

How I made my ‘study of religion’ “religious”¹

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The title is purposely provocative. The study of religion, since its inception in the 19th century, has been one long, confused (and confusing) tug of war fueled by the modern demand to separate religious thought from the science of religion. The former is sometimes called theology, sometimes derogatorily “metaphysics”, the latter religious studies or simply academic study of religion. We do well to separate both pursuits from what Hillary Rodrigues and John S. Harding (2009, 6-9) call “religious education,” which seems to be coupled with theology in their otherwise respectable pursuit of an autonomous science of religion. Although theology can loosely be defined as “education by believers for believers”—Rodrigues’s and Harding’s description of the teaching and practice of religion—it encompasses far more. One might think, for example, of apologetics, which, broadly speaking, is insiders’ appreciation of the world around them, how faith answers the concerns of their culture and times. Academic theology is another example, which includes an interfaith discussion in pursuit of what David Ford (2010, 94, italics his) describes as “*wisdom in relation to questions, such as those of meaning, truth, beauty and practice, which are raised by, about and between the religions and are pursued through engagement with a range of academic disciplines.*” It goes without saying that the decision to disengage theology and “metaphysics” from religious studies closes the door on proposals as my own. This is largely because I flirt with subjectivity in an environment playing catch-up with the natural sciences. My view is to push past the understanding that religion remain an object of study and not a practice in and through study (cf. Rodrigues and Harding 2009, 10, 44-48).

Returning to the provocation of the title now for some context. By enclosing the study of religion in single quotation marks I am being specific about the field in question that takes religion as its object. By personalizing the phrase (“my”) I mean to be explicit that this is how I do religious studies, not at all sanguine that my views will be endorsed. This also speaks to the scare quotes surrounding the word “religious”. Again, I mean something specific. My designation leans on the spirit of the term (pun intended) without the associations commonly attached to it. “Spiritual” could quite easily replace it, but I choose otherwise in disapproval of the common sentiment: “I’m spiritual, not religious.” While I understand the reasoning, I’m not satisfied by it. Being spiritual has an institutional presence, even if imagined as less rigid than traditional religion. This is also my “No” to the view that Buddhism or Christianity represent the truth and are not religion. While I respect this reasoning as well, study of the truth in religious studies does not commit us to such an understanding. That is theology. To be clear, then: I mean doing religion with my religious studies hat on, which is neither theology as apologetics nor as academic, although I am friendly toward both.

¹ I wrote this blog largely for students who wrestle with the significance of my treatment of and emphasis on theory in the study of religion. The religion or simply meaning connection is not always clear to them, except for the historical and hence problematic “orientalist” subject-matter. It has forced me to be more explicit about the existential nature of my practice over the years. An article for peer review is on the horizon. This blog is only a quick explanatory reference for purposes of pedagogy, transparency.

In my classes, to distinguish it from religious education and theology, I have been nominating the aspect of religious studies I advocate as “ideology critique”. I suspect this placates students’ and colleagues’ fears given the currency of the term thanks to so-called cultural Marxism. I might rekindle some of those fears, however, when I add that my proposal requires something *more* be done than simply subjecting ideologies to an academic, critical gaze.² Even kinder views of ideology as descriptive, as “gaining self-consciousness about human meaning making” (Roberts 2005, 371), does not make the cut for me. In the context of identity formation in religious studies, such an understanding typically attaches to a naturalism closed off to the influence of *religious* meaning making. A top-down influence is prohibited on that elevator. It only goes up. I need it to go down as well.

I never completely bought into that otherwise useful bottom-up story, which oddly also means it impacted me deeply. I am something of a recovering skeptic. I am recuperating from the onslaught of “never-ending critique” (Lease 1998, 377-378), that stern scholarly master refusing entry to unmeasurable insight. That kind of skepticism effectively shuts down what led me to the university in the first place: open inquiry with spiritual intent. I am reclaiming for myself a comparatively healthier skepticism that puzzles over the transmundane and how such puzzling can purge falsificationism of false modesty. I have given voice to this over the years recently assembled in a book currently at press (“Toward a Philosophy of Religious Studies: Enestatic Explorations”). However, my aim is to personalize it even more here, to be as explicit as I can about the how and why of my procedure.

Oddly enough, this later development emerged as I obsessed over a field of study this past year dedicated to understanding NDEs (near-death experiences). I had, of course, encountered the phenomenon many years prior, even taught a class on it, but I couldn’t give it the attention I and pockets of the scientific community believe it deserves; I had a dissertation to write! The connection is also sutured to my interest in method and courses I taught on the interface of science and religion. Study of the NDE overlaps with these broader methodological issues. It’s what caught my attention as I targeted normative issues³ through the often-stuffy material that I teach—stuffy, that is, to students unaware why theory and method in religious studies is something to be excited about. It’s my porn, as I often jest. Bent on a philosophy of religious studies, the aim, I discovered, was to learn how to carve out a proper subject-matter, a tradition of study, and how engagement with it exemplifies or parallels what the naturalist accent excludes: religious-like sentiment. That may be fine for the naturalist religion scholar, but philosophers of religion are free to enhance the significance of study. They are, after all, philosophers, and if Pierre Hadot (1995, 83) is right, philosophy is about life, all of life:

[Philosophy] is a concrete attitude and determinate life-style, which engages the whole of existence. The philosophical act is not situated merely on the cognitive level, but on

² See Tyler Roberts (2018) for four types of criticism, the last of which I, too, seek to incorporate in my study of religion: “reverence as critical responsiveness”.

³ On the importance of explicit normative engagement in philosophy of religion, what I call philosophy of religious studies, see Kanaris 2022.

that of the self and of being. It is a progress which causes us to *be* more fully, and makes us better. It is a person who goes through it. It raises the individual from an inauthentic condition of life, darkened by unconsciousness and harassed by worry, to an authentic state of life, in which he attains self-consciousness, an exact vision of the world, inner peace, and freedom. (Hadot 1995, 83)

“It is a person who goes through it.” Enter the NDE. I am thinking here specifically of physicians, neurosurgeons, etcetera, who have undergone the experience and the non-NDEr scientists open to non-reductive explanations of their significance, their value for those of us who haven’t had an NDE.⁴ They all speak of a change in them because of the experience or investigation of it, a conversion, we may say, from one way of being and thinking to another. Positioned similarly as an academic, this orientation resonates with me. I sit relatively comfortably in both camps, their orientations, even though I haven’t had an NDE. As a young man of 18 years, I had a similarly classed experience called an STE (spiritually transformative experience). However the experience may be explained, it changed the course of my life in radical ways. It mattered and, fortuitously, continues to matter to me, which I cannot simply dismiss based on this or that explanation, religious and/or naturalist. One often hears similar sentiments expressed by near-death experiencers, except vacillation tends to occur more with the spiritually transformative experiencers. The STE tends to lack the imprimatur of a post-mortem experience that supplies NDErs with their unshakable convictions.

To cut to the chase, I will characterize my STE simply in terms of two fundamental elements in the Greyson NDE Scale: the experience of unity with God/universe, the interconnectedness of all things, and being unconditionally loved. The experience was soon framed by rather rigid evangelical perspectives that led me to the university. I needed a broader perspective, learning much, in my case, about the Christian heritage and its inextricable, precarious relationship to the western intellectual tradition, the tradition that birthed comparative religious studies. Whatever vacillation occurred—and God knows it occurred many times!—I came to distinguish my STE from the frameworks that simultaneously nurtured and deposed it. A protective strategy? Perhaps. However, I like to see it as a way of owning rather than suppressing and repressing the experience in search of the “unadulterated” truth provided by this or that explanation. What this provided is an ability to view engagement with theory and method—study, in a word—as a kind of spiritual (“religious”) exercise, a peculiar asceticism of self-care housed in and by the university. What birthed me to a career in religious studies was precisely this, although luxury of hindsight conveniently masks the anguish that led up to it. For this and other reasons, the idea is completely foreign to me that theorizing about religion is the furthest thing from religion, positively or negatively construed.

⁴ Individuals who make up this community include Raymond Moody, Bruce Greyson, Pim van Lommel, Mary Neal, Jeffrey Long, Eben Alexander, Ian Stevenson, Marjorie Woollacott, Edward F. and Emily Williams Kelly, Sam Parnia, and John Martin Fischer, to name a few of the well-known figures. A Google search will quickly reveal their voluminous contributions.

Lest I be misunderstood, I do not mean that an STE is required to study religion in this way, only that it was my experience that later furnished this newfound appreciation. Just as an NDE is not prerequisite for an STE, so too an STE is not prerequisite to engage in the study of religion along the lines proposed by Alexander Nehemas (1998), namely, as an “art of living” paraphrased in terms of a contribution to one’s spiritual view of the world. I take my cue now from the work of colleagues in the scientific community. Their research into NDEs changed their outlook on life. It caused them to reassess, in certain cases to jettison, the still dominant materialist philosophy. My practice of philosophy of religious studies is similarly structured. I seek an understanding of the frameworks that configure religion to assess the outlook implicit in them, whether they enhance or unnecessarily mar my developing experience of the world. In other words, I value my object of analysis, specifically the theorizers of religion, the second-order tradition of religious studies, and learn what I can from them about their object of study. When such outlooks are ontologized, that is, when ontology capitulates to method, I negotiate the value of the production as an issue of soul formation, a kind of spiritual warfare, to put it a little boisterously. The philosopher calls this dialectic, the saint a struggle against spiritual forces (Eph. 6:12). What runs through my telescope are flat ontologies claiming to tell it like it is.

In terms of philosophy of religious studies, how far can one take this? How can one honor what the field aims to facilitate, namely, study of a wide variety of phenomena, free from the constraints of religious traditions. David Ford (quoted earlier) and others have put forward models that qualify, in my estimation, as a subset of normative reflection in philosophy of religious studies.⁵ However, I believe something more general is required in a context friendly toward pluralism sans modernist pretensions (see Barnes 2005). To invoke NDE research one last time, Bruce Greyson, Professor Emeritus of Psychiatry and Neurobehavioral Sciences at the University of Virginia, and John Martin Fischer, Distinguished Professor of Philosophy at the University of California, serve as useful examples for my delineation. Greyson is a leading expert on NDEs having worked 50 years on the subject and is co-founder of IANDS (The International Association for Near Death Studies).⁶ Fischer, interested in the phenomenon for about a decade, has become something of an expert in the field, having directed and administered a three-year Immortality Project funded by the John Templeton Foundation that produced more than a hundred books and published articles. I will speak to Fischer’s contribution first since it is the more modest of the two in terms of metaphysical reach.

Fischer is quite magnanimous for his treatment of the significance of NDEs. He advocates their potential for meaning in this life without necessarily endorsing the metaphysical beliefs often communicated in them concerning the hereafter. He reiterates the common elements of positive NDEs, most significantly angelic, familial, and other beings escorting the dying through some passageway (a tunnel, a river, a meadow) toward complete serenity and/or (an) indescribable (being of) light and unconditional love. Because Fischer neither has had an NDE

⁵ See also Ninian Smart (1996) and more recently Paula Cooley (2002) and Sheila Greeve Davaney (2002).

⁶ For purposes of this brief sketch, I have summarized and selected elements from presentations by Greyson and Fischer available on YouTube, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=p7Clv7NkQF8> and <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FgqAYtXfP9c&t=16s> respectively.

nor shares the metaphysical beliefs of many who have, he nonetheless esteems their value for the potential comfort they provide in facing the inevitable. To paraphrase, it is the arch-liminal experience communicated in the form of narrative—Fischer calls it a “travel log”. It extrapolates from the oversight we receive in this life from family and friends during significant events to the capstone existential rite of passage: death. Even those who have reported negative NDEs serve to provide some positive outcome for a meaningful life, namely, how the negative NDE, if it does not completely incapacitate or continue to fuel indifference, teaches us the importance of living more mindfully, more compassionately. That’s as far as Fischer can take us as a self-designated secular individual. Would that fellow secularists follow his example! The takeaway is this. One can study the religious objectively and be self-involved, directly impacted by what is examined. One may not embrace all aspects of the phenomenon, but knowledge of it need not sit in judgment of it or explain it away because it doesn’t conform to one’s conceptions of reality. Fischer is inspired by NDEs, imbibing what he can from them as he seeks to make the world a more meaningful place.

Greyson admits more into his metaphysical bag, so to speak. However, as an inexperience himself, namely, as one who has not had an NDE, his thinking is of the variety that remains cautious about the particulars. It boils down to NDEs having changed his mind about death, that it is not the end of consciousness, and that their value consists in applying their meaning to life and reducing suffering. Fischer is demure about the former, although he would like to live forever provided some exit proviso exists should immortality become burdensome. At any rate, something Greyson heard from the Dalai Lama at a conference in 2011 on cosmology and consciousness caused Greyson to be more enthusiastic to air out the science of NDEs, to make it more than a “respectable” fact-finding enterprise. The Dalai Lama drew a parallel between western science and Buddhism. Both, Greyson reportedly states, are based on observation and logical deduction. Both give precedence to experience over belief (a point I made earlier about my newfound appreciation of my STE and how it serves normatively in search of a philosophy of religious studies). But, Greyson continues, the Dalai Lama also noted that western scientists seek an understanding of how the world works to change and control the natural world, to gain mastery over it. Buddhists, on the other hand, seek an understanding of how the world works to live more harmoniously with it, to co-exist with nature rather than gain mastery over it. In a word, to reduce suffering. Greyson then drops a bombshell:

That distinction made me question what I do as a researcher, why I do it, and what purpose it serves. It changed my thinking when I start a project from what might this research tell us about how the world works to how might this research reduce suffering in the world.⁷

Effectively, Greyson expands on his perspective as a scientist by augmenting the task of explaining NDEs, their causes and phenomenology, with a search for their values and implications. “What do they tell us about how to live and about how to die?”⁸ He follows this

⁷ Greyson, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=p7Clv7NkQF8> starting at 16:45.

⁸ Greyson, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=p7Clv7NkQF8> starting at 18:03.

with a string of other questions about the mind-brain relation, which seem to be tied to the work he seeks to augment. In any case, the value question he underlines surfaces an important takeaway that I find at the heart of both application *and* theory.

Fruitful parallels dawn the philosophy of religious studies. In acquiring knowledge of religion from the vantage point of theorists, the philosopher of religious studies can negotiate the assumptions that frame a research project. Like Fischer, we may place limits on the beliefs in a particular theory by emphasizing how they contribute to our experience of the world. A simple illustration is in order. Freud's idea of the superego sits well with me, someone who has had an STE, when it unearths the detrimental nature of my punishing projections. In other words, it undergirds a prescription Meister Eckhart puts in the form of a prayer: "I pray God to rid me of God." However, I reserve the right to dismiss the explanatory efficacy of Freud's insight that ontologically God *is* nothing but the God I want to rid myself of. Here Theodore Flournoy's "principle of the exclusion of transcendence" serves the theorist well when assessing the nature and meaning of religious belief psychologically.⁹ Note, too, the focus of the engagement. It cultivates a perspective that does not rely directly or specifically on the religious discourses scholarly discussion aims to illuminate, namely, first-order religious traditions (Christianities, Buddhisms, etc.). To pray "God rid me of God" is not to invoke the specificities that divide monotheisms. In the context of this conversation, it is a comment, put religiously, on the source of dangerous projections commonly identified as ego. Iconoclasm comes in many sizes and shapes. This is another limit analogous to the procedure one finds in Greyson and Fischer. Again, while I have nothing against such direct implementation of first-order religious beliefs and in fact condone it when donning the academic-theology hat, this is not the primary difficult task of philosophy of religious studies as I understand it. We are seeking analysis of and edification in the theorizing of religion as we apply it in a quest to better ourselves and the human situation.

The spiritual practice advocated here is of a peculiar sort. It functions at the level of scientific explanation and phenomenological description, addressing properly basic beliefs that furnish methods and their accompanying theories apropos of the religious phenomenon. That's one sort of engagement, a "struggle with spiritual forces" that would frame our world, shape our experience. Another is application, to gain some self-betterment, self-transcendence, from such engagement in the hopes of alleviating suffering, ideational and existential. If the academic study of religion excludes such engagement, I will have to work harder at finding reasons to teach it.

⁹ The principle of the exclusion of transcendence is what its author of psychology says: exclude comment on the reality of objects of religious concern when psychologizing about religion. See David Wulff 2005, 48.

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