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Why Philosophy Matters for the Study of Religion & Vice Versa

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Why Philosophy Matters for the Study of Religion & Vice Versa. By Thomas A. Lewis. Oxford University Press, 2016. 224 pages. \$34.95 (hardcover), \$19.49 (e-book).

Many philosophers claim that there is something wrong with the philosophy of religion today. Diagnoses differ in their specifics, yet most agree that the problem stems from the field's historic preoccupation with metaphysical and existential dilemmas native to the Christian tradition, particularly the Protestant version thereof. Suggestions for how the philosophy of religion can be improved therefore envision how a post-Christian, post-Protestant mode of philosophical inquiry should proceed.

Thomas A. Lewis's recent book makes an illuminating contribution to this line of inquiry. His arguments center around the claim that contemporary philosophers of religion have not sufficiently digested the implications of recent critical-genealogical studies of the modern discourse on religion. This failure, he suggests, impoverishes both the philosophy of religion and the broader academic study of religion by diminishing the interchange between robust theoretical and empirical perspectives. One of the broader aims of Lewis's book is therefore to stimulate a renaissance of sorts within the academic study of religion by envisioning a mode of philosophical inquiry that aligns more closely with humanistic and social-scientific findings and approaches. Hence, the title of his book: *Why Philosophy Matters for the Study of Religion & Vice Versa*.

Lewis begins by explaining how, during the early 1990s, "the readings, themes, and modes of analysis dominant in required [graduate religious studies] seminars were largely philosophical." Yet, in subsequent decades "many of the most significant methodological developments in religious studies have come from those who would have been classed as 'historians'" (1). Particularly significant have been new critical studies of how the modern discourse on "religion" arose under the influence of the dual Protestant preoccupation with "doctrines articulated by theological elites" and "ecstatic" religious experiences (3).

Philosophers of religion have thus far failed to address the implications of this critique. Indeed, the dominant "analytic" and "Continental" schools still remain mired in the framework of beliefs and experiences. Thus, whereas analytic philosophers of religion examine "classical metaphysical claims about the existence and nature of God," their Continental counterparts approach the divine as an experiential "other" that "exposes and transgresses the limits" of rationality (17, 25). It is therefore not without good reason that philosophical arguments have exerted less influence on the field of religious studies in recent years.

Having presented this analysis in his introductory chapter, Lewis devotes the remainder of his book to considering how philosophers can transcend this limited framework and begin approaching its subject in a more historically and critically nuanced light. In this regard, chapter 1 examines three philosophically inclined scholars of religion who use philosophical concepts without perpetuating dominant analytic and Continental tropes; chapter 2 considers the role that normativity plays in the academic study of religion, paying particular attention to

questions concerning theology; chapter 3 advances a new perspective on how historically significant religious thinkers should be engaged; chapter 4 argues that comparative religious-ethical inquiry should figure more centrally in the broader field of religious studies; and chapter 5 critiques the framework animating contemporary visions of religious literacy. Although there is not space in this short review to examine all the fascinating and well-reasoned arguments presented in these chapters, we can engage the basic thrust of Lewis's project by considering the question with which he finishes his book: Hegel or Nietzsche? That is, when striving to more closely attend questions about the historical construction of the concept of religion, should philosophically attuned scholars of religion take the methods of Hegel or Nietzsche as their guiding light?

The Nietzschean option has been more energetically pursued in recent years, largely because his critical-genealogical methods help expose the Protestant-imperial elements of the modern discourse on religion. Yet Lewis contends that scholars of religion have not yet thought through "the most radical dimensions of Nietzsche's challenge." For they deploy Nietzsche's critical-genealogical methods in order to "expose the injustice and oppression entailed by a particular history," while Nietzsche clearly asserts that even such well-intentioned modern ideals arise from the same will to power that animates more explicitly violent, hateful, and oppressive endeavors. Lewis therefore claims that efforts to bind Nietzsche's critical-genealogical methods to the kind of "unarticulated notions of justice, ethics, and truth" that left-leaning Western academics embrace are deeply problematic (149–50).

The Hegelian option, he suggests, avoids these difficulties by advancing the idea that each historical moment "produces immanent contradictions," the reconciliation of which leads us to the next historical moment and hence to the next set of immanent contradictions. Thus, like Nietzsche, Hegel identifies contradictions within each historical moment. Yet he goes beyond this critical task by proposing potential resolutions. Progress in Hegelian thought is not therefore defined "vis-à-vis any sort of yardstick or standard of judgment external to the process," but rather by the successful resolution of historically embedded contradictions (154).

One could read Lewis's suggestions on this front as simply entailing that philosophers of religion should spend more time trying to resolve the contradictions that critical-genealogists have identified within the modern discourse on religion. This reading appears to be confirmed by many of Lewis's explicit arguments in this book, which focus more on resolving particular dilemmas embedded in religious studies than on articulating broadly synthetic philosophical perspectives.

However, when Lewis's arguments are considered in a broader light, it becomes clear that he has something more ambitious in mind. Hegelian philosophers, he suggests, cannot escape the task of examining "how our present has and has not overcome the tensions in previous moments in our collective history" (159). By extension, then, Hegelian philosophers of religion cannot escape the task of examining how modern religious dynamics have or have not overcome the tensions in previous moments of religious history. And they can do this only if they already understand the extent to which earlier moments of religious

history successfully reconciled the tensions present in moments earlier still. Lewis spells out the implications of this Hegelian approach quite clearly in an earlier book, *Religion, Modernity, and Politics in Hegel* (Oxford University Press, 2014), suggesting that, at least in principle, “particular traditions can be ordered in relation to each other precisely in terms of the way that the more advanced ones overcome contradictions immanent within ones that preceded them” (189). Lewis faults Hegel for pursuing such a line of inquiry by presenting overly static and schematic accounts of the world’s religious traditions. Yet Lewis clearly remains sympathetic to the kind of broad historical and conceptual analyses that Hegel pursues, and presents figures like Alasdair MacIntyre and Charles Taylor as the rightful inheritors of this approach.

I appreciate Lewis’s suggestion that broadly Hegelian philosophical investigations of religion should be more energetically explored. I would, nevertheless, contend that this suggestion could be more helpfully advanced in the context of a broader account of the various methods that philosophers of religion aiming to transcend their Protestant-imperial heritage can engage. For is it not possible to pay adequate attention to recent critical-genealogical studies of religion by utilizing, say, a Wittgensteinian approach, striving to quietistically dissolve contradictions instead of facilitating their resolution? Could one not also overcome the philosophy of religion’s Protestant-imperial legacy by using Heideggerian hermeneutical methods to disclose alternative religious lifeworlds? Or again, could not a pragmatic philosopher of religion incorporate recent critical-genealogical insights into her efforts to gradually modify and improve modern concepts of religion? Of course, the argument could be made that each of these methods remains indebted to Hegelian thought, and thus could be plausibly labeled “Hegelian.” But doing so undermines the very force of the term “Hegelian,” and hence the broader implications of Lewis’s argument. I therefore find it difficult to avoid the conclusion that philosophers and philosophically inclined scholars of religion who seek to digest the implications of recent critical-genealogical studies of the modern discourse on religion are not, as Lewis suggests, forced to choose between Hegel and Nietzsche, but rather can and should draw additional insight from the methods of Wittgenstein, Heidegger, and Dewey, to name a few, and likely many others as well.

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The Erotic Life of Manuscripts. By Yii-Jan Lin. Oxford University Press, 2016. 224 pages. \$74.00 (hardcover), \$72.99 (e-book).

For some time now, New Testament scholars have been disabused of the notion that texts carry with them a single, univocal meaning accessible through impartial, objective analysis. Post-structuralist and postmodernist approaches of various sorts