This is the peer reviewed version of the following article: *Metaphilosophy*, January 2016, Volume 47, Issue 1, pp. 39-56., which has been published in final form at http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/meta.12168/full. This article may be used for non-commercial purposes in accordance with Wiley Terms and Conditions for Self-Archiving.

# "The Problem of Relevance and the Future of Philosophy of Religion"

Thomas D. Carroll

Abstract: Despite the growth in research in philosophy of religion over the last several decades, recent years have seen a number of critical studies of the subfield in an effort to redirect the methods and topics of inquiry. In addition to problems of religious parochialism described by critics such as Wesley Wildman, I argue that the subfield is facing a problem of relevance. In responding to this problem, I suggest philosophers of religion should do three things: first, be critically self-aware about their aims of inquiry; second, investigate concepts used by other philosophers, scientists, and religious studies scholars to identify and dispel confusion about religions; and third, following the model of applied ethics, work to clarify concepts and advance arguments of contemporary practical urgency.

Keywords: applied philosophy, higher education, metaphilosophy, philosophy of religion, relevance, religious studies

> "Socratic thinking is important in any democracy. But it is particularly important in societies that need to come to grips with the presence of people who differ by ethnicity, caste, and religion. The idea that one will take responsibility for one's own reasoning, and ex-

> changing ideas with others in an atmosphere of mutual respect for reason, is essential to the peaceful resolution of differences, both within a nation and in a world increasingly polarized by ethnic and religious conflict." (Nussbaum 2010, 54)

> "It seems clear that there is a rich array of ways to conceive of a fruitful relationship between philosophy and the academic study of religion, and indeed that this may be one of the most exciting areas of intellectual work associated with religious studies. It is equally clear that philosophers of religion, who reject the restrictions associated with serving the interests of a particular religious community or tradition, are struggling to articulate what it is that they are doing, and the ways they seek to transform traditional philosophy of religion in the secular context." (Wildman 2010, xiii)

In recent years, scholars in many fields have become increasingly aware of the significance of religions in local, national and international levels of cultural activity and political affairs. Partly, this heightened awareness is due to religious conflicts, and partly, it is a result of changing cultural landscapes in many societies due to increased emigration. With this new awareness, one might expect philosophy of religion to be among the disciplines at the center of cutting edge, critical reflection on the place of religions in contemporary life. Yet while this has been seen with political theory, intellectual history and various areas of religious studies and theology, philosophy of religion has largely not followed suit. For example, when one sees articles concerning religious pluralism, the topic is explored overwhelmingly as a potential defeater within religious epistemology; the idea that religious pluralism -- the fact of it within many soci-

eties -- might itself be a topic needing philosophical insight has gone largely unexplored by philosophers of religion.[i]

Even so, depending on who one reads, philosophy of religion is either in the midst of a decades long boom[ii] or is a field in crisis.[iii] It seems to me that both views are correct, within their respective contexts. At some private and religiously affiliated institutions, philosophy of religion has indeed been thriving and shows a strong likelihood for continuing this pattern. Yet at secular colleges and universities, philosophy of religion is at best a minor sub-area of philosophy and religious studies and at worst barely registers, if at all, among faculty. The perception that the field consists of *post hoc* justifications for religious belief may be reinforced by surveys by David Bourget and David Chalmers as well as Helen De Cruz (See Bourget and Chalmers 2009 and De Cruz 2012).

The value of philosophy of religion is not self-evident within the academy and beyond. The subfield today is found to varying degrees along the margins within its two parent fields, philosophy and religious studies. The margins have margins as well, as collections in feminist and post-colonial philosophy of religion continue to show (Anderson 2010, Bilimoria and Irvine 2009); indeed, it is partly due to the marginalization of the field in general that feminist and post-colonial standpoints in the field have been doubly obscured.

This article is not an exercise in the giving of advice, but it is a call for self-assessment. Recent years have seen an uptick in the number of conference panels, congresses, papers and books devoted to the subject of the future of philosophy of religion. While some boosters depict a bright future for philosophy of religion in the twenty-first century, others argue that philosophy of religion needs to change in some fundamental ways (e.g. greater engagement with religious

studies). Yet there is another problem philosophy of religion is facing, one that while not unrelated to those identified by critics such as Nick Trakakis and Wesley Wildman, extends beyond their respective analyses: this is the problem of relevance. The marginalization that philosophy of religion increasingly faces is due to the perceived irrelevance of philosophy of religion to mainstream topics in philosophy and religious studies and to topics of more general social interest.

Yet for all that, relevance in academia can be a catch-22. In seeking relevance, a discipline may come to be framed as a commodity in a marketplace. This objectification of learning, e.g. in the service of career training, ignores the dialectical aspects of education; however, if a discipline ignores the value of relevance, it may dwindle in appeal to all but a small group of practitioners. To escape the catch-22, what is needed is relevance that maintains the integrity of the discipline. The point is for philosophers of religion to perform a service to their communities, a service that will be filled by non-experts if philosophers of religion avoid, ignore, or disdain that role.

## 1. The Scope of Philosophy of Religion

In considering the future for philosophy of religion, a dilemma arises: what do we mean by "philosophy of religion"? There is contemporary philosophy of religion and historical philosophy of religion. Contemporary philosophy of religion divides into clusters of inquiry typically identified as analytic, continental, feminist, post-colonial, pragmatist, process, and sometimes is associated with a particular point of view with respect to religious identification or participation: agnostic, atheist, Buddhist, Christian, Hindu, Jewish, Muslim, and so on. Further additions, subdivisions or combinations of approaches and religions would be needed to account for the di-

verse intellectual work that may be considered to lie in the subfield when broadly conceived. Because of this dynamic, it does not make sense to speak of *one* future for the philosophy of religion; instead philosophers at various locations of philosophical activity shall each pursue their own ends with their devised methods.[iv]

Yet there is a striking lack of awareness among these different quarters of the field regarding what takes place in other traditions.[v] One reason for this may be the “justificatory” footing of most philosophy of religion.[vi] If one is investigating the rational grounding of one’s (community or tradition’s) beliefs about ultimate reality or central ethical commitments, then the most important questions have to do with one’s native formulations of these topics. While philosophers of a more pluralistic bent may be drawn to encounter disparate traditions in an effort to develop a comprehensive philosophy of religion, the aims of many philosophers of religion end with rational assessment of their local beliefs, doctrines, practices, etc.[vii]

Charles Taliaferro locates the name “philosophy of religion” in the work of the seventeenth century Cambridge Platonists. For them, the name meant something similar to what is understood by the term today. Taliaferro writes:

> Much of the subject matter treated by Cudworth and More is continuous with the current agenda of philosophy of religion (arguments about God's existence, the significance of religious pluralism, the nature of good and evil in relation to God, and so on), and many of the terms that are in current circulation had their origin in Cudworth's and his colleague's work (they coined the terms *theism*, *materialism*, *consciousness*, *et al.*). (Taliaferro 2013)

Even so, their practice of philosophy differed significantly from prevailing philosophical practice today (e.g. different genres of writing and speaking, such as public sermons, Taliaferro 2005, 12); these differences point in part to the different footing philosophy has within contemporary institutions of higher education versus the institutional contexts within which it was embedded in other times and places.[viii] The name came into common use during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries; yet Anthony Flew and Alasdair MacIntyre refrain from using the name in the title for their widely read collection *New Essays in Philosophical Theology* (1955) due to the name's then Hegelian overtones, although the name rose again to prominence within analytic philosophy not long after their book (see MacIntyre and Flew 1955, vii). In his recent book on the future of philosophy of religion, Wildman recommends shifting the name of the field to "religious philosophy," in the goal of trying to align philosophy of religion better with religious studies and the institutional context of the secular academy. What this history suggests is that philosophical work having to do with religions has been so fraught on occasion that scholars have tried to break off from previous iterations of the subfield in an effort to start fresh. The multiple ways that "philosophy of religion" can be parsed make it vague (is it philosophical analysis of concepts having to do with religions? is it philosophy performed under a religious identity?) as well as dated (does it concern a supposed underlying essence to all religions?). Even so, the name "philosophy of religion" is no more ambiguous than its competitor names (philosophical theology, religious philosophy) and has the benefit of longevity as a name for the area of philosophical discourse about religions.

I address the problem of relevance in connection mostly with analytic philosophy of religion (henceforth, simply "philosophy of religion") not because this work is especially problemat-

ic or exemplary with respect to relevance but because the intersection of analytic philosophy and philosophy of religion is the space within the field with which I most closely associate my own work. The spirit in which I write is as much self-critique as critique of the subfield. My remarks are addressed both to those who consider themselves philosophers of religion and also to those who do not, such as philosophers whose work may at times concern religions but may not address what may be regarded as "classic" questions or topics in the field.

## 2. Diagnoses and Prescriptions

A medical diagnosis typically begins with the identification of symptoms. From these a diagnosis may or may not be drawn, but only once one has been made can a prescription be given and prognosis determined. Unlike human bodies, academic fields are not amenable to the study and experimentation requisite to identify factors leading to overall health -- or for that matter, risk factors that may under certain conditions produce disease.[ix] This is why I advocate not for a particular prescription but for self-assessment; we must be our own physicians. Indeed, what "health" or "disease" might amount to when it comes to academic fields is not always clear; yet, I would agree that there are troubling symptoms within philosophy of religion. These symptoms include diminishing stature at secular and private non-religious institutions, relative lack of interest from the broader field of philosophy, overwhelming white male dominance, and theoretical parochialism of Christian theist points of view. Symptoms like these have led to some recent diagnoses and prescriptions for the subfield. I will focus on the recent books of Trakakis 2008 and Wildman 2010.

In *The End of Philosophy of Religion*, Trakakis argues that the problem with philosophy of religion, and analytic philosophy in general, is that it has forsaken *wisdom* in favor of *knowledge* (see Trakakis 2008, 2). Symptoms of this problem include unreadable philosophical prose as well as political and personal dangers for practitioners. He understands the cause of the problem, embrace of a scientistic model of rationality, to have led to a narrowing of the ends of philosophy, and this trend has been exacerbated by the professionalization and instrumentalization of the discipline and the academy. Trakakis' prescription is to realize philosophy once again as a way of life;[x] and continental philosophy is well suited for this purpose in Trakakis' estimation.

Trakakis's diagnosis suffers from extreme generalizations of "analytic" and "continental" philosophies, and he chooses idiosyncratic exemplars of these "traditions" in Alvin Plantinga and John Caputo.[xi] Yet I think Trakakis is on the right track in being wary of the unforeseen costs of professionalization of philosophy, although not necessarily for the reasons he provides. Trakakis is concerned that the socio-economic conditions of contemporary academia compel philosophy to become more like a science and more enamored with the extension of knowledge than the pursuit of wisdom. To this end, he recommends a more literary-existential approach to the field, one that he takes to be at home within continental philosophy. While I admire some philosophy that aspires to be a way of life, the vast majority of philosophers first encountered philosophy within the institutional contexts of colleges and universities. If the institutionalization of philosophy is part of the problem, it is also what has enabled philosophy to reach a larger audience than in all of its history. My concern is not that the institutionalization of philosophy will corrupt its mission, the pursuit of wisdom, so much as that the professionalization of academia -- in which much contemporary philosophy is situated -- will issue in dramatic reduction of the disciplines

and sub-disciplines in the humanities, social sciences, and physical sciences that have an unclear relation to job training. If this happens, then many future university students will lose the opportunity to contend with fundamental philosophical questions with experts.

Wildman's *Religious Philosophy as Multidisciplinary Comparative Inquiry* presents a comprehensive vision for the future of the field with an eye to the role of Peircean pragmatism as occupying the organizational heart of the research program. The symptoms of the problems currently facing the subfield can be seen in the lack of prestige philosophy of religion has within religious studies, the decline in hiring of philosophers of religion within religious studies departments, and the fact that philosophers of religion trained in religious studies are in a difficult position with respect to explaining what it is they do. For Wildman, the problems facing philosophy of religion are two-fold: the field has unresolved contradictions about method and scope, and the field is out of step with the academic study of religions. The cause of the problem is "undiagnosed or obstinate religious bias" and parochialism (Wildman 2010, xi). The idea being that many philosophers of religion seek to find *post hoc* justifications for previously held views on the nature of ultimacy. Academically respectable philosophy of religion would require fallibilistic inquiry into ultimacy, drawing on disparate intellectual resources and traditions; this is precisely what informs Wildman's prescription for the field: to reconceive the field as religious philosophy (i.e. as multidisciplinary comparative inquiry into religious phenomena, to better parallel "religious studies" and to signal its piecemeal, collaborative nature), and to build a theory of rationality in order to organize the multidisciplinary comparative inquiry so that it does not fall into a jumble.

There is much to admire in Wildman's approach. Wildman's project of reconceiving philosophy of religion as multidisciplinary comparative inquiry could conceivably organize a great deal of what takes place philosophically concerning religions. Even so, I must register an area of concern: his identification of six traditions of inquiry that demarcate historical as well as live areas of ongoing research. Wildman identifies these six traditions as the "ontotheological," "cosmotheological," "physicotheological," "psychotheological," "axiotheological," and "mysticaltheological" (Wildman 2010, 247ff). With these six traditions of multidisciplinary comparative inquiry, Wildman seeks to cover the disparate intellectual projects that may take place under the aegis of philosophy of religion. In line with Kevin Schilbrack's criticism that traditions require a "handing down" (Schilbrack 2012, 307), I concur that these categories of research combine philosophical projects that are far flung across geographical areas and historical eras; I would add also that this mode of characterizing the diversity of religious philosophy downplays the historical contingency of instances of "religious reason-giving", to use Knepper's phrase (see Knepper 2013, x). I anticipate that Wildman would want to introduce that contextual information at what would amount to as the proper stage from a pragmatist perspective, and when warranted, to modify the comparative categories used; from a contextualist perspective, such as my own, his six traditions of inquiry downplay the nontrivial, performative value of these instances of reasoning (who the audience is, what religious, political or philosophical purposes are being served by the instances of reasoning).

When contemplating the future of philosophy of religion, the problem that looms largest in my mind, larger than Trakakis's concerns about the possible loss of wisdom as an end for philosophy or Wildman's concerns over lack of interest or awareness for what the academic study of

religions supplies to philosophy of religion, is the problem of relevance. After all, many colleges and universities around the world are presently being restructured according to models of business management; while tenured faculty contemplate whether to collaborate with scholarly peers in philosophy and religious studies, tenure lines are disappearing in the humanities at an alarming rate. Despite the clear relevance of philosophy concerning religious phenomena to many problems our world faces this century, philosophers of religion have not done a good job of demonstrating this relevance. If the subfield is to have a robust future, proponents will need to make a strong argument in its favor. The ethical challenge will lie in whether philosophers can make these arguments in a way that maintains integrity with their philosophical principles.

It is my view that increased concern for relevance will lead to greater social impact for philosophy of religion. Yet, concern for relevance can carry connotations of market-based reevaluations of entire fields within universities undergoing restructuring. Concern for relevance must be balanced with a sense of integrity within the discipline. Relevance may or may not help philosophy departments survive economic changes, but it will help philosophy survive. In particular, the problem of relevance can be seen in the near silence of philosophy of religion about the place of religious traditions in local and national political debates as well as in international affairs (marked out over the last decade or so by references to the "post-secular" or "post-9/11" world). The heightened profile of religions in global affairs in the last couple of decades ought also to raise the profile of philosophical inquiry into matters concerning religions (paradigmatically, philosophy of religion). While the slim volume of interviews with Jacques Derrida and Jürgen Habermas, *Philosophy in a Time of Terror* (2003), was published shortly after 9/11, there has been little by the way of published reflection by analytic philosophers of religion on the re-

cent public resurgence of interest in the topic.[xii] Political philosophy and applied ethics show growing numbers of publications connecting topics such as terrorism, torture, just war theory and the ongoing relevance of human rights to religious ethics, but philosophy of religion has not shifted its attention from typical problems in light of recent events. Contrast the level of engagement with issues relating to 9/11 in philosophy of religion with Liam Harte's observation regarding philosophy in general after 9/11: over the previous six decades, *The Philosopher's Index* "shows 89 publications that have the term "terrorism" as a subject keyword; but from September 2001 to 2008, the number (at time of writing) is 410. Such a huge increase seems unlikely to be a coincidence, even allowing for some duplication in records and the fact that a fair number of items make little reference to terrorism." (Harte 2009, 191)

Furthermore, despite enjoying a resurgence over the last forty to fifty years in the Anglophone academic world (and especially at private and religious institutions), philosophy of religion is marginalized within the field of philosophy, pursued significantly at religiously-affiliated colleges and universities and little if at all at secular institutions in the U.S. Of the top ten graduate Philosophy Departments, according to the Philosophical Gourmet Report (2014), only Oxford clearly has a strong showing for philosophy of religion. Princeton, Harvard and Yale each have good resources for philosophy of religion, but in the cases of Princeton and Harvard, these resources are found largely in the Religious Studies department or Divinity School. NYU, the University of Pittsburgh, the University of Michigan, and Stanford list no faculty with the area of specialization (although Stanford has resources in the Religious Studies department); philosophy of religion courses are occasionally taught at these institutions but they are not mainstream courses within the curriculum. Rutgers has the notable resource with Dean Zimmerman and the new

Center for the Philosophy of Religion, but he is alone on their faculty claiming the area of specialization. At the time of this writing, there are a few faculty members at these institutions who identify philosophy of religion as an area of competence, but the subfield's absence as an area of specialization at most of these institutions illustrates its marginalized status in philosophy.

The presumption (among boosters and detractors) seems to be that philosophy of religion is a prolegomenon to religious/non-religious belief; it is the field that considers (if needed) the epistemic claims of theism or atheism. Alternately, philosophy of religion is sometimes considered irrelevant precisely because it offers *post hoc* justifications of religious beliefs that would be help with or without the philosophy. Because a great many philosophers are naturalists (metaphysically speaking),[xiii] it is possible that the question of the ground of naturalism may simply not present itself as a problem of wide interest. However, it is not clear what conclusions can be drawn from the data. While arguments for the epistemic parity of theism with naturalism abound, arguments that go the other way are rare. For naturalists, the intellectual terrain has shifted in their favor. If one looks just at where philosophy of religion is practiced and cultivated in the United States and where it is not, it appears it is largely for theists (and other religion-friendly thinkers) that philosophy of religion remains as a discourse.[xiv]

This marginalization is evident in Brian Leiter's edited volume *The Future for Philosophy* in which eminent contemporary philosophers describe the cutting edges of some of the most important subfields in the discipline, the sort of philosophy done by "the very best and most influential contemporary philosophers" (Leiter 2004, 1); yet philosophy of religion is not included. Gary Gutting corrected this oversight in his *What Philosophers Know* but limited his discussion of philosophy of religion to the epistemic viability of Christian theism and Plantinga's formula-

tion of Reformed epistemology (see Gutting 2009). While a leading figure in later twentieth century Christian analytic philosophy in the United States, Plantinga's inclusion supports the view that philosophy of religion is a discipline concerned with the epistemic status of commonly held religious beliefs.

It is perhaps more difficult to determine the place of philosophy of religion within religious studies as the academic study of religions is not so much a discipline as a somewhat diffuse cross-disciplinary area. Widely available rankings are harder to come by in Religion, but the 2010 National Research Council Rankings: "Doctoral Programs in America" provides some guide. Even without a hard and fast list of the top programs in Religion, one can gather that programs such as Duke, UNC Chapel Hill, Princeton, Chicago, Brown, Harvard, Emory, Notre Dame, Yale and Boston College are among the most highly regarded and are thus ranked highly on the chosen criteria. Philosophy of religion appears to fare a little better in highly ranked religious studies departments than in philosophy departments, especially if one includes faculty working on topics that could broadly be termed philosophical. Philosophical work within particular traditions (e.g. religious ethics), or scholarly study of religious texts with philosophical content (such as the study of Buddhist or Jewish speculative literature), is well represented in most of the top religious studies programs, but only Chicago and Brown appear to have thriving programs in philosophy of religion. Even so, because philosophy of religion appears to be a comparatively lively, if threatened, subfield in religious studies, I will focus my attention on philosophy of religion within the field of philosophy, where the problem of relevance is more acutely felt.[xv]

Some philosophers of religion might hold that the mission of philosophy of religion – what makes it already relevant to a great many people whether they know it or not – is that it is the field that contemplates and assesses beliefs in ultimate matters (for example, the existence and nature of God(s), the authority of traditions, the coherence of certain traditional practices, doctrines, or textual interpretations) and the arguments used in support of these beliefs. According to the justificatory conception of philosophy of religion, philosophers weigh arguments regarding religious claims for their justificatory value alone.[xvi] The problem of marginalization of philosophy of religion would therefore not be due to irrelevance so much as the avoiding or ignoring of philosophy of religion (and its traditional subject matter) by other philosophers and scholars of religions. So long as philosophy of religion is widely thought of in terms of the justificatory project alone, other possible topics and approaches within philosophy of religion will be underdeveloped or ignored.

Calls for reconsiderations of philosophical projects may be found frequently across the history of philosophy. One such call concerned whether philosophers had a social responsibility to do more than clarify concepts. At the July 1945 meeting of the Aristotelian Society, H. H. Price addressed his peers in a critical tone in the lecture “Clarity is Not Enough,” observing that in light of the ground-shaking events of the second world war, a reconsideration of the aims of philosophy was in order. With the war freshly in mind, a needful public might approach professional philosophers for a comprehensive view of life, something that would answer to the fundamental questions recently raised; yet, Price observes that the professional nature of academic philosophy could prove impenetrable to the uninitiated and in any case, if the problems of philosophy must first be taught before dispelled, the naïve and possibly inchoate questions of the

public may fail successfully to be formulated in a way to which the philosopher could respond. Price writes: "As pure philosophers, we may think about what we like, and nobody has the right to stop us, or to tell us that we ought to think about something else instead. But as teachers of Philosophy, we have a duty to the community; and it is alleged, rightly or wrongly, that we have not been doing it." (Price 1963, 16) According to Price, this allegation is legitimate insofar as philosophers are also *teachers* of philosophy. When we think of ourselves as teachers, how does our sense of responsibility to our communities shift our attention? Contemplation of the problem of relevance for analytic philosophy is not new; indeed, portions of Price's essay may challenge contemporary readers, and have challenged the present author.

Price is critical of the tendency he detects among analytic philosophers in the 1930s and 40s to focus exclusively on analytic clarity – or clarity of expression within particular sentences, correspondences between the structure of propositions or sentences and the structure of the world – as the proper end of philosophy. Price defends synoptic clarity as an alternate end for philosophy, i.e. clarity regarding knowledge of the many features of our world – including all the main departments of human experience: from the sciences to history to religious and mystical experiences. (Price 1963, 36) Price is not rejecting analytic clarity as an end for philosophy, but he is challenging philosophers to be more responsive in their work to other academicians as well as to students and the educated public. Price is arguing not merely for another conception of what clarity might amount to as a goal for philosophy, but instead for a pluralistic conception of the aims of philosophy itself. He understands philosophy to be not just a single intellectual enterprise with individual philosophers contributing to a broad philosophical program through their tightly focused analyses; instead Price considers philosophers from different historical periods to have le-

gitimate aims of their own. Here we can consider a parallel between metaphilosophical consideration of the history of philosophy and philosophy of religion. If interpreters approach a text from the history of philosophy without an appreciation for its social context, they may misunderstand the arguments or overlook the ends towards which the arguments drive.

Price recommends synoptic clarity to stand alongside analytic clarity as a legitimate aim of philosophy, and indeed, Price holds speculative metaphysics to be better suited to answering "the consumer's" interests. Here one sees an early appearance of the unfortunate metaphor of the market. If students, or more generally the philosopher's community, deserve better, it is not just because they have paid for a service, although this economic dynamic should not be neglected; rather, it is because they are confused, aware of their confusion, and are consulting experts in good faith. The market relationship is contingent on this more basic social role for philosophers, as gadflies on the body politic.

I am not arguing for Price's suggested revival of speculative metaphysics, but I would note that synoptic clarity can be thought of as the drawing of connections — "perspicuous representations", to use Wittgenstein's expression — across bodies of knowledge (i.e. both within philosophy and also across traditional disciplinary boundaries). Price seems to understand the connective assertions of speculative metaphysics to be responsive to bodies of knowledge that may improve over time. Even so, the fit between the map (metaphysics) and territory (human experience) will determine the adequacy of the map. I would want to suggest in a similar tone to Price's that philosophy of religion that is more open to conversation with non-specialist conversation partners would be more open to addressing the theoretical problems of cognate fields and the practical problems of communities. Here I have in mind conversations between philosophers

and psychologists or sociologists of religions, for example, as well as between philosophers and local communities increasingly characterized by diversities (including religious diversities).

3. Prognoses

Price was diagnosing a problem that does not match today's problems for philosophy of religion, and the therapy he prescribed might not be plausible or functional today. Yet, his call for relevance remains instructive in its strengths as well as weaknesses. In the spirit of Price's criticisms, and with some modification, I argue that in light of our vocations as philosophical educators, some of us ought to include, at least on occasion, as audience members and peers a broader swath of the intellectual neighborhood than may be found at the more familiar intersections of philosophy and religions. Some might say that the analytic aspect of analytic philosophy of religion prevents it from social or historical relevance, that other approaches to philosophy of religion would better serve relevance. I do not believe this is right although I admire the resources of these different approaches. The methods of analysis may be directed to any subject matter or problem which philosophers deem important. What I am arguing is that we should let our students and communities, from time to time, influence the topics we choose to then analyze. Work in philosophy of religion that aims to demonstrate the intellectual viability of various aspects of religious commitment, practice, or belief is valuable when it provides sound arguments for including these salient aspects of human experience in philosophical theorizing. Yet there are numerous other topics concerning religions that merit philosophical analysis by professionals qualified to assess them. For as Price indicates, the consumer "will in fact get what they want in the end, though they may not get it from the present generation of professional philosophers; and

perhaps they will not get it from professional philosophers at all, but from other and less well-qualified persons." (Price 1963, 35)

It is possible to stretch the subdiscipline of philosophy of religion, without changing the overall approach. In a review of P. M. S. Hacker's *Wittgenstein's Place in Twentieth-Century Analytic Philosophy*, Hans Sluga observes that the analytic history of philosophy can take on the analysis of concepts such as "authors," "philosophers," the "development" of a philosopher, "interpretations," "texts," "work" as a whole, "schools," "movements," and "traditions" (Sluga 1998); philosophy of religion can address a wider set of problems and traditions than are generally analyzed in the field, narrowly conceived. Some of these problems may show the relevance of philosophy of religion to projects in other areas of philosophy or related fields. In his critical response to Wildman, Schilbrack advocates beginning with Ninian Smart's list of seven dimensions of religion for philosophical analysis: categories used by religious studies scholars such as "ritual," "narrative and mythic," "experiential and emotional," "social and institutional," "ethical and legal," "doctrinal and philosophical" and "material" (see Schilbrack 2012 and 2014). Other concepts may arise from problems relating to contemporary events involving religions, bringing clarity to vexing issues of public interest such as how to balance religious commitments with democratic compromise or social order. Over the last forty years or so, applied ethics has shown how philosophy can be relevant to larger academic and non-academic audiences (see Steinbock 2013). Philosophy of religion can be more relevant too.

I would like to suggest a reconsideration of philosophy of religion as the subfield that responds (with particular philosophical ends in sight) to conceptual questions or problems that may arise from human experience with religions. This reconsideration is meant to address the prob-

lem of relevance from a conceptual standpoint. When thus considered, philosophy of religion will of necessity be relevant to some occasion of human experience. Thus, philosophy of religion could be understood to be conversant not just with traditional problems in religious epistemology, metaphysics and ethics, but also with debates over theory and method in religious studies, cognitive science of religion, religion and political philosophy, sociology of religion, history of philosophy, religion and law, and applied philosophy generally (among other intersections between religions and philosophy).

For example, Wildman explores as an example the varying features of humanity's relationship with food, drawing on resources from different academic fields. When inquiry proceeds along the lines of an individual discipline, food may be analyzed in terms of nutrition, social cooperation, ritual, aesthetics, etc. Comprehensive multidisciplinary investigation will display in a synoptic way the many different features of humanity's relationship with food and the way this manifests itself in religious traditions. Wildman provides a good example of how novel topics can be addressed using established methods or combining those established methods.

Another example of this could be exploring the meanings of ascriptions of the term "religion", with an eye to local contexts of disputation. The status of Confucian tradition as a religion is disputed in China and among members of the Chinese diaspora; yet, it is common to find entries on Confucianism in dictionaries and encyclopedias concerning religious studies, and textbooks frequently include chapters on Confucianism. Who has got it right?[xvii] One could stipulate a definition of religion, and then consider any particular candidate for the status of religion one by one. In fact, this is how many legal systems function when it comes to ascriptions of religion; because religions sometimes enjoy legal rights in virtue of being religions, ascriptions of reli-

gion-status can have important consequences. In China, for example, five religious traditions have been recognized by the government as being worthy of official toleration: Buddhism, Daoism, Islam, Protestantism, and Catholicism; yet, it is a requirement of toleration that members of these religious movements officially register with government patriotic associations (see Yang 2012). A new religious movement runs the risk of being categorized as a "dangerous cult" (*xiejiao*). As the profile of China rises around the globe and China plays a more significant role in international summits where global policies regarding toleration of religions are devised, the local Chinese view on religions will be felt elsewhere. Philosophers of religion have something to offer to critical analyses of these ongoing dynamics: how is "religion" constructed? According to what or whose interests? Under what circumstances should religions be tolerated? In what does religious toleration consist?

Students may take a course on philosophy of religion for any of a number of reasons. It may be a requirement for a program of study or perhaps the student has her own questions. These questions may have to do with understanding their own traditions or communities, learning how to proselytize more effectively members of other religions, confirming or disconfirming commonly held biases against certain religious groups, simply coming to understand why people believe or do what they do, or seeing if one tradition or another is able to address a deeply felt existential need (e.g. fear of death, significant suffering, etc.).

I want to be clear: a philosopher has no special responsibility to answer someone else's heartfelt questions. Non-specialists may have inchoate questions. To help them is to delve into their confusion, to show it as such, and to dispel it. Only then will a question worth answering emerge. It may be that a question is really historical or sociological and not philosophical. For

example, a question regarding the (putatively) high prevalence of violent extremism within Islam indicates a bias on the part of the student. Once that bias has been identified, the question may reduce to: Is violent extremism prevalent in Islam? Now the question is more properly framed as an inquiry into social facts, something sociologists and historians are equipped to answer (and dispel). A similar dynamic may emerge with a student interested in an existential problem. Here, taking the student seriously - honoring her questions - is an important first step, but the second is equally important: the student learning how to frame her questions in the best way. Partly, this may be determined by studying how experts may have done this before. (Has someone else already asked these questions? Epictetus? Socrates? Kierkegaard?)

Recent Pew Forum polls have detected a rise in religious nonaffiliation in the U.S., but this raises numerous philosophical questions (see Pew Research Center 2012, 2015). What are “affiliation” and “nonaffiliation”? What stances towards religious and nonreligious others should a pluralistic ethics advise? Another poll determined that religious knowledge - of one’s own tradition or of others’ - was at an all time low (see Pew Research Center 2010). What religious knowledge should, e.g. college graduates, possess? What remedy would address this problem?

These everyday examples illustrate the principle at hand: in effective teaching to new philosophy of religion students, a bridge must be built between students and their questions and the relevant philosophical resources. Something similar could be said about diplomatically extending the reach of philosophy of religion in philosophy, the academy and the wider public. “Relevance” can be defined in relation to communities of discourse. Philosophers of religion can then ask “who is my community?” “To whom am I writing?” “To what should I respond?” Philosophy

of religion, reconsidered in this way, attaches itself to lively instances of philosophical confusion or existential need.

## Conclusion

For the purpose of addressing the problem of relevance, I offer three modest suggestions: (1) As we saw with recent sympathetic critics of philosophy of religion, differing philosophical purposes entail different diagnoses and prescriptions. For example, we should be more self-critical about our aims of inquiry; critical self-awareness will enable philosophers of religion of one tradition to speak to other philosophers and scholars of religions in order to locate possible areas of joint concern. With philosophy of religion being such a diverse field, with different aims and methods, straddling its two parent fields, this will help reduce equivocation and uncharitable interpretations.

(2) We should investigate concepts used by other philosophers, scientists, and scholars of religions to identify and dispel confusion. In this sense, we may think of work done under the banner of theory and method in religious studies as overlapping with philosophy of religion and philosophy of science broadly conceived. In this sense, I am in broad agreement with the prescriptions offered by Wildman (as well as Knepper and Schilbrack); (2) entails that philosophers of religion ought to extend the reach of their studies well beyond the familiar territory of Christian theism, where so much of the twentieth century "renaissance" in philosophy of religion was localized.

(3) Perhaps most importantly, philosophers should follow the model of applied ethics at times by selecting concepts to clarify and arguments to evaluate in terms of contemporary ur-

gency, whether those topics have to do with religion and ethics, politics, epistemology or metaphysics.

These suggestions are offered not as an indication of what all philosophers must do in order to be relevant; that would be an arrogant and fruitless endeavor. A key feature of academic freedom is that each scholar ought to consider autonomously what her responsibilities are to her self, academic peers, students, and community. Rather, I offer these three suggestions as one deeply invested in the subfield and as one who is growing concerned about its standing in a changing academy. Suggestions (1) and (2) stem from the idea that philosophers of religion need to display their relevance to cognate fields and other academic peers; call this the academic service of philosophy of religion. Suggestion (3) stems from the idea that philosophers of religion need to display their social relevance, especially in a time of heightened awareness of religions; call this the public service of philosophy of religion.

A key problem in contemplating relevance for philosophy of religion is relevance to what, relevance for whom? Philosophical problems, and thus standards of relevance, are always problems for someone. So, the idea of a general measure for relevance ought to be resisted except where a clear interest in the problem is determined for each and every person. Even without a general measure for relevance, we can examine our own contexts, our own communities (both academic and beyond) and discover important matters for philosophical attention. Other philosophers will discern different topics as most deserving of philosophical attention. So much the better; a renewed conversation within philosophy of religion in public and academic life will have begun. Whether philosophy of religion has a secure place in the academy, or not, there will long be important matters at hand involving religions deserving of philosophical attention (as the

quote from Martha Nussbaum that began this article avers). The better philosophers are at addressing these problems, the easier it will be to justify the relevance of philosophy of religion in an evolving educational environment and the greater the likelihood that philosophers of religion will be in a position to achieve goals such as the cultivation of practical wisdom.[xviii]

Xing Wei College

1635 Cheng Nan Road

Shanghai, 201300

P. R. China

thomasdcarroll@gmail.com

References

Amesbury, Richard. 2012. "Religious Philosophy after 'Religion'?" *Sophia* 51 no. 2:293-297.

Anderson, Pamela Sue, ed. 2010. *New Topics in Feminist Philosophy of Religion: Contestations and Transcendence Incarnate.* Dordrecht: Springer.

Bilimoria, Purusottama, and Andrew B. Irvine, ed. 2009. *Postcolonial Philosophy of Religion.* Dordrecht: Springer.

Bourget, David and David Chalmers. 2009. "PhilPapers Survey." http://philpapers.org/surveys/. Accessed Nov. 10. 2015.

Brunsveld, Niek and Trigg, Roger, ed.. 2011. *Religion in the Public Sphere: Proceedings of the 2010 Conference of the European Society for Philosophy of Religion*, *Ars Disputandi*.

Clack, Beverley and Brian Clack. 2008. *The Philosophy of Religion: A Critical Introduction.* Malden, MA: Polity Press.

Clayton, John. 2006. *Religions, Reasons and Gods: Essays in Cross-Cultural Philosophy of Religion.* Prepared for publication by Anne M. Blackburn and Thomas D. Carroll. New York: Cambridge University Press.

De Cruz, Helen. 2012.“Results of My Survey on Natural Theological Arguments.” https://www.academia.edu/1438058/Results_of_my_survey_on_natural_theological_arguments. Accessed Nov. 10, 2015.

Draper, Paul and Ryan Nichols. 2013. “Diagnosing Bias in Philosophy of Religion.” *The Monist* 96, no. 3:420-446.

Flew, Antony, and Alasdair C. MacIntyre, eds. 1955. *New Essays in Philosophical Theology*. London: SCM Press.

Frankenberry, Nancy. 2005. “‘Sleepwalking through History’: Reflections on Democracy, Religion, and Pragmatism in a Time of Terror.” *American Journal of Theology & Philosophy* 26, nos. 1-2:45-59.

Gutting, Gary. 2009. *What Philosophers Know: Case Studies in Recent Analytic Philosophy*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.

Habermas, Jürgen, Jacques Derrida, and Giovanna Borradori, 2003, *Philosophy in a Time of Terror: Dialogues with Jürgen Habermas and Jacques Derrida.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Hadot, Pierre. 1995. *Philosophy As a Way of Life: Spiritual Exercises from Socrates to Foucault*. ed. by Arnold I. Davidson, and Michael Chase. Malden, MA: Blackwell.

Harte, Liam. 2009. "Known Unknowns: How Philosophy Has Responded to Fear of the Post-9/11 World." in *The Impact of 9/11 on Religion and Philosophy: The Day that Changed Everything?* ed. Matthew J. Morgan. Palgrave Macmillan, 187-206.

Knepper, Timothy David. 2013. *The Ends of Philosophy of Religion: Terminus and Telos.* Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave Macmillan.

Kvanvig, Jonathan L, ed. 2008. *Oxford Studies in Philosophy of Religion: Volume 1*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Leiter, Brian, ed. 2004. *The Future for Philosophy.* Oxford: Clarendon Press.

Pew Research Center. 2010. "U.S. Religious Knowledge Survey." http://www.pewforum.org/files/2010/09/religious-knowledge-full-report.pdf. Accessed Nov. 10. 2015.

—-. 2013. "'Nones' on the Rise: One-in-Five Adults Have No Religious Affiliation." http://www.pewforum.org/files/2012/10/NonesOnTheRise-full.pdf. Accessed Nov. 10. 2015.

—-. 2015. “U.S. Public Becoming Less Religious.” http://www.pewforum.org/files/2015/11/201.11.03_RLS_II_full_report.pdf. Accessed Nov. 10. 2015.

Margolis, Joseph. 2006. “Intimations of Moral Philosophy, By Way of War and Terrorism,” *Ars Disputandi*, 6.

National Research Council. 2010. “NRC Rankings: Doctoral Programs in America: Religion.” http://chronicle.com/article/nrc-religion/124664/. Accessed Nov. 10. 2015.

Nussbaum, Martha. 2010. *Not For Profit: Why Democracy Needs the Humanities.* Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Philosophical Gourmet Report. 2014. http://www.philosophicalgourmet.com. Accessed Nov. 10. 2015.

Plantinga, Alvin. 2011. *Where the Conflict Really Lies: Science, Religion, and Naturalism.* New York: Oxford University Press.

Price, H. H. 1963. “Clarity is Not Enough” in *Clarity Is Not Enough: Essays in Criticism of Linguistic Philosophy*. H. D. Lewis, ed. London: Allen & Unwin.

Rockmore, Tom. 2006. “Before and After 9/11: Religion, Politics, and Ethics.” *Ars Disputandi* 6.

Schilbrack, Kevin. 2012. “Assessing Wesley Wildman’s Religious Philosophy as Multidisciplinary Comparative Inquiry.” *Sophia* 51, no. 2:303-309.

—-. 2014. *Philosophy and the Study of Religions: A Manifesto.* New York: Wiley Blackwell.

Sherman, Jacob Holsinger. 2010. “Nick Trakakis *The End of Philosophy of Religion.*” *Religious Studies* 46, no. 3:415-420.

Sluga, Hans. 1998. “What Has History to Do with Me? Wittgenstein and Analytic Philosophy.” *Inquiry* 41, no. 1:99-121.

Steinbock, Bonnie. 2013. “How Has Philosophical Applied Ethics Progressed in the Past Fifty Years?” *Metaphilosophy* 44, nos. 1-2:58-62.

Sun, Anna. 2013. *Confucianism as a World Religion: Contested Histories and Contemporary Realities.* Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Taliaferro, Charles. 1998. *Contemporary Philosophy of Religion*. Malden, Mass: Blackwell.

—-. 2005. *Evidence and Faith: Philosophy and Religion Since the Seventeenth Century*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.

———. 2013. "Philosophy of Religion." *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy.* Edward N. Zalta, ed. http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/philosophy-religion/ (accessed Nov. 30, 2015).

Trakakis, Nick. 2008. *The End of Philosophy of Religion*. London: Continuum.

Wildman, Wesley J. 2010. *Religious Philosophy as Multidisciplinary Comparative Inquiry: Envisioning a Future for the Philosophy of Religion.* Albany, NY: SUNY Press.

—-. 2012. "Response to Amesbury, Knepper, and Schilbrack." *Sophia* 51, no. 2:311-317.

Yang, Fenggang. 2012. *Religion in China: Survival and Revival Under Communist Rule.* New York: Oxford University Press.

Yang, Xiaomei. 2008. "Some Issues in Chinese Philosophy of Religion." *Philosophy Compass* 3, no. 3:551-569.

Zagzebski, Linda T. 2007. *Philosophy of Religion: An Historical Introduction.* Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishers.

Notes

[i] For an exception to this tendency, see Brunsveld and Trigg 2011.

[ii] Numerous philosophers describe recent decades as a renaissance or revival of philosophy of religion. Some examples may be found in Taliaferro 1998, 4; Zagzebski 2007, viii; and Kvanvig 2008, vii.

[iii] For critics, see Trakakis 2008, Wildman 2010, Knepper 2013, and Schilbrack 2014.

[iv] It bears reminding that approaches are contested also *within* these sub-areas. What is "analysis"? What is "phenomenology"?

[v] Parochialism among philosophers of religion is at the core of the criticisms of Knepper 2013, Wildman 2010, and Schilbrack 2014. These three each advance a vision of philosophy of religion being truly comprehensive in its coverage of philosophy and religious traditions from around the world. In a different way, Draper and Nichols 2013 criticize parochialism in philosophy of religion primarily in terms of epistemic bias.

[vi] I borrow the name for this conception of the field from John Clayton 2006.

[vii] Arguments in support of "local" beliefs, doctrines, and practices should be understood to include counter-arguments against competing beliefs, doctrines and practices; thus, Alvin Plantinga's evolutionary argument against naturalism is part of the rational apparatus designed to support common sense Christian theistic beliefs, doctrines, and practices (see Plantinga 2011).

[viii] For more on the history of the contexts of early modern philosophy of religion, see Chapters 8-10 of Clayton 2006. See also Amesbury 2012 and Wildman 2012 for remarks on the place of philosophy of religion in the "secular academy".

[ix] This is in contrast to Draper and Nichols 2013 who diagnose bias in philosophy of religion and prescribe a set of recommendations to counter it. While there is much I agree with in their essay (the criticism of partisanship, polemicism, and narrowness in philosophy of religion), clarity about the ends of philosophy of religion will determine the criteria to be used in evaluating arguments. Epistemic justification is one of those ends, but it is not the only one.

[x] Trakakis mentions the work of Pierre Hadot 1995 in identifying the different purposes involved in the practice of philosophy in the ancient world versus the contemporary academy. Greco-Roman stoics, skeptics, cynics, and Platonists approached philosophy with a goal of being relieved of the mental perturbation that is a feature of everyday life.

[xi] See Sherman 2010 for similar criticisms.

[xii] Exceptions can be found in Frankenberry 2005, Margolis 2006, Rockmore 2006, and the final chapter of Clack and Clack 2008.

[xiii] According to the PhilPapers survey, 49.8% of respondents identify as naturalist and 85.4% identify as atheist or agnostic.

[xiv] This perception may be reinforced by De Cruz 2012; in her survey, 73.1% of specialists in philosophy of religion self-identify as theists.

[xv] See Wildman 2010 and Schilbrack 2014 for more on the contested status of philosophy of religion within the academic study of religions.

[xvi] Indeed, it is the failure of much contemporary work to live up to the ideals of the justificatory conception of philosophy of religion that is the focus of Draper and Nichols 2013.

[xvii] For more on the classification debates surrounding Confucianism, see Yang 2008 and Sun 2013; Yang especially links the debates with what philosophy of religion could be in a contemporary Chinese context.

[xviii] I read a previous version of this article at the 2010 meeting of the American Academy of Religion in the session "Possible Futures of the Philosophy of Religion". I am grateful to the members of the audience and other panelists, especially Timothy Knepper, J. Aaron Simmons, and the presider Michael Rea, for comments and questions.