I CALLED TO GOD FROM A NARROW PLACE . . . A WIDE FUTURE FOR PHILOSOPHY OF RELIGION

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Abstract. I urge philosophers of religion to investigate far more vigorously than they have until now the acceptability of varied components of the world religions and their epistemological underpinnings. By evaluating "acceptability" I mean evaluation of: truth, morality, spiritual efficacy and human flourishing, in fact any value religious devotees might think significant to their religious lives. Secondly, I urge that philosophers of religion give more attention to what scholars have called the "esoteric" level of world religions, including components of strong ineffability, weak ineffability, and an alleged perennial philosophy. All this should involve a cooperative effort between analytic, comparative, and feminist philosophy of religion.

PREFACE

I was born to and raised in a traditional Jewish family in Detroit, Michigan. As a child, my deepest impression of Christianity was as a dark, sinister, threatening force. It started with our devout Christian downstairs landlady when I was playing out in front of the house at the age of five. She lured me to her door and gave me a piece of bacon. She closed the door and watched gleefully from a window as I ate it. I thought it was rather tasty but not terrific. Terrific it wasn't when I told my parents of the event. Whenever we made any bit of noise upstairs over her head, this Christian lady would bang hard on her ceiling with the stick end of her broom to demand silence. Clearly, a Christian suppression of the Jews!

On one Sunday afternoon car ride, my father pointed out to me an impressive church where, he said, a woman had been murdered that very Christmas eve. Menacing. Soon after there were the churches that

displayed – right outside in front – a kind of a statue of a man who had died after obviously being savagely tortured. Now, let me ask you – if a dress shop displays dresses out front and a shoe shop displays shoes, what must this shop be up to? You guessed it: this was a place where they brought people to be tortured and murdered. Then there were the stories in my Jewish school about priests who long ago, in Eastern Europe, would kidnap sweet Jewish children, like me, who were never to be found again; stories about the Spanish Inquisition and expulsion of the Jews from Spain, and the Christian pogroms; and in Detroit, Father Charles Edward Coughlin's Sunday radio broadcasts accusing the Jews both of being the chief communists *and* of being the chief capitalistic pigs (excuse the expression from someone who has eaten bacon only once.)[1]

Those childhood impressions still lie very deep inside me, even after these many years of knowing many wonderful Christians, having read wise and spiritually enriching Christian thought, and even spending a year at the home of the Fighting Irish.[2] But these later experiences have greatly diminished my apprehension to the point where I can appreciate much in Christianity, although I believe that Jesus was neither the Messiah nor divine, and although I have no opinion on whether the Spirit proceeds directly from the Father alone or also through the Son.

I write what follows, then, as a person who in the United States lived in a religious minority that historically the majority religion had persecuted. And I write this as a person who in the country in which I now reside, Israel, is part of a religious majority that must act with respect to its Islamic, Christian, Druze, and Circassian religious minorities. What I seek is more emphasis on an honest assessment of the acceptability of beliefs and practices across the world religions including various "levels" of religious understanding and practice. Moreover, I seek doing this in a way that encourages overall respect and even appreciation of the good motivations and fruits of a religion where that is possible, even when judging some elements of that religion unacceptable.

[1] Although the broadcasts ended at the time of my birth so I never heard them, the Jews of Detroit were still "hearing" them for many years beyond.

[2] This is an esoteric reference to the University of Notre Dame, a splendid Catholic university in Indiana.

INTRODUCTION

In his monumental *Twentieth-Century Western Philosophy of Religion 1900-2000,* Eugene Long divides the discipline at the end of the twentieth century into five categories: analytic philosophy, hermeneutics and deconstruction, critical theory, comparative philosophy, and feminist philosophy.[3] In what follows, I focus on analytic philosophy, comparative philosophy, and feminist philosophy, areas I know more about than the others on Long's list. So, when I write below about philosophy of religion I will always mean the discipline as represented by those three subdivisions.

I urge philosophers of religion, first, to investigate far more vigorously than they have until now the *acceptability* of varied components of the world religions, as well as their epistemological underpinnings in what scholars have called "exoteric" religion. By evaluating "acceptability" I mean evaluation of: *truth, morality, spiritual efficacy and human flourishing*, in fact any value religious devotees might think significant to their religious lives. Secondly, I want to urge that philosophers of religion give more attention to a comprehensive inquiry across world religions into what scholars have called "esoteric" religion. This should include not only testing the claim, sometimes made quite forcefully, that religions are identical or at least very close to one another at this level. Also, the various "esoteric" forms of religion should be tested for their inner coherence and acceptability. In short, I propose a dialectic between evaluating the contents of the world religions and investigating with philosophical acumen and integrity the possibilities of closer agreement between religions. All this should include a cooperative effort between analytic, comparative, and feminist philosophy of religion.

Now, in proposing these undertakings I am not so naïve as to expect that philosophers will solve many issues with anything like a consensus. (I take to heart Peter van Inwagen's keen observation that in philosophy very little ever gets settled.[4]) Nonetheless, philosophers of religion can

[3] Eugene Long, *Twentieth-Century Western Philosophy of Religion 1900-2000* (Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 2000).

[4] Peter van Inwagen, "Is It Wrong Everywhere, Always, and for Anyone to Believe Anything on Insufficient Evidence?" in *Philosophy: The Big Questions*, Ruth J. Sample, Charles W. Mills, and James P. Sterba, eds. (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2004), pp. 87-98.

make progress in their discipline in a number of ways: (1) By reaching a consensus or coming near to one wherever possible, (2) By deepening and clarifying for (at least) one's own self, to then recommend to others, the ranking of elements in the world religions regarding their truth and other values of acceptability, (3) By getting to the bottom of and assessing the epistemologies of different religions, and (4) By assessing a philosopher's understanding of the implications of other world religions from the vantage point of her own religion. For example, this would be for a Christian philosopher to go beyond defending Christian belief, to evaluate, say, Shaivism (the worship of Shiva in India) with the tools for evaluation provided by her own brand of Christianity.

Here I am reminded of Alvin Plantinga's "Advice to Christian philosophers." There he writes that, "The Christian community . . . ought to get on with the project of exploring and developing the implications of Christian theism for the whole range of questions philosophers ask and answer."[5] Christian philosophers have the right, avers Plantinga, to wield their own perspectives on philosophical issues. This, I urge, should apply to Christian philosophers, as well as to members of other religions, namely, to consider the content as well as the fact of the very existence of other religions from their religious view. (I would add that in such an undertaking the philosopher of religion is not to be protected *a priori* from coming to see serious problems within his own religion.)

One should not confuse my proposals that include evaluating "other" religions, with the position that when faced with religious diversity a follower of one religion is obligated to consider the justification of his own religious adherence. My proposals pertain to philosophers of religion, religious and atheist alike, *acting as philosophers*. And even when I urge acting, say, *qua* Christian philosophers, as in point (3) above, I do not believe they are obligated to do so in virtue of following one religion when aware of the variety of world religions.[6]

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[5] Alvin Plantinga, "Advice to Christian Philosophers," *Faith and Philosophy*, (1984) 1, 253-271.

[6] Indeed, I have argued that no such obligation exists, at least not across the board. See: Jerome Gellman, "Religious Diversity and the Epistemic Justification of Religious Belief," *Faith and Philosophy* 10, (1993), pp. 45-364. (Reprinted in *Philosophy of Religion, The Big Questions* eds. Michael Murray and Eleonore Stump (Oxford, Blackwell: 1999), pp. 441-453. And: Jerome Gellman, "In Defense of a Contented Exclusivist," *Religious*

What was once a global village has since become a global apartment house.[7] No longer in the West is it only Christian denominations facing skeptics whom they wish to turn aside. Christians are no longer ensconced in a cocoon-like mutually supportive religious culture for which Hindus and Sikhs are exotic pictures that show up in travelogues. Western Christian analytic philosophers journey for long stays in China, and the Association of Christian Philosophers holds a conference in Hong Kong attended by Chinese, American, European, and Israeli analytic philosophers. We are now progressively intertwined with one another, and exposed in the mass media and on the street to one another's religions. The issues that arise for many people today, for example Christians, are beyond skeptical assaults on Christianity and Christian apologetics, and beyond attempts to reform Christianity in light of its alleged moral failures. There is much uncertainty and confusion out there about what the world religions "really" mean to teach, and what, if anything, in various religions is acceptable. While knowing similarities and differences is crucial, obviously it is not sufficient for trying to calm the noise coming through the thin walls from the neighboring apartments inside our creaking, tottering, apartment building. Philosophers of religion should take up the challenge into the center of the discipline.

SOME SETTING UP

The Exoteric and Esoteric

To set this all up I begin with "exoteric" and "esoteric." The Oxford dictionary defines "exoteric" as "Designed for or suitable to the generality of disciples; communicated to outsiders, intelligible to the public," and "esoteric" as "Designed for, or appropriate to, an inner circle of advanced or privileged disciples; communicated to, or intelligible by, the initiated exclusively." This distinction has turned blurry since in many Western circles these labels are not as valid as they were. Increasingly what used to be esoteric in religion has become known and popularized beyond

Studies, 36 (2000), 401-417. (Reprinted in *Readings in Philosophy of Religion: East Meets West*, ed. Andrew Eshleman, (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2008), pp. 374-383.)

[7] I owe this felicitous turn of phrase to Evan Fales.

an inner circle of enthusiasts. Witness, for example, the popularity of religious mysticism, which once was a carefully restricted religious domain. Nowadays, much that used to be esoteric has spilled over to become far more known and appreciated.[8] I am interested only in the respective *components* of what were once considered two realms separated by the number and status of their adherents. And my interest includes only components of esoteric traditions that interpret exoteric beliefs and practices. I exclude aberrant ideas and practices that followers keep secret, like magic and astrology, in the service of religion.

In order to denote only the components without ascribing the Oxford Dictionary's meanings, in what follows I will write "Exoteric" and "Esoteric" with a capital "e" for the religious content itself that used to be relatively clearly exoteric and esoteric, not for what we can properly describe today as "exoteric" and "esoteric," with a small case "e." I realize that the lines between even Exoteric and Esoteric are not clearly drawn and that to speak of just two realms is a gross simplification. But I am in the business of making some proposals and for that purpose my rough and ready distinction between Exoteric and Esoteric will do fine.

Exoteric religion, then, pertains to what used to be the domain of plain, and even most fancy, educated folk, and largely remains so. In theistic religions this would include belief in a God distinct from the world and conceived in an anthropomorphic way or else in a fashion much analogous to us, having power, knowledge, goodness and the like but supremely heightened in form and degree. In a non-theistic religion, like Buddhism, for another example, this would include taking the dharma teachings of Buddha about no-self, karma, enlightenment, interdependent co-arising, etc. at face value, as literal metaphysical truths. And in all religions this would include having a conception of religious behavior and of ritual appropriate to the beliefs and the concomitant religious aims of Exoterism.

In the Esoteric area I focus on three types, which involve some overlap yet are different enough to warrant individual attention:

[8] Indeed, several modern day kabbalists insist on teaching hitherto esoteric teachings of kabbalah in Judaism to the masses if the Messiah is to come. As a result, kabbalah is now popular well beyond an inner circle of Jewish kabbalists.

Strong Ineffability

The great third century Buddhist philosopher Nagarjuna once wrote, "There is no dharma whatsoever taught by the Buddha to whomever, whenever, wherever."[9] This statement flatly contradicts the Buddhist belief in the Three Jewels of: the Buddha, the dharma, and the sangha. How could the devout Nagarjuna deny one of the Three Jewels? The answer lies in the Mahayana *Lankavatara Sutra* and *Shurangama Sutra*. The *Lankavatara Sutra* portrays the Buddha as saying, "All the teachings in the Sutras are fingers pointing to the moon." And in the *Shurangama Sutra* the Buddha says,

> If someone uses a finger to point out the moon to another person, if that person takes the finger to be the moon, he will not only fail to see the moon, but he will also fail to see the finger. He mistakes the pointing finger for the bright moon."[10]

To say the Buddha *had* "teachings," i.e., *linguistically conveyed statements meant to be true*, would be to fasten onto the teachings themselves, study them, and apply them, as end points. This would be to fasten on to the finger. It would be to miss the moon, that which the Buddha could never teach because it is ineffable, but to which he was always pointing.

There is a Zen story that at Vulture Peak (Grdhrakuta) Buddha gave a dharma talk consisting entirely of his holding a flower and twirling it in his fingers. One monk's (Mahakapahsa's) smile indicated that he had understood the revelation.[11]

And the *Tao Te Ching* begins with the words, "Even the finest teaching is not the Tao itself. Even the finest name is insufficient to define it. Without words, the Tao can be experienced, and without a name, it can be known."[12]

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[9] Nagarjuna, *The Fundamental Wisdom of the Middle Way, Nagarjuna's Mūlamadhyamakakārikā,* Jay L. Garfield, tr. (New York/Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), chapter 25.

[10] *The Shurangama Sutra* (Burlingame, CA: Buddhist Text Translation Society, 2003), p. 30.

[11] *Zen Flesh Zen Bones, A Collection of Zen and Pre-Zen Writings*, compiled by Paul Reps and Nyogen Senkazi (Boston: Tuttle Publishing, 1998), pp. 121-122.

[12] Lao Tzu, *Tao Te Ching*, Translated by Stan Rosenthal (Shi-tien Roshi), Available at: http://www.vl-site.org/taoism/ttcstan2.html.

In the case of strong ineffability, there are no teachings because whatever is said is cancelled out, having the function only of pointing to what is ineffable. Exoteric religion points to the moon and has value for those who cannot (yet) see as far as that.

Weak Ineffability

In this form of Esoterism, there do exist teachings. What is said is not cancelled out, but remains true, however, what is *referred* to is something ineffable. I have in mind the *via negativa*, or "apophatic theology." In Christianity this is perhaps most identified with Pseudo-Dionysius, and later with the anonymous author of *The Cloud of Unknowing*. In Judaism it is most identified with Maimonides and forms of kabbalah. In Maimonides' version, the *via negativa*, maintains that God is indescribable with positive attributes. However, all negative attributions to God, denials of positive attributes, are true. Statements ascribing positive attributes to God are category mistakes and in Esoterism undergo translation into negative statements. So, what one says in negative theology about God is true, but the theology *points* to an ineffable God. As with Maimonides, while the positive beliefs about God of standard religion are false, they are necessary for the religious life. (*Guide for the Perplexed* 3: 28) [13]

We need to distinguish the *via negativa* from a different form of unsaying belonging to the category of strong ineffability. In this form, which you can find in Zen for example, one is to deny, in sequence, each statement one makes in an endless chain, so that every statement remains "unsaid." In this form of negation, the denial of a denial does not return us to a positive statement, but only provides the next statement to deny.[14]

The Perennial Philosophy

The term "perennial philosophy" is an old one. Various scholars, including Ananda Coomaraswamy, Seyyed Hossein Nasr, Frithjof Schuon and Huston Smith, have revived the claim that all (or nearly all) religions have a common Esoteric "perennial philosophy" (PP), distinct

[13] Maimonides does say that our silence is most befitting God. That is with regard to speaking of God in positive attributes. The negative attributions remain true.

[14] See Thich Nhat Hanh, *Zen Keys* (Doubleday: New York, 1974), chapter 5.

from Exoteric religion.[15] PP has these metaphysical and epistemological components (greatly simplified and boiled down):

(PP1) A monistic metaphysics in which there exists an infinite Reality (my term) that is the only true reality (hence, "absolute").
(PP2) The Reality is neither personal nor impersonal, being beyond these categories.
(PP3) The Reality constantly infuses the world with grace, drawing us to the consciousness of our true being resting within the Reality.
(PP4) There is a universal human intuition of the existence of the Reality as the one true reality.
(PP5) Our worldly existence masks and distorts this intuition.
(PP6) It is possible to retrieve this consciousness, to become transformed by overcoming the sense of separateness from the Reality and orientation toward a separate ego.
(PP7) PP in various versions provides methods and disciplines for realizing life transformed (resulting from the reinterpretation of Exoteric practices and beliefs).

PP converts "ordinary" religious statements (the finger) into PP talk (the moon), on the grounds that the former arise from within the depths of one's soul where the universal intuition lies, only to be distorted on the way up. For example, that God is creator *ex nihilo* points to the truth that nothing exists but the Reality. And that God is morally good is based on a correct intuition of the Reality's metaphysical "goodness," in the constant flow of grace from the Reality. This intuition however, manifests in Exoterism masked by a concept of goodness informed by self-interest.

[15] For the bibliography of Coomaraswamy's works see: *Ananda K.Coomaraswamy: Bibliography and Index*, Rama P. Coomaraswamy, ed. (Berwick-upon-Tweed: Prologos Books, 1988). For the bibliography of Seyyed Hossein Nasr, see *The Philosophy of Seyyed Hossein Nasr*, L.E. Hahn, R.E. Auxier, and L. W. Stone, Jr., eds. (Peru, Ill.: Open Court, 2001), part 3. The bibliography of Frithjof Schuon is available at: http://www.frithjofschuon.info/public/writings/bibliography.aspx. Of Huston Smith's many books the following are the most central to my concerns here: Huston Smith, *Forgotten Truth: The Common Vision of the World's Religions* (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1992), *The Religions of Man* (New York: Perennial Library, 1989), and *The World's Religions: Our Great Wisdom Traditions* (San Francisco: Harper San Francisco, 1991).

We need to distinguish PP from its cousin, John Hick's Pluralistic Hypothesis (PH) in which the "Real" is the actual goal of all religious practice.[16] Here are some salient differences:

1. In PH the Real is distinct from the world, while in PP the Reality is not.
2. PH does not attempt to translate ordinary religious talk into the argot of PH, while PP provides an isomorphic transform-scheme for at least core standard pronouncements.
3. PH is a hypothesis *about* religions, not claiming that any religion tradition has endorsed it. PP-ers, on the contrary, claim PP to exist within and to be an important part of almost all religious traditions.
4. PH is not interested to judge the truth or falsity of any Exoteric religious doctrine, concentrating instead on how these are employed with reference to the Real. PP, on the other hand, judges standard beliefs as not quite true, yet reflecting deep truths, existing in PP.

SO LET'S START (FINALLY)

Now for my suggested program for philosophy of religion in the twenty-first century. My interest is to broaden topics in philosophy of religion and bring them cooperatively from the sides to the center. My program pertains to the Exoteric, to the Esoteric, and to the relationship between them in the world religions.

THE EXOTERIC

Religions are starkly inconsistent with one another in their Exoteric doctrines, in the explanations they give of important facts, and in what they expect their devotees to be doing with their time. Rather than ignore these

[16] John Hick has expounded this view in many books and articles. See John Hick, *An Interpretation of Religion: Human Responses to the Transcendent* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989). For a not-quite-up-to-date bibliography of his writing, see David Cheetham, *John Hick: A Critical Introduction and Reflection* (Aldershot: Ashgate Publishing, 2003).

inconsistencies or pretend that they are not significant to religious devotees, philosophers should engage in evaluating the acceptability of major components of the world religions. I am talking about evaluations across world religions, both evaluating major religious components of a single religion by itself as well as evaluating religions relative to one another.

In addition, philosophers should investigate different religions for what sort of epistemologies they embrace. The late William Jellema, of Calvin College, taught, so I have been told, that Christians had a different concept of "rationality" than other folks. Do religions really differ over their understanding of rationality? Philosophers of religion should investigate and evaluate the epistemologies that go along with various religions.

So, here is a sampling of the kind of topics I have in mind for the philosophy of religion of Exoterism:

1. Enlightenment: Various religions, Eastern religions in particular, emphasize reaching enlightenment, variously interpreted; a permanent state of a person who is then forever released from his/her former condition. Is this a realistic possibility for mere mortals or are we caught in what Judaism calls "*ritzo v'shov*," moving back and forth between a higher and a lower spiritual state, never reaching constancy in this life? In addition, what are the implications of ascribing enlightenment to a person for the creation and protection of authority and control?
2. No-Self: Buddhism teaches that there is no self. Hindu religions teach there is a self, but it is identical with Brahman, not a separate entity. Exoteric Christianity teaches the existence of a separate self, as do Judaism and Islam. Historically in Western philosophy, the issue of the existence of the self revolved around Hume's rejection of its existence. Philosophers of religion, with some outstanding exceptions, have not sufficiently addressed the issue in the context of the diversity of religions.[17]
3. Evil: The problem of evil has been around quite a long time. Philosophers should examine treatments of evil in both theistic and non-theistic religions. This should include such issues as these: How consistent is an explanation of evil to the religious scheme in

[17] See below for an important exception. William Wainwright has also touched on this in William J. Wainwright, *Mysticism, A Study of its Nature, Cognitive Value, and Moral Implications* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1981).

which it is offered? Does it solve the problem in logical terms? How does a particular treatment of evil fare in moral terms? How do non-theistic treatments fare against theistic ones?

4. Divine Reversal: Christianity used to claim, and part of it continues to claim, that it supersedes Judaism: God had made a covenant with the Israelites described as "for ever." (Exodus 31:16) Then, God annulled those commandments in favor of "circumcision of the heart." (Romans 2:28) Could God change His mind like that? The Jewish philosopher Saadia Gaon (882-942) argued that God could not do so (despite many biblical passages apparently to the contrary). This forced him to novel interpretations of the sacrifice of Isaac, where apparently God first issues and then annuls a commandment to Abraham. Can God have a change of mind? If God cannot change His mind, did God utter a falsehood at the start when giving a command "for ever"?
5. The Fact of Religious Diversity: There exists a multitude of religions in our world, some claiming hundreds of millions of followers. Each religion should be able to explain that fact convincingly from its own point of view. Why do only the people of India know about worshipping Vishnu, Shiva, and Krishna? If the Jews are God's chosen people, why do the religions of the majority of people on earth not know of them or know almost nothing about them? Which religion(s) best explain the variety and great number of religions and the immense number of followers in religions other than its/their own?
6. Devotee non-Fidelity: In the history of some religions, the most ardent believers and the religious hierarchy have had rather bleak histories of practicing what the religion teaches. It does not follow, of course, that the religion is false. However, a religion should be able to give a good explanation of how it was that its teachings were not compelling enough to create a responsible leadership that implemented its teachings. How do different religions fare in giving such explanations, and how do religions fare relative to one another?[18]

[18] This divides into two: (1) How do religious explanations fare with regard to scientific or quasi-scientific ones, and (2) How does a religion fare in its own terms in giving an explanation, in comparison to other religions.

7. Sexuality: Religions have varied ways of thinking about human sexuality. Some endorse celibacy as an ideal way of life. Others think it an obligation to have children. Some think of "carnal knowledge" as an untidy affair they tolerate as unavoidable. Others don't make much of a fuss about sexuality. Still others see sexual intercourse as part of the way to enlightenment. In light of what we now know of sexuality through science, with new moral insights and in light of the wide failure of celibacy in some religions, which attitudes to sexuality are now the most acceptable? How valid are the various rationales for particular attitudes?
8. A Harsh God: In the Hebrew Bible (The "Old Testament"), God appears at times as a harsh being quite at odds with the idealized picture of God in some of later Judaism and Christianity. In the Quran as well God can be quite harsh. How well do religions deal with this fact? Does any religion do better than others? [19]
9. Epistemology: Do different religions have different epistemologies? If they do, which are acceptable? Which are more acceptable than others?[20]

A recent paradigm of the kind of undertaking I am advocating is *Buddhism, A Christian Exploration and Appraisal,* a cooperative study by Keith Yandell, an analytic philosopher with a keen interest in Buddhism and Harold Netland, professor of philosophy of religion and intercultural studies.[21] In this work the authors present a balanced and edifying presentation of the history of Buddhism from Siddartha Gautama the Buddha until the "Dharma comes West," (a nice play on the words of

[19] Recently, two books have appeared on this topic: Paul Copan has written a Christian theology of the Old Testament addressing that issue. See: Paul Copan, *Is God a Moral Monster? Making Sense of the Old Testament God* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2011). A collection of essays is Michael Bergmann, Michael J. Murray, and Michael C. Rea, eds. *Divine Evil? The Moral Character of the God of Abraham* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011). See my forthcoming review in *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion.*

[20] The criteria of evaluation will include meta-epistemological principles (such as what any epistemology must account for) as well as whatever epistemology a group of philosophers of religion can agree on.

[21] Keith Yandell and Harold Netland, *Buddhism, A Christian Exploration and Appraisal* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 2009).

the Zen expression "The Dharma comes East" referring to Bodhidarma coming from India to China, bringing Zen with him.) There then follows a sympathetic examination of Buddhist doctrines pertaining to such topics as Truth, Rebirth and Karma, and Enlightenment and Nirvana. Following this appears a sensitive evaluation of similarities and differences between Buddhism and Christianity.

Yet, the book goes beyond comparing/contrasting Buddhism with Christianity. In their Introduction the authors state flat out that, "It is our contention that, whatever other merits Buddhism might have, some of its central beliefs are deeply problematic and should be rejected."[22] The authors challenge the coherence of Buddhist metaphysics, most visibly a critique of the Buddhist belief in "no-self" in favor of the existence of the self (as attested to by Exoteric Christianity). That is not all. The final chapter, "The Dharma or Gospel?" goes further with this declaration:

> Our purpose here is not to argue comprehensively for the truth of Christian claims as opposed to Buddhist perspectives but rather to clarify the differences between the two sets of claims and, at points, to suggest, in a very preliminary manner, why Christian theism is more plausible than Buddhism.[23]

Here the authors are being modest since what follows is a serious discussion that presents a defense against various Buddhist statements of the problem of evil, and against two arguments for God's non-existence by the Buddhist philosopher Nagarjuna. The authors make a case for the historical reliability of the Gospels while casting great doubt over the historical reliability of the Buddhist sutras and of early Buddhist history. Finally, in the face of the metaphysical problems in the Buddhists' way of dealing with suffering the authors note that the crucifixion and resurrection resolve these same problems, (allegedly) without or with fewer metaphysical problems.[24] [25]

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[22] Yandell and Netland, pp. xiv-xv.

[23] Yandell and Netland, pp. 176-177.

[24] Unfortunately, the authors do not enter much into the metaphysics of incarnation and resurrection or into the moral implications of vicarious atonement.

[25] Another earlier good example of what I am after is William J. Wainwright, *Mysticism, A Study of its Nature, Cognitive Value, and Moral Implications* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1981).

ESOTERISM

Philosophers have done much work on ineffability, strong and weak, in religions. My proposal here is to supplement that discussion. Philosophers have made quite a fuss over the very meaning of "ineffability" and have worried over its very meaningfulness and its political significance. Philosophers have conducted the discussion almost entirely with regard to mystical religious claims. Thus, Wayne Proudfoot strongly centers his discussion of ineffability on ineffability-claims within religious mystical traditions and concludes that the claim is nothing more than a way for those traditions protectively to create and maintain a sense of mystery.[26] And the feminist philosopher, Grace Jantzen objects to ineffability-claims as a disturbing effort to remove mystical experiences from the realm of rational discourse.[27]

The sole link between ineffability and religious mysticism is unfortunate, because ineffability-claims abound in places far removed from mystical religious traditions. Experiences of ineffability occur in the arts. Regarding music, famously, Schopenhauer thought that it opened an experience of the "ding an sich," Kant's "thing in itself" beyond all human categories. In Aldous Huxley's *Point Counterpoint* one character offers Beethoven's trios as a proof of God's existence. The best way to understand this is to say that the trios have the power to invoke a sense of the ineffable. (I must confess that it's Beethoven's quartets that do that for me.) John Dewey said it best:

> If all meanings could be adequately expressed by words, the arts of painting and music would not exist. There are values and meanings that can be expressed only immediately by visible and audible qualities, and to ask what they mean in the sense of something that can be put into words is to deny their distinctive existence.[28]

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[26] Wayne, Proudfoot, *Religious Experience* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, and London: University of California Press, 1985).

[27] Grace Jantzen, *Power, Gender, and Christian Mysticism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995). See also Pamela Anderson, "Ineffable Knowledge and Gender," in Philip Goodchild, ed. *Rethinking Philosophy of Religion: Approaches from Continental Philosophy*, series edited by John Caputo (New York: Fordham University Press, 2002), pp. 162-183.

[28] John Dewey, *Art as Experience* (New York: Penguin, 1934), p. 77.

My proposal for the treatment of ineffability is for philosophers of religion to broaden their vision to encompass the literature of all the major world religions *as well as* all human undertakings where ineffability figures, including the arts and sexuality. In that way, there is a greater chance to get into the guts of the concept and the phenomenon, and to investigate the possible link between ineffability at large and the presence of God in the world.

Scholars of religion have investigated PP, but philosophers of religion have not done so enough in the ways I am about to suggest. Here too, philosophers have made too strong a connection between PP and mystical experience. The argument is out there that: A universal PP can exist only if the same mystical experiences exist across all religions. However, no mystical experiences are the same across religions, Hence there is no perennial philosophy. Thus, Steven Katz concludes, "There is no *philosophia perennis*" mainly because there cannot be, by his lights, uniform mystical experiences across religions.[29] However, even if there are no identical mystical experiences across religions, this is consistent with there being a common epistemological basis for perennial philosophy. This is because on PP the major epistemological support for PP is not in the first place in mystical experience but in an alleged intuition common to all humanity. Perhaps mystical experience can back-up this intuition, but that is not necessary.[30] Philosophers have much work to do on PP.

So here now is a sampling of my suggestions relating to Esoteric religion:

1. To investigate ineffability claims across religions together with such claims made outside of religious contexts.
2. To examine Esoteric contents across religions for their internal consistency, and their religious adequacy.
3. To explore the connections between the Exoteric and the Esoteric in each religion, to determine translational efficacy between the two (where applicable).
4. To search for abuses of the Exoteric/Esoteric division in creating false ranks of religiosity and a power structure; and to recommend,

[29] Steven T. Katz, "Language, Epistemology, and Mysticism," in Steven T. Katz, ed. *Mysticism and Philosophical Analysis*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978), p. 24.

[30] See Huston Smith, "Is there a Perennial Philosophy?" The *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, 55 (1987), 553-66.

if need be, how to make out the division, if at all, to better serve the religious life.

5. To judge the epistemological basis of PP in an alleged universal intuition. What would show that there is such an intuition? How good is the PP explanation for the intuition not being visible more often at the surface? What is the epistemic value of an alleged universal intuition?
6. To weigh the degree of closeness between the Esoteric forms of the world religions. Is the notion of a perennial philosophy warranted? What is at stake in the issue?
7. Is Esoteric religion a good way to reveal religions to be closer to one another than would be thought in Exoteric religions?

THE TRACK RECORD OF PHILOSOPHERS OF RELIGION

Neither analytic philosophers, nor comparative philosophers, nor feminist philosophers of religion, have attended sufficiently to the sorts of topics I am suggesting.

Analytic Philosophers

Analytic philosophers of religion have stuck pretty close to Christianity and at best to the Judaic-Christian tradition. They *have* thought about religious diversity but in a very limited way. They have excelled at categorizing positions, from religious relativism to religious pluralism (hard and soft) on to non-exclusivism and exclusivism (again, hard and soft). Often, analytic philosophers simply suppose or hypothesize epistemic parity between religions without going further.

In any case, the catfight is mostly over whether a follower of a particular religion is epistemically challenged by knowledge of other religions at odds with hers. David Basinger stands out as championing the view that "for her [one faced with religious diversity] to choose then to retain a purely defensive posture – for her to then claim she is under no obligation to consider the matter further – is for her to forfeit her right to claim justifiably that her perspective is superior."[31] And Alvin

[31] David Basinger, *Religious diversity: A Philosophical Assessment* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2002), p. 13.

Plantinga leads the clowder (look it up) in favor of exclusivism being just fine.[32] Yet, the discussion stays pretty much there. "Other" religions arise only as examples for setting up the dilemma. Actual evaluation of world religions is scarce, and the Exoteric/Esoteric distinction remains quite a secret for much of standard analytic philosophy of religion.

Comparative Philosophy

Long defines "comparative philosophy of religion" as follows: "Comparative philosophers of religion are seeking to develop new conceptions and methods appropriate to analyzing religion in a comparative context" (p. 389). Long describes Ninian Smart as a comparativist who wants philosophy of religion to be neutral, and not to try to examine religious truth (p. 475). William Christian, who Long says is another comparativist, wants only to determine the different ways the doctrines of different religions can clash, while studiously avoiding "taking sides."

Since 1990, the State University of New York Press has been publishing a flagship series, "Toward a Comparative Philosophy of Religions." Here are typical titles:

–*Applying the Canon in Islam: The Authorization and Maintenance of Interpretive Reasoning in Hanafi Scholarship*
–*Seeing through Texts: Doing Theology among the Srivaisnavas of South India*
–*Rediscovering God with Transcendental Argument: A Contemporary Interpretation of Monistic Kashmiri Saiva Philosophy*
–*Buddhism and Language: A Study of Indo-Tibetan Scholasticism.*

These are generally concerned to familiarize readers with religions not prevalent in the Western Northern Hemisphere and to analyze differences and similarities between them and, chiefly, Christianity. Keith Ward has encouraged the comparative philosopher of religion not to stop there, but instead to "be prepared to revise beliefs if and when it comes to seem

[32] Alvin Plantinga, "Pluralism: A Defense of Religious Exclusivism," in *The Philosophical Challenge of Religious Diversity*, K. Meeker and P. Quinn, eds., (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000) pp. 172–192. I have made my own modest contribution to a defense of exclusivism in Jerome Gellman, "In Defense of a Contented Religious Exclusivist," *Religious Studies,* 36 (2000), 401-417.

necessary."[33] This is closer to the spirit of my suggestions rather than solely comparing and contrasting between religions.

Feminist Philosophy

Feminist philosophy of religion and feminist theology have strong overlaps so I treat them here as one. Formerly, feminist philosophy of religion focused greatly on Christianity, and a traditional version thereof. Some feminists, particularly Rachel Adler, Judith Plaskow, and Melissa Raphael did write seriously on Judaism,[34] and still others studied Islam, notably Leila Ahmed.[35] Since Rita Gross, a Buddhist, lamented in the year 2000 the narrow focus on Christianity, work on Eastern religions has been more extensive.[36] And of course, this has pertained only to gender issues, such as an Eastern fondness for Goddesses. Now, if feminist philosophers of religion were to engage in issues other than gender, they would no longer be acting as *feminist* philosophers. Nonetheless, those *persons* who are feminist philosophers could bring along their religious imagination (in a positive sense) and their keen ability to sniff out implicit biases and power abuses to wider evaluations of the world religions. Feminist philosophy of religion stands as a warning to the rest of us against smug, non-self-reflective and narrow assumptions in and about religions.

Feminist philosophers of religion can also contribute much to the study of ineffability and embodiment. One grand illustration of this possibility is the work of Catherine Keller, who combines feminist interests with studies in apophatic mysticism.

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[33] Keith Ward, *Religion and Revelation* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994), p. 48.

[34] Rachel Adler, *Engendering Judaism, An Inclusive Theology and Ethics* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1998); Judith Plaskow, *Standing Again at Sinai, Judaism from a Feminist Perspective* (New York: HarperCollins, 1991); Melissa Raphael's work on Judaism includes, *The Female Face of God in Auschwitz: A Jewish Feminist Theology of the Holocaust* (London & New York: Routledge, 2003), "Judaism and Gender," in Lindsay Jones, ed., *Encyclopedia of Religion*, Second Edition (New York: Macmillan, 2005), and "Jewish Feminist Theology," in Mary McClintock Fulkerson and Sheila Briggs, eds. *The Oxford Handbook of Feminist Theology* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006).

[35] See Leila Ahmed, *Women and Gender in Islam: Historical Roots of a Modern Debate* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992).

[36] Rita M. Gross, "Feminist Theology: Religiously Diverse Neighborhood or Christian Ghetto? (Roundtable: Feminist Theology and Religious Diversity)," *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion*, (2000), p. 77.

Explanations Of The Track Record

How are we to explain the reticence of philosophers of religion to judge religious belief and practices across religions in the ways I propose? I will take a stab at an answer by listing four reasons: political correctness, a rejection of "truth," an endorsement of cultural incommensurability or isolation, and worries about religious discord.

Political Correctness

In Western countries, in the general culture people sometimes consider it bad taste to examine another person's religious beliefs. There is a feeling among some non-religious folk that a religious attachment is both very precious to a devotee as well as rationally indefensible. Since this is so, it would embarrass a person to find her religious beliefs under examination. Many religious folk might be equally reticent to raise the issue with regard to others because they might be unsure how they would defend or even articulate their own beliefs. Therefore, they assume a protective strategy. In any case, in a culture where everyone is supposed to smile at and be nice to everyone else cross-religious evaluation does not get very far.

Philosophers of religion should not be part of this cultural vogue. Philosophy of religion should include the agenda of evaluating the acceptability of claims and practices across world religions, separately, as well as evaluating religious claims against competing ones. If philosophers of religion will not do it, who should?

Rejection Of Truth

Sometimes folks reject truth in the name of "relativism." I have never seen a coherent characterization of relativism, and do not know any proclaimed relativist who behaves as one is supposed to throughout the course of the day. Here is not the place to trot out the arguments.[37] From my point of view relativism is not a good reason to refrain from evaluation of the acceptability of the world religions.

Some feminists have rejected truth in the name of a "no-exclusive-truth-claims" platform, which strikes me not so much as relativism but

[37] I refer you to Alvin Goldman, *Knowledge in a Social World* (Oxford: Oxford University, 1999), and Alvin Plantinga, "Postmodernism and Pluralism," in Alvin Plantinga, *Warranted Christian Belief* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), pp. 422-457.

simply as a refusal to engage in truth-talk about religion. Rita Gross once urged feminist theologians to study religions other than Christianity to break the hold of exclusive religious truth claims:

> One might hope and expect that feminist theology, with its sensitivity to diversity and to the pain of exclusion, would be among the leading movements to condemn exclusive truth claims in religion, and to manifest a different, religiously diverse stance.[38]

Exclusive religious truth claims, so the thinking goes, are a tool to fix boundaries between outsiders and insiders. So, turning to "other" religions in a non-judgmental way serves to collapse the binary categories of "us" and "them."

In general, feminist philosophers are wary of "truth," thinking it a weapon that men have brandished to enforce obedience to patriarchy and to distinguish between those included and those excluded. Hence, I do not expect feminist philosophers of religion to consider evaluating the truth claims of various religions. However, feminist philosophers of religion can evaluate religions along other dimensions. Feminist philosophers judge unacceptable androcentric/patriarchal thinking and practices in various religions. After we make adjustments as to "whose acceptability" and "whose power" is at stake, we should expand judgments beyond the categories of patriarchal/non-patriarchal, as to the acceptability of religious practices and values (both "theirs" and "ours") in terms of morality, spiritual efficacy, and human flourishing.

The enterprise is fraught with danger, especially from a feminist perspective. The major danger is enlisting neighborhood (including androcentric) values without adequately appreciating the perspective of another religion and its culture. Feminist thinkers have emphasized this, especially lamenting the disregard of the perspectives of the marginalized and oppressed. We should take heed of the feminist philosopher of religion, Pamela Anderson when she writes: "To be objective is to be

[38] Rita M. Gross, „Feminist Theology: Religiously Diverse Neighborhood or Christian Ghetto? (Roundtable: Feminist Theology and Religious Diversity)," *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion*, (2000), p. 77. Gross has written the by-now classic work on Buddhist feminism: Rita M. Gross, *Soaring and Settling: Buddhist Perspectives on Social and Theological Issues* (N.Y.: Continuum Books, 1998).

able to think one's claims from the perspective of another and to reinvent oneself as other."[39]

Religious Insularity

A third reason for avoiding judging the acceptability of religions is that you cannot adequately understand a religion unless you have lived it from the inside. Hence, you should refrain from making solid judgments about a religion if you are an outsider. At the extreme, this view claims incommensurability between one religion and another. (Rudyard Kipling: "Oh, East is East, and West is West, and never the twain shall meet.")

Now, obviously, there is some truth to this. I know this from the way in which non-Jews typically will understand the subtleties of my Jewish religion in a way that misses the point because they really cannot get the point from the outside. To the extent that meaning involves a living context, there is no substitute for living the religion itself.

However, we ought not to make too much of this fact. One is not excluded from understanding other religions, since one can come to appreciate elements of religions not one's own by at least approximating an understanding of their beliefs, values, and experiences. Otherwise, it would not have been possible for me to have engaged in Buddhist meditation for many years with knowledge of Buddhist writings in the background and then come to anticipate stuff I discovered only later in my Buddhist reading. It would not have been possible for me to have benefited in contemplative prayer from the anonymous Christian works *The Cloud of Unknowing* and the *Book of Privy Counsel*, that have enhanced my own Jewish prayer. So, while I might not understand it fully, I can understand another religion enough to value at least some of its important content, and understand it enough to be able as well to depreciate other things.

If what I just wrote was too simplistic for you and did not convince you, then I would argue that still we should not excuse philosophers from dealing with religions to which they do not belong. Philosophy should do the best it can, and if need be bracket such endeavors as coming from an etic standpoint.

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[39] Pamela Anderson, *A Feminist Philosophy of Religion: The Rationality and Myths of Religious Belief* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1998), p. 78.

Religious Peace

The fourth reason for refraining from religious evaluation connects to some of the above, and that is the desire to foster religious peace and avoid religious strife. Religious animosity so fills the world, the objection goes, that our foremost obligation as human beings is to diminish that strife as much as possible. Evaluating another religion and designating elements of it unacceptable will only increase and harden alienation between devotees of different religions, amplifying the confrontational atmosphere so prevalent between world religions. Better to smile to one another and forget the differences.

This sentiment is a good and honorable one. However, philosophy is quite a different matter. And here I answer that to the contrary, evaluating religions with the intellectual calm and emotional reserve of trained academic philosophers should be a paradigm of how people of one religion can relate to other religions with which they disagree. Such activity presents itself as a replacement for shrill polemics that can lead to acrimony, violence, and wars. Demonstrating how to disagree with respect and regard, which is my experience with Christianity, is a socially beneficial activity where philosophers can have influence. Furthermore, philosophers can provide a counter to religious strife when judging the content of "other" religions as acceptable in one way or another.

To address these topics satisfactorily the three strands of philosophy of religion should cooperate. Comparative philosophers of religion possess expertise in knowing in depth the details and nuances of world religions. Analytic philosophers have the skills to take an idea apart and then (try) to put it back together again with sharper corners, and they have the skills to sniff out logical implications. They certainly have skill in arguing. Feminist philosophers of religion bring an ability to uncover biases in what otherwise might strike one as the height of objectivity and fairness. Womanist feminists, largely Afro-American, can offer an additional perspective, other than that of WASP women university professors, which should be joined by perspectives of women and men in various cultures.[40]

[40] A classic work of womanism is Emilie M. Townes, ed. *Embracing the Spirit: Womanist Perspectives on Hope, Salvation, and Transformation* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1997)

In addition, philosophers of religion should investigate a religion in collaboration with informed, articulate members of that religion. Books alone cannot give a full picture of how beliefs and practices actually affect the religious culture. We philosophers should study and take into account how a religion is lived, including gaps between the way a religion looks on paper and the way its most serious devotees interpret it and live it on the ground. Often, devotees will shape a religion into what they think most important, and live it selectively. So when evaluating a specific religion we should be aware of this potential dualism in its workings.

Conclusion: This little boy from Detroit has grown up to be an analytic philosopher of religion (with side trips to Kierkegaard, Sartre, and Jewish thought) and has witnessed the growth of this discipline into a beneficial presence for religious culture in the English-speaking world. In future, philosophy of religion should contribute to civil culture even more. Honestly assessing religious claims will further the cause of truth as well as demonstrate how to address religions other than one's own in a civil manner even when differing over acceptance. By evaluating Esoteric religion, rather than only studying it or subjecting it to a narrow critique, philosophy of religion can contribute to answering the question as to what extent there is overlap among *acceptable* components of Esoteric religions.[41]

[41] Jonathan Malino read this paper and gave very good comments as always. I thank him.