

Reading Tea Leaves, Drinking Tea: Four Transformations in Philosophy of Religion

Wesley J. Wildman, Boston University

Abstract

global transformation (multi-religious including non-belief), critical transformation, multidisciplinary transformation, practical transformation; informed by recent field-wide studies of PoR

Introduction

Ask yourself: Why is philosophy of religion so rarely about *religion in all its complexity* (as articulated in the academic study of religion generally) but rather typically focuses narrowly on worldview beliefs, often limited to a particular religious tradition (usually Christianity) or set of religious traditions (usually theisms)? Why is philosophy of religion operating at such a distance from *critical theories* of every kind that are ascendant in other parts of the contemporary academy? Why is philosophy of religion so *slow to respond to developments in other university disciplines* that are highly relevant to the understanding of religion, from fundamental physics to evolutionary biology, from cognitive neuroscience to political economy, and from cultural history to literary theory? When was the last time a philosopher of religion made an influential contribution to public discourse on any subject in North Atlantic cultures, *as a philosopher of religion*?

While you are at it, ask yourself why university positions specializing in and named for philosophy of religion are *drying up* in North Atlantic cultures.

The first four of these questions draw attention to transformations well underway within the academy in many parts of the world and around the borders of philosophy of religion itself. The final question points to one of the prices paid by philosophy of religion for being so slow to recognize and respond to these transformations. This essay – and it is an essay, an exploration, a musing, rather than a technical analysis of something or other – meditates on these four transformations as markers of the future that philosophy of religion must navigate in the future. But this exercise in reading tea leaves is not enough to address the problems our discipline faces. We actually need to drink the tea, to change the way we operate. If we don't, we'll perish within serious academic contexts and philosophy of religion will be reinvented in another generation by people who do it better than us and are more worthy of the designation *philosopher of religion*. They'll look back on us as squandering our birthright in exchange for the comfort of doing things that feel familiar despite their increasing irrelevance.

You may be able to detect from the tone of this opening that I am provoked by the failure of our field to step into the light of the global, critical, multidisciplinary, practical (GCMP) orientation that I think defines the conditions for its long-term survival and value. My perception is informed by investing the last five years in studying philosophy of religion as an academic field, striving to understand how it works and why it is slow to change. At one level the answer is obvious: philosophers of religion are seriously talented people with plenty to do, and a GCMP orientation just isn't in their bailiwick. The blog-based discussions I've sponsored at PhilosophyOfReligion.org show just how good their minds are. They have generated first-rate insights into what philosophy of religion is, what norms define high

quality work in the field, and what its role in the wider academy might be. In light of those impressive contributions by so many professional philosophers of religion, I have fallen in love with my home field all over again. But that has only amplified my concern. Why are the large majority of these super-smart, super-good people utterly failing to reverse the dismaying trend of their marginalization within today's academy?

The answer is painful but, I think, painfully true: we are applying our beautiful minds to the wrong subjects, not learning from the wider academy about how we could do our work better, and failing to see how we are perceived more broadly within the few parts of the academy that still pay any attention to our work. As a group – demographically speaking, if you like, which allows for exceptions – we are brilliant but comfortable, unconsciously clinging to the security of tenured professorial positions, depending on the implicit institutional support of religious organizations, and failing to read the tea leaves. The few who do read accurately don't usually drink the tea. The very few who do drink the tea are regarded by their colleagues as having drunk Kool-Aid instead. So we are getting nowhere fast. And while we spin our wheels, most lines formerly named for philosophy of religion in both religion and philosophy departments open due to retirements but more often than not are transformed into something else – another branch of philosophy, another areas-studies focus within the academic study of religion – and the philosophy of religion positions continue to dry up.

Are we really going to stand by and watch this happen?

In addition to experience and countless discussions and panels on the future of philosophy of religion with a rich variety of colleagues, two sources of data guide the interpretation offered here.

- First, the Values in the Study of Religion (VISOR) project generated data from 704 specialists in the study of religion, 499 of whom completed an Academic Identity survey, in which they identified their academic specialization and their professional associated affiliations. Six major specialization categories were identified (Ethics, Groups, Histories, Ideas, Minds, Texts) and 108 respondents identified the Ideas category as their academic home; that category includes 35 philosophers of religion based on professional association data.
- Second, invited professional philosophers of religion presented their thoughts on specified topics at PhilosophyOfReligion.org, and these blogs, as well as the entire collection of 621 philosophers of religion in the site's database, generate many valuable insights. A total of 51 philosophers blogged about the question "What is the philosophy of religion?" and we have detailed information about their thoughts.¹

VISOR presents powerful evidence of the drying up of philosophy of religion positions, confirming experience. Respondents born in the 1950s or earlier are represented in the VISOR sample to the same degree both inside philosophy of religion (31.4%) and outside (32.1%). For people born in the 1960s or later, however, there is a precipitous decline within philosophy of religion. For example, respondents born in the 1970s or later amount to 2.9% inside philosophy of religion and 23.3% outside – the difference is a shocking factor of 8. The shrinkage problem is real, not merely paranoid perception. The

¹ Wesley J. Wildman and David Rohr, "North American Philosophers of Religion: How They See Their Field," in Paul Draper and John Schellenberg, eds., *Renewing Philosophy of Religion: Exploratory Essays* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2017): 133-153.

preliminary challenge is to understand it. The ultimate challenge is to rethink the field of philosophy of religion.

The Global Transformation

Two groups of philosophers of religion endorse truth in advertising. One is the Society of Christian Philosophers (SCP), who frankly identify themselves and their work as being from and for Christianity. The other is the more marginalized crew of philosophers who actually take religion, as understood within the academic study of religion, to be their subject matter; they are the global philosophers of religion (GPR).

The SCP group is in ongoing dialogue primarily with the Christian doctrinal tradition, focuses almost exclusively on beliefs, and is distinguished from systematic Christian theology mainly by the (typically) analytical philosophical tools employed. This is a well-trodden path, the approach is socially stable with lineages of discussion clearly identified, and some tertiary institutions consistently hire philosophers of the SCP kind.

The GPR group is in dialogue with the academic study of religion, and thus takes beliefs, practices, experiences, and the embodied and embedded aspects of religions to be the relevant subject matters for philosophy of religion. They are younger, often not Christian and often idiosyncratically religious or not religious at all, typically trained in religious studies as well as philosophy, and striving for reform within the field. Their research is methodologically diverse and the entire effort is relatively new so there are fewer clearly identified lineages of discussion and debate.

Aside from the SCP and GPR philosophers, there is a group of philosophers of religion who neither belong to the SCP nor deal with the academic study of religion. They are as cognitively obsessed with beliefs as the SCP group but, despite mostly identifying as Christian, they are more likely to focus on theism in general than on Christianity specifically. A few focus on other religious traditions, including non-theistic traditions, and a few are atheist and are interested in non-belief. These folk are typically trained in philosophy departments, they are age-tilted toward tenured professors and away from newly minted PhDs, and their positions are most likely not going to be filled with a philosopher of religion when they depart. I'll call them traditional philosophers of religion (TPR).

I believe it is fair to ask: Who among these three groups is entitled to employ the phrase "philosophy of religion" to describe their work? This is a particularly urgent question when considering hiring realities within religion departments, which are exquisitely sensitive to deployments of the word "religion." I think the answer here is that only GPR philosophers can reasonably apply the phrase to themselves. But the first year of blog entries at PhilosophyOfReligion.org (N=51) shows how few positions are held by the GPR crew: less than 6% of respondents gave significant hints of a global orientation to philosophy of religion.

It is difficult to know what happens in faculty meetings when a position formerly designated for philosophy of religion comes up for discussion due to a faculty departure. Philosophy departments are interested in philosophers, above all, with the quality of philosophical work judged in different ways depending on which philosophical traditions are most highly valued within the department. It is a stretch for most of them to hire junior faculty graduating from a religious studies program specializing in philosophy of religion, which is where you find most of the GPR philosophers. It is also a stretch in many places to hire a philosopher from the SCP group because the "from and for Christianity" dimension of

such a hire may be inconsistent with a prevailing departmental identity of secular-academic philosophy. But SCP philosophers can still get jobs in the venues explicitly or implicitly organized around Christian confessional commitments.

Meanwhile, religion departments, especially in trend-setting research universities, are rarely hiring philosophers of religion because the presence of SCP and the neglect of religious-studies interests within philosophy of religion means that the field operates in a very different way than secular, academic religious studies. SCP graduates can sometimes get jobs in religious departments, but typically only in venues where philosophy and religion are still studied together, which means not in research universities. GPR graduates are far more likely to get jobs in religion departments, including in research-university settings, except that the SCP orientation has poisoned the pool for everyone so most newly open lines are redirected to an area-studies topic, which fits the religious-studies orientation better.

Demographically speaking, the TPR group is dying out. The SCP group is sufficiently socially stable and institutional viable that it is producing younger scholars but the number of SCP philosophers with tenured positions is slowly contracting as the ideals of the secular academy steadily spread from research universities to the more diverse world of liberal arts colleges. The globally minded GPR group is young and eager for a revolution. They alone address religion in all its richness and complexity. But they are outsized and battling uphill against the placement realities described above.

Here is a projection based on the foregoing: If the philosophy of religion is to survive as a university field, it will be because the transformation to a global approach takes over. This will require religion departments to distinguish appropriately between philosophy of religion as covert Christian ideology and philosophy of religion as global in scope and not solely cognitivist in orientation – and that is likely to occur in the long run. It will also require philosophy departments to embrace a more global orientation – that is already happening and is very likely to continue, quite apart from the dynamics of the sub-field of philosophy of religion. Thus, we are in a transition period where the global transformation in philosophy and the secular transformation in the academic study of religion are both part-way through. Only GPR can survive both transformations so they define the future of the philosophy of religion, at least in this respect.

The Critical Transformation

The global transformation is underway but currently thwarted, a revolution held in check. Something similar can be said of the rise of critical consciousness within philosophy of religion. The Anglo-American analytic tradition of philosophy has been slow to engage critical theory in its manifold forms. The American pragmatist tradition has done better but it is the Continental tradition that leads the way. The critical transformation as it relates specifically to philosophy of religion springs from European philosophers and has been spreading through the English-speaking world thanks to translations of writings from those European luminaries.

Critical theory springs from the dawning awareness that our cultural practices and moral norms are socially constructed. The social construction of cultural reality has enormous effects on every aspects of human life. It operates reflexively to reduce cognitive load for people navigating the inter-personal intricacies of culture, increasing the evolutionary viability of a cultural formation. It centralizes authority and power both to optimize efficiency of social problem-solving and to consolidate privileged access to social and material benefits. It is difficult to detect because it is habituated through learning and

training, though some aspects of it are easier to detect for those who may suffer when power is deployed at their expense. It is reinforced through narratives related to cultural identity and cosmologized religious worldviews, and through a variety of means of social control including punishment for dissenters. It is hard to change for all these reasons: it is useful, it marshals social power, it is hidden, and it hijacks resources for reinforcement.

The critical turn in a variety of fields, including both philosophy and the academic study of religion, pivots on this awareness and then spins to confront one situation after another where the side effects of our socially constructed world are sources of great suffering – especially when redressing the problem involves confronting ignorant privilege and unjust power. The imperative driving the critical turn is natural one, I think – alleviate suffering and increase fairness – but, historically speaking, German philosopher Karl Marx was one of the first to associate the unmasking of our socially constructed worlds and revolutionary commitments to mitigating suffering and increasing justice. The Marxist lineage in critical theory is unmistakable, though endorsement of Marxist political systems is relatively rare. We can't live without socially constructed worlds and we can't live with their unjust consequences so we must balance advantages against disadvantages by mounting critiques aimed at greater fairness and ultimately by building critical feedback systems that regulate socially constructed worlds more effectively.

Once our consciousness is raised and we learn to see the social construction of reality – how it works, how it is maintained, its sometimes horrific side effects, its cheating heart in the form of privilege, its brutal neglect of the downtrodden – it is natural for philosophers to want to join the fight on the side of the vulnerable against their oppressors. Many philosophers have joined the fight, in their distinctively head-heavy ways, though it is fought on many fronts simultaneously. Marx battled over economic injustice and exploitation, but it wasn't long before feminist philosophers took up arms, and soon after that the themes of racism and colonialism came into the sights of justice-minded philosophers. Then came eco-justice and a new wave of thinking about economic justice. Within the academic study of religion, the very category of "religion" came under fire as it dawned on specialists that it is fraught with colonialist pretensions and distortions. Some even refuse to use the word for these reasons, in a kind of ascetic moral protest, even though we do appear to need such a category. This line of critique is slowly filtering into philosophy of religion, at least among the globally minded GPR crew, who deeply engage academic religious studies.

When religion departments consider philosophers of religion as candidates for open professorial positions, they often have in mind (among many other considerations) the responsiveness of these candidates to issues related to critical theory. This mindset is fairly widespread within religion departments at the present time and they naturally seek compatible outlooks in their new colleagues. What do they find? How does philosophy of religion appear to religion experts as far as its critical consciousness is concerned?

- VISOR respondents from the Ideas category looked like the other categories regarding mean birth year (1961), percentage of Caucasians (84.3%), affluence, religious orthodoxy, and religious service attendance. They were politically a bit more conservative than the rest of the pool, which leans left; they had the lowest percentage of women (30.6%) and were more interested in religion than average.

- Narrowing the focus to self-identified members of scholarly associations related to philosophy of religion, the philosophers of religion are almost twice as likely to be tenured as others (because they are older, despite the age parity in the Ideas category described above, and because so few young philosophers of religion are winning tenure-track jobs), they are half as likely as others to be women (20% versus 41%), they are more affluent than others (possibly an effect of the gender wage gap in academia), they are only slightly less likely to be Caucasian (80.0% versus 86.4%), they are much more likely to regard religion as important (93.8% versus 74.4%), and they are dominantly from the Northeast region of the USA (24.3% versus 14.9%).
- At PhilosophyOfReligion.org, 19.6% of respondents to the first-year blog invitation were female; of the entire list of 621 professional philosophers of religion listed on the site, 20.0% are female – less than half the rate in the academic study of religion as a whole.
- Digging deeper to detect the presence of critical theory within philosophy of religion, the first year of blog entries at PhilosophyOfReligion.org (N=51) showed zero hints of significant presence of critical theory in conversation with philosophy, from gender to race, and from post-colonialism to eco-justice. Rather, the leading controversies engaged were apologetics (for and against), arguments for an agent's God's existence, the adequacy of rationality, and religious language and meaning. All good topics, but in practice not reflective of the critical turn.

It appears that the critical turn has not taken hold among many established professional philosophers of religion and, given the age distribution, probably never will. The great pile of textbooks introducing philosophy of religion confirms the lack of interest in critical theory, as well as the merely peripheral engagement with global philosophy and global religion. By contrast, many in the youngest generation, those philosophers struggling to access the rapidly contracting pool of available professorial positions in philosophy of religion, have made the critical turn. These include the philosophers working in the American Academy of Religion's Global Critical Philosophy of Religion group, trying to create a new type of introductory textbook and struggling to realize a transformation in the field. They are outnumbered and relatively liminal in terms of their presence within the field. But they are far more in tune with the critical and global transformations in both philosophy generally and the academic study of religion, and thus more likely to represent the future of the field in the long run.

The Multidisciplinary Transformation

Even less developed than the global and critical transformations within philosophy of religion is the multidisciplinary transformation. This transformation is one of the most prominent features within the contemporary academy, with experts striving to address problems with multidisciplinary methods because those problems remain intractable with tools from any single university discipline. In particular, the field of philosophy boasts many multidisciplinary entanglements, with generative analyses of the human and natural sciences within the philosophy of science, penetrating engagement with neuroscience and artificial intelligence in philosophy of mind, and profound engagements with mathematics, logic, computer science, political theory, ecology, medicine, and a host of other disciplinary domains. This multidisciplinary orientation is only broadening as philosophers incorporate empirical perspectives into their arguments and allow all forms of knowledge to deepen their interpretations.

The philosophy of religion specialization lags far behind both the field of philosophy and the university world as a whole. There is almost no sign of a multidisciplinary orientation in the first year of blogs at

PhilosophyofReligion.org on “What is philosophy of religion?” Even the second year’s blogs on “What can philosophy of religion contribute to the university?” rarely endorse multidisciplinary engagement, focusing instead on the capacity of philosophy of religion to help clarify concepts and evaluate the validity and soundness of arguments – in short, teaching students how to think. While philosophy of religion certainly does that, there is every reason to think that most of the topics engaged within the field would benefit from the wealth of information on those topics generated across the entire spectrum of university disciplines. But it is not easy to detect that promise in introductory philosophy of religion textbooks. Philosophers of religion seem willing to talk in detail about the human condition without incorporating insights from biology and medicine; similarly, they are willing to talk about belief in God without dealing with the earth-shaking developments in cognitive science and evolutionary theory that help to explain the emergence and sustenance of such beliefs, regardless of their accuracy.

The academic study of religion is far more hesitant than philosophy about multidisciplinary but it is doing much better than philosophy of religion as a field. Religious studies see itself as dominantly a humanities discipline, despite the fact that humanities disciplines currently generate only half of the literature on religion each year, with the other half coming from scientific approaches or multidisciplinary methods that integrate scientific findings. That’s a serious problem for the future of the academic study of religion, but the problem applies equally to philosophy of religion, so I’ll deal with it at that level. Considered as a strictly humanities venture, academic religious studies is highly multidisciplinary, with history, languages, text-studies, cultural anthropology, political science, and the theoretical wing of sociology richly engaged. Humanities religion scholars routinely engage fellow humanities scholars in relevant disciplines and the work produced is of higher quality because of those connections. While stretching to the natural sciences, medicine, brain sciences, psychological sciences, and the empirical wing of sociology is routine for some scholars of religion, they are few in number and rarely located in departments of religious studies. But philosophers of religion are no better on that score and rarely even engage humanities disciplines, beyond the interest that historians of philosophy sometimes have in social history (not strong enough, according to social historians).

Is there a price paid for this neglect of multidisciplinary within philosophy of religion? Judging from religious studies, philosophy, and the university as a whole, the answer is obviously yes. Even theology is intensively multidisciplinary compared with philosophy of religion! But don’t philosophers deal exclusively with arguments? How could detailed knowledge of evolutionary biology and medicine possibly help a philosopher of religion working on arguments about human nature? How is cognitive science supposed to help a philosopher of religion in talking about the origins and persuasiveness of religious beliefs? I consider it a tragedy, and a travesty, that such questions appear to require patient answers. Even for the most analytically minded philosophers, translating an argument into symbolic logic to evaluate its validity is an activity fraught with hermeneutical complexities, all of which commit the philosopher to relevant forms of multidisciplinary engagement. Evaluating the soundness of arguments involves judging their premises, which is a similarly complex hermeneutical undertaking involving evidence weighing and necessarily presupposes multidisciplinary perspectives. When philosophers venture beyond sheer analysis of arguments to offering interpretations of subject matters related to religion, which is common especially in the American and Continental traditions, the multidisciplinary entanglements and corresponding criteria for excellence of interpretation are even more intense.

The university as a whole, philosophy as a whole, humanities religious studies as a whole, and the scientific study of religion as a whole are *not wrong about this*: multidisciplinary engagement is critical for excellence in all domains of human inquiry at the present time. This applies to philosophy of religion, too. Yet, with some notable and welcome exceptions, most philosophers in our field are non-responsive to the multidisciplinary transformation. What's worse is that the younger generation of philosophers among the globally, critically minded GPR crew are little more advanced in this respect than their older colleagues who hold the steadily evaporating pool of tenured positions in philosophy of religion. Witness the near-absence of multidisciplinary reflection within the Global Critical Philosophy of Religion group within the American Academy of religion: even these young guns, fully on board with the global and critical transformations, are mostly out of step with the multidisciplinary transformation underway in the contemporary research university.

This is a reason to think that philosophy of religion just won't make it – in the specific sense that we won't succeed in reversing the dramatic contraction of available positions – and will have to reinvented at some point in the future by philosophers who take multidisciplinary as seriously as contemporary universities do. Yet, if we take a cue from the younger generation of philosophers, who have embraced the multidisciplinary transformation, it ought to be possible for younger philosophers of religion to do the same.

The Practical Transformation

The final transformation for discussion here is triggered by critical-theoretic analysis of university cultures within their wider societies. What roles do universities play in the wider culture? Clearly, they *extend the base of knowledge* that defines one dimension of richness of human cultures, alongside art, music, cuisine, literature, and a host of other dimensions. Building this base of knowledge and understanding are vital achievements and make cultures worth protecting. This is why events from the destruction of the Alexandrian Library during the Roman Empire to the looting of Iraqi museums in 2003 were such calamitous tragedies. But there is more to university relevance than this: some aspects of university research also *solve problems*. This is most obvious in medicine, public health, engineering, and clinical psychology but the practical relevance of university research for solving pressing social problems is evident in a wide variety of disciplines, to different degrees.

One of the reasons for the marginalizing of the humanities disciplines – the so-called crisis of the humanities – is its lack of practical applications relative to other university research endeavors. This is so despite the essential role played by the humanities in extending and deepening the base of knowledge that guides understanding of human nature and the relationship of human beings to the wider world.

The practical transformation has become evident in recent years as universities have backed expansion of research in the sciences that explicitly aims to improve human welfare by solving pressing medical, material, and engineering challenges. Humanities scholars rarely drink from that particular trough of relevance so they wind up off the side, appreciated as important venues for human knowledge generation but confined to drinking whatever puddles they can find on the ground. The issue here is not the quality of humanities research, which in research universities is as good as it has ever been in the history of the academy. Rather, the driving concern here is relevance of research, connecting universities more directly with ordinary people and the problems we face at every level from the bodily to the civilizational. This driving concern for relevance is not merely a PR management strategy in an era when many people look askance both at universities and purported scientific authorities; nor is it solely

a fund-raising technique – though it is surely both of these in part. More fundamentally, I see it as a deliberate attempt to disrupt the privileged isolation of university intellectuals by forcing them to confront real-world problems and show their value by solving them. Smart people have always been indispensable for problem solving within human cultures but it has rarely been as important as it now is for universities to demonstrate that the smart people they protect and support are also useful for addressing concerns outside of university subcultures.

The humanities disciplines may struggle to demonstrate the relevance of their research in ways that regular people can understand – most of us can't even explain our research to our families – but the situation in philosophy of religion is particularly dire. What is the philosophy-of-religion equivalent to the poet laureates in the United States, who exercise a profound influence on cultural awareness? Where are the best sellers in philosophy of religion to match what Dan Dennett does in philosophy and Huston Smith did in religious studies?

The practical transformation is the newest of the four under discussion in this essay. It is understandable that it is catching humanities scholars, including philosophers of religion, off guard.

PhilosophyOfReligion.org blogs do demonstrate that practical relevance is valued in two domains: helping university students learn to think (which is common territory with philosophy in general) and deepening the understanding of religious beliefs within religious communities (which is common territory with theology). I am concerned that the drive for relevance doesn't go much further than that, and certainly not very deeply into the research activities of philosophers of religion. But shouldn't philosophers of religion be on the leading edge of interpreting religion – which is, after all, a global reality with both charming and menacing aspects? Shouldn't they be the ones to help scientists and doctors who study aspects of religion do their work better? Shouldn't they cash out the practical value of learning to think globally and critically about the social construction of reality and its impact on people's worldviews and lifeways?

I think we should be doing all these things within philosophy of religion. But we don't seem close to playing those roles in our societies at present.

Conclusion

How are philosophers of religion supposed to navigate four transformations simultaneously, each with its distinctive political profiles and personal pressures? It's a fair question. I don't know the answer. Maybe we can't. We are watching the rest of the university navigate these four transformations, after all, and it isn't moving the needle in philosophy of religion to an appreciable extent. We are witnessing the vanishing of our field from the university and we are still not responding with much energy. So maybe it's all over for our field, and it is just up to time to impose what the tea leaves suggest is coming.

But what if we were to drink the tea? What if we really did embrace the global transformation, the critical transformation, the multidisciplinary transformation, and the practical transformation? Just think about it. What might happen?