and Ivan Strenski. Von Stuckrad, whose philosophical credentials are otherwise impeccable and who recognizes that "contemporary philosophy [provides] the most interesting insights into the multi-leveled issue of reflection," was not alone in initially failing to consider that, while we might temporarily be able to do without *theoretical* or *precising* definitions, we cannot do without basic *stipulative* definitions or we literally do not know what we are talking about! We can only hope to resolve this issue with a clear understanding of the nature of definition and the differences between different types of definitions as explained by many basic introductions to logic and philosophy (e.g., Copi and Cohen 2005: ch. 4). Again, I must repeat the caveat that such studies can only be productive in the context of reliable empirical data on the history of religion. Much of the recent fulmination of the "new atheist" debate displays a disappointing ignorance of the history of religion culminating in an inaccurate identification of contemporary Western fundamentalist literalism

with "religion" *in toto*. This mistaking of a part for the whole is a fallacy of composition (Copi and Cohen: 159). Scholars trained in the tradition of Western philosophy should know better, and this serves to demonstrate that the lack of good historical knowledge is every bit as dangerous as the lack of good philosophical method. We need both.

Many of the questions raised above are already being addressed within religious studies in the areas of method and theory and discourse analysis. However, as the disciplinary "Philosophy of Religion" is hampered by its attachment to a pre-modern philosophical theology, so method and theory in the study of religion is hampered by an imperfect familiarity with both the method and the history of philosophy. That lack of familiarity often encourages a postmodern critique of philosophy that is entirely unhelpful, leading either to a debilitating skepticism regarding the potential to answer any questions about religion or to impenetrable verbosity engendered by inadequate familiarity with already existing discourse which constitutes, among other things, training in the means necessary to stating complex philosophical positions in comprehensible language. It may be a small—but it is not an insignificant—point that the observations of the academy must be made clear to the non-specialist, the undergraduate and the interested public, in order to attain any real cultural significance. The on-going separation of philosophy from method and theory in the study of religion is contributing to obfuscation rather than clarification.

An analysis of the contents of the journal *Method and Theory in the Study of Religion* for the twenty years of its publication is edifying and informative (such a review is highly to be recommended for anyone interested in these issues, it is an extremely valuable publication and its editors, past and present, are to be commended). However, a total of 58 published volumes on what are obviously philosophical topics—"Transcendental Analysis, and the Objective Study of Religion," "The Definers Defined: Traditions in the Definition of Religion," "Idealism vs. Materialism in the Study of Puritan Missions to the Indians," "Is a Phenomenology of Religion Possible?" "*Wesen und Erscheinung* in the history of the study of religion," "The Name of the Game is 'Nominalism'"—need I go on?—barely mentions philosophy. Authors invoke or involve the likes of Michel Foucault, Ernest Gellner, Daniel Dennett, David Hume, Richard Rorty, and Jacques Derrida. Yet the words "Philosophy, philosopher, philosophical" occur only eight times in all of the article titles of all 58 volumes, twice in contexts that clearly do not mean the tradition of Western philosophy as I intend it ("the Perennial Philosophy" and "a Peruvian Curandera's Philosophy of Healing") which leaves only six mentions, and interestingly enough three of these come from one author—Kevin Schilbrack

(Ryba 1991; Lohr 1999; Schilbrack 2003, 2004, 2005; Craig 2007). I think that this indicates an avoidance, conscious or unconscious of the term and a discomfort with or distrust of it. People who don't distrust it (such as Schilbrack) use it freely. Further, it must be recognized that many of those involved in this discourse are not primarily trained in philosophy: Jeppe Jensen, for example, is an Islamicist and Robert Segal's doctoral work was in the Classics as was Luther Martin's. I sincerely admire these authors, but it is indicative that so much of this philosophical work is being done by scholars not formally trained in philosophy.

So what? What does this suggest? What might be achieved? What problems might it solve? What might be done? A new Philosophy of Religion(s) must insist on its contemporary relevance and reclaim its rightful place in global and general scholarship on religion by broadening its bases to cover the application of a respectable philosophical method to *all* of the areas to which it can profitably be applied. This does not necessitate the abandonment of the traditional arguments of philosophical theology, but it does require their accurate historical contextualization within the history of philosophy and their recognition as one small component of a much larger field. In order to do this, philosophers of religion(s) must seek a broader familiarity with the data of the history of religion—all of it, not just the Western, predominantly Christian, history from which philosophical theology sprang. At the same time those historians of religion who wish to focus upon the ineluctably philosophical approach involved in considerations of method and theory and discourse analysis must overcome their superstition in the face of philosophical methodology. It is simply incorrect to confine philosophy to quasi-religious speculative metaphysics. It is historically the most productive method of research in areas in which no accepted paradigm[3] has emerged, with the greatest chance of giving rise to some such more formal ("scientific") method. When philosophical method does result in a specific and productive paradigm of thought it gives birth to a "new discipline," most evidently in the sciences, whose continuity with their philosophical forbears is, similarly, not entirely resolvable and thus does not entirely separate them from either their philosophical or mythological antecedents—hence the possibility of, for example, Paul Feyerabend's

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[3] I recognize the vagueness and potential problems of this term, even when one seeks to apply in a "strictly" Kuhnian sense. It overlaps with discourse and episteme, and even system and field, as referred to by Yelle and von Stuckrad in this issue. However, in general I intend by it a discourse and episteme resulting in a recognized methodical procedure based on an inter-related set of precise definitions understood and assumed by all practitioners that enables the "normal science" that Kuhn likened to "puzzle-solving." Before the emergence of such a paradigm, one is in the realm of a "pre-paradigmatic science," which is surely the state of any proposed "science of religion."

critique of science as religion (1975: 295-309). In the absence of such a new paradigm for the study of religion we have to continue to operate with "the best paradigm for non-paradigmatic thought" (I thank my colleague, David Goldberg, for this phrase), that is, philosophical method, which remains on a continuum between science and myth. In order to do this, scholars of religion must seek a much broader familiarity with both the nature and the history of Western philosophy (and with the skills of argument and expression that it inculcates). Courses in the Philosophy of Religion(s) so understood would be of immense utility to historians of religion and philosophers alike. They would not focus upon the likes of Thomistic or Augustinian arguments (although such philosophical theology might remain an instructive part of the history of ideas) but on the history and method of philosophy as itself the Western tradition—no doubt ineluctably entwined with Western religious traditions—that did, in fact, produce the sciences. They would focus on the application of that method to the broad history of the world's religious traditions while remaining conscious of the problems emergent from the very act of identifying such traditions. According to the *OED*, "Natural Philosophy" is now more usually called "science" (definition #3, n. 2 above). So any "science of religion" could equally be called the natural philosophy of religion, or as I would prefer, the History and Philosophy of Religion(s). Such a discipline would educate philosophers about religion and scholars of religion about philosophy. Such an approach would, it is be hoped, familiarize scholars with the empirical data that they require, alert them to the fallacies of reasoning that they should avoid, and, by avoiding the fallacy of utterly irreducible categories (the philosopher of science, Peter Machamer, has suggested that "we must deny that eliminative reduction is even a possibility," 2009: 358) it should reduce the tendency to fall into mutually hostile camps encouraging instead mutual empathy and accurate understanding as rational beings engaged in fundamentally similar enterprises.

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