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### Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/827247kw>

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### Publication Date

2024

### DOI

10.1093/jaarel/lfae062

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(The) Discipline and the Confessional:  
Toward Methodological Numenism and an Engaged, Embodied Study of Religion<sup>1</sup>

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*Abstract*

For all its transdisciplinarity, Religious Studies remains a field focused on boundaries, especially those between scholars and practitioners and between confessional and nonconfessional scholarship. The disciplinary use of the confessional in religious studies calls for a Foucauldian analysis that has not yet been central to our discussion of methods, despite important work on Foucault and religion from a number of prominent scholars. Disentangling the threads of the disciplinary and the confessional in religious studies and (re)articulating scholars' often disjointed response to the uncanniness of the worlds beyond the human, I build on the critiques offered by scholars such as Masuzawa, Beliso-De Jesús, Driscoll and Miller, and Schaefer to argue for methodological numenism and an engaged, embodied study of religion as critical steps in the decolonization of the field.

Religious studies can't quit positivism.

Some of us couch our positivist compulsions in a commitment to our field's history as a *Wissenschaft*<sup>2</sup> – a human science – or explain them as a part of our responsibility as public

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<sup>1</sup> This article is indebted to the input of many: communities created and persisting despite the ravages of the pandemic. I thank especially the "Lived Religion: Power and Protest" Fall 2021 seminar at the University of Oslo, for which I produced the initial articulation of these ideas in an online keynote address, and seminar co-organizer Nina Hoel; the Undisciplined Normativities research group at UC Riverside, in particular Sahin Acikgoz, Aaron Brown, Tammy Ho, Jason Hockaday, Wesley Leonard, Kori Pacyniak, and J Selke; the students in RLST 220: Advanced Seminar in Theory and Methods – Brigid Boll, Xin Ren, Alba Rodríguez, Julia Torres, and Christopher Valencia – with whom I explored these ideas through the writings of both classic and contemporary scholars of religion; and the always sharp and insightful observations of Janet Jakobsen, who generously made time to read and thoughtfully critique two different drafts of this article as well as to encourage me to pursue it. The article is also indebted to the generosity of my two co-bubbling adult family members, who provided child care at crucial moments so that I could briefly remember that I know how to think, read, and write in the midst of two and a half years of full-time parenting while attempting to also work a full-time job under COVID isolation. Their ongoing support afforded me the time to research and write the revised version. Finally, this work benefited greatly from the insightful, supportive, and constructive critiques of two anonymous reviewers, to whom I am deeply grateful.

<sup>2</sup> I follow the lead of a growing number of bilingual and multilingual writers here in not setting apart non-English words in italics. *Religionswissenschaft*, or the "science of religions," is the term translated into English as "history of religions." Masuzawa (2005, 107-

scholars. The latter is especially the case for those of us who work at state schools in the US, where according to some (but not the current Supreme Court's) interpretations of the Constitution, the practice and advocacy of religion have no place. Others explain the field's positivism as even-handedness, or as scholarly integrity: a principled restraint from making claims that we cannot empirically verify. Donna Haraway, ironically, called positivist claims of objectivity, "of seeing everything from nowhere," "the god trick (1988, 581)" yet many scholars who swear fealty to this perspective have a severe aversion to theology and theologians alike. Our desperate clinging to a world in which the religious practitioner and the spiritual soul are someone else, whether a bracketed internal person or those Other people over there (probably somewhere east or south of Europe, in a different neighborhood from our universities [or right outside their gates], on a reservation, or somewhere rural), keeps us grounded in elitist, Eurocentric, positivist logics that perpetuate neoliberal, colonial, white supremacist, cisheteropatriarchal, ableist epistemologies and render our field impervious not only to the keenest insights of well over a century of critique and theory-building by a wide range of minoritized scholars, but also to those scholars themselves. From these spaces of insularity, to which we admit an annual quota of those from outside the fold who can play our game exceptionally well, the field of religious studies continuously recreates itself in its own limited image. We engage in this effort, we tell ourselves from within this charmed circle (Rubin [1982] 2011), in order to stay relevant. We are doing precisely the opposite.

This article is rooted in a Foucauldian analysis of a key element of religious studies scholars' understanding of our own distinctiveness, or perhaps on the contrary, of our insistence

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8) notes that historians of the field typically date the rise of this school of thought to the 1870s and in particular to the 1877 passage of the Dutch Universities Act, which replaced theology with history of religions in public university curricula.

on sameness to other human sciences: the claim to be nonconfessional. Relying on Foucault's conceptualization of discipline and the confessional as tools of contemporary biopolitical regimes, I argue that the concept of the confessional functions as a disciplinary tool and a conduit of power that maintains Eurocentric, secular Protestant (Jakobsen and Pellegrini 2008) epistemologies as the sole world concepts permissible within the field. Claims to "bracketing" and to "nonconfessional" approaches are therefore disingenuous, I suggest, as they rely on the unmarked nature of these dominant epistemologies in order to present them as universal, neutral, and therefore superior to all other epistemologies and methods, or even to render them invisible as epistemologies and methods. As Christopher M. Driscoll and Monica R. Miller argue in *Method as Identity*, "'critical method' function[s] as camouflage concealing a not-so-cryptic normative identity in the study of religion," making method "a kind of invisibility cloak" for "white, male, normative social identity in the academic study of religion" (Driscoll and Miller 2019, 160-61). This state of affairs leaves the field of religious studies antithetical at best, and at worst in active opposition, to practices of freedom and efforts to decolonize the academy.<sup>3</sup> In place of the compulsion to positivism, I challenge religious studies as a field to follow the decades-long lead of feminist, BIPOC, trans, global South/global East, crip, and queer scholars in creating an engaged, embodied study of religion that actively opposes Christian imperialism while relinquishing its phobia of theologians, ethicists, and religious practitioners, and that

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<sup>3</sup> As one reviewer of this article noted, the word "freedom" has taken on – and indeed, has long held – troublingly complex meanings, and is in use today to justify everything from neoliberalism to militarization and fascism. I intend the phrase "practices of freedom" in the sense used by liberatory scholar/activists. bell hooks is among those who popularized the term in *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom*. In the introduction to that work, hooks writes, "I celebrate teaching that enables transgressions – a movement against and beyond boundaries. It is that movement that makes education the practice of freedom" (1994, 12).

presses past the boundary of methodological agnosticism to take up instead a practice of methodological numenism.

### *Confessing Scholars*

Many scholars of religion who were trained in religious studies departments are keenly familiar with the affect-laden charge of confessionalism. Indeed, that very affect, which for many ranges across aversion, fear, disgust, and the like, should serve as our first clue that the workings of power are afoot in the field. This is Otto's *mysterium tremendum* without (in some cases) the *fascinans*; it is Kristeva's *abject*, of which more anon. A second clue is the slippage in the definition of the term. Ostensibly, "confessional" scholarship is scholarship that "confesses" a particular faith; in this instance, confession is not the legal procedure or the Catholic sacrament but the Christian affirmation of adherence to doctrine. If we hold strictly to this definition, then only scholarship that makes explicit doctrinal claims – and, strictly understood, only that which makes explicit *Christian* doctrinal claims – should be termed confessional. Yet the term is used much more broadly. In line, in fact, with the universalizing perspective that Tomoko Masuzawa (2005) identifies at the heart of the field, "confessional" is used in the narrowest sense to reject any scholarship that centers or sometimes even identifies the author's own religious perspectives – unless those perspectives involve atheism, which is methodologically acceptable and even valued in the field.<sup>4</sup> Moreover, scholarship which advocates for a particular group or cause, such

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<sup>4</sup> Such approaches are referenced explicitly or implicitly (for instance, by offhand remarks that assume readers will share the author's incredulity at a certain belief or experience under discussion) by many scholars who are aligned with the history of religions school. While I considered (and one reviewer recommended) including a list of references for curious readers, such a list would be limited as well as predictable to most readers and would risk reducing this work to yet another return to what another reviewer called "well-worn ground." It is not my interest here to debate or challenge individual scholars, but rather to note a general ethos in this scholarly tradition, to understand as well as challenge it, and to direct our attention to other, perhaps more fruitful, approaches.

as feminist, antiracist, or community-based work, also fails in many cases to make the cut. Here we see another, related form of slippage, as the latter work is often labeled not only confessional but also “normative” – precisely *not* in reference to the unmarked and therefore ostensibly *not*-normative scholarship penned in normative modes by scholars belonging to socially normative groups. Accusations of normativity slide confusingly into cries of confessionalism, making clear the threads that have been stitched between the confessional and the subjective in part through the sharp demarcation of insider from outsider, scholar from practitioner. The fierceness of objections to scholarship that has been thus labeled makes it more accurate to speak of “anticonfessional” than “nonconfessional” as the watchword in much of religious studies.

Describing these battles for the field’s identity as a reflection of its impostor syndrome – a field whose motives have long been suspect trying its hardest to be accepted into the ranks of the sciences, to cast itself as a *Wissenschaft* – Christopher Driscoll and Monica Miller suggest both that the intense methodological boundary maintenance in the field masks an equally intense attachment to whiteness, *and* that the field’s tortured self-examination and self-policing make it in fact “particularly suited to address methodological questions of normative identity and dominant experience as they relate to scholarship in our own field and in others” (Driscoll and Miller 2019, 162-63). Likewise, writing a few years earlier, Aisha M. Beliso-De Jesús suggests that demarcating boundaries between “religious” and “secular” leads to what she calls “dialectical tensions between two heteropatriarchal White father figures: ‘practitioner’ and ‘scholar’...both whitened [and, one might add, presumptively Christian in affiliation or heritage] affective categories that are deceptively seen as purged of their racial and gendered [and religious] specificity”: the non-normative normative (Beliso-De Jesús 2018, 318). Within the claims of confessionalism, then, perceptible especially but not solely through the insistence that

advocacy also violates the unwritten pact of anticonfessionalism in the field, we can begin to trace the workings of power. To any Foucauldian scholar, as to most scholars whose work focuses on power and justice, this comes as no surprise. In contributing an explicitly Foucauldian critique of anticonfessionalism, however, I hope to improve our understanding of this phenomenon and point the way toward the alternative approaches I discuss in the second half.

It bears remembering that the French title of Foucault's book *Discipline and Punish* uses the word "surveiller." Translator Alan Sheridan (1995, ix) explains that the English cognate, "surveil," has too narrow a meaning to adequately translate "surveiller," and that in fact there is no good English equivalent to the term. Foucault himself suggested "discipline," and indeed that term works well with the various ways in which Foucault engages the word "surveiller" through the book. It connects especially well with his early reference in the section on discipline to La Mettrie's writings on military training (Foucault 1995, 136). The use of the English word "discipline" for "surveiller" has the added benefit of inviting us to reflect on the resonances between the discipline that serves as a form of punishment, the discipline developed through technologies of the self, and the siloing of academic specialties into disciplines – a line of inquiry that I think is especially generative for considering boundary-making and, especially, boundary policing in the study of religion.

As many commentators have pointed out (e.g., Asad 1993; Masuzawa 2005; McGuire 2008; Beliso-De Jesús 2018; Long 2018; Driscoll and Miller 2019), scholars of religion have long been at pains to position ourselves relative to our topic of study, and that self-positioning has shifted as the definition, valuation, and associations of religion have changed. When religion was considered the purview of the most advanced societies and men (a word I use intentionally here), religionists were all too happy to write from within this purportedly 'most evolved'

position, which included primarily certain forms of Christianity and at times admitted Judaism more or less begrudgingly. As the concept of religion was expanded to permit (or assign) entry to the traditions and lifeways of more and more people, perhaps unsurprisingly some scholars distanced themselves increasingly from the term. And as global North/global West epistemologies shifted in such a way as to separate religion and science – a change not unrelated to the broadening of access to the term “religion,” that is, a change that had everything to do with retaining the height of intellectual erudition and reason solely for global North/global West elites – the proponents of the new science of religions became increasingly careful to define themselves as not religious. In consolidating religious studies as a discipline, these scholars disciplined themselves – and perhaps more importantly, other scholars – into the regime of science. They trained, supervised, surveilled, and punished – ils surveillaient – themselves and each other, and certainly their students, to conform with the newly consolidating ethos of academic *disciplines* and objective, positivist, scientific *discipline*.<sup>5</sup> And they joined many other scholars in effacing the very specific social locations and privileged bodies from which their scholarship stemmed and which it in turn reflected back at the world.

Arguably, this is when the field began to reject the confessional, and it is at this point that the slippage in the definition of the latter becomes comprehensible. The problem with confession for these foundational scholars was not only – probably not even primarily – that it expressed one’s *beliefs* but that it expressed *one’s* beliefs.<sup>6</sup> The problem, in other words, was that

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<sup>5</sup> Much of this history is nicely encapsulated in some of the essays in Charles H. Long’s *Ellipsis...* (2018). See, for instance, Chapters 3 (“The Study of Religion in the United States of America: Its Past, Present, and Future”), 7 (“A Look at the Chicago Tradition in the History of Religions: Retrospect and Future”), and 8 (“The Chicago School: An Academic Mode of Being”).

<sup>6</sup> The reasons for my focus on beliefs here are multiple, having to do with the centrality of belief (broadly construed in the sense that Ninian Smart [e.g. Smart 2000] termed “worldview”) in most of the classics in the field as well as the intensely cognitive methods of the authors of those works. That defining the subject of these scholars’ studies through



confession brought the researcher into the research and thereby violated the core principle of objectivity on which the scientific method rested and still rests today despite persistent critiques from philosophers of science and other scholars of epistemology (e.g. Haraway 1988; Hartsock 1985; Jaggar 1989; Sandoval 2000). What Foucault calls “telling the truth of oneself” has no place within objective research, because the self has no place there; neither, importantly, has the body, a rule which extends to a wide variety of people whose being has been reduced solely to their bodies in modern global North/global West epistemologies. Thus, despite the fact that religious studies scholars in the early twentieth century may have remained connected to their own religious traditions, in the office they set those aside (or, more accurately, disavowed them) like any scientist was expected to set aside personal perspectives, producing their work from a disembodied yet often culturally Christian space with no place for the worlds beyond the human. It turns out our famed epoché, our “suspension” or “bracketing” of our own beliefs or disbeliefs, is not very original after all; it’s just a fancy Greek word for scientific objectivity. And epoché and confession, as any good historian of religions will tell you, do not mix.

A Foucauldian analysis of the disciplinary regime of the anticonfessional cannot, of course, stop at the disciplinary; perspectives on the confessional are also key to understanding this regime of power in the field. Foucault argues (1990; see also Jordan 2015) that under the developing biopolitical regimes of modern Europe, even as church attendance and certainly Catholic confession dwindled, confession became a sacrament of law, medicine, psychology, and carceral systems; what Foucault fails to add is that Christian epistemologies and worlds traveled alongside the itinerant yet ubiquitous practice of confession. One was still required to confess

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belief betrays a strongly Protestant influence is no accident but is in fact central to the history of the field and to the methodological problem at hand. A genealogy of the term “confessional” in the history of religions is outside the scope of this project, but would be very valuable.

one's secrets to the purveyors of knowledge, and the purveyors of knowledge still responded with the truth of one's self – one's strengths and ailments, accompanied by regimes for maintaining the former and remedying the latter; only the loci and the sources of knowledge had changed. So, living in societies ruled by discipline and the confessional imperative as technologies of the self – at least, as Achille Mbembe (2003) points out, for those valued bodies and populations interpellated by biopower – how could any intellectual truly evade the confessional or the ubiquity of Christian structures of thought? I think, instead, that religious studies scholars have been ardently disavowing both. After all, many scholars (e.g., Asad 1993, Jakobsen and Pellegrini 2008) have noted the Christian basis for the very concept of the secular. And could we not argue that an articulation of methodological atheism is itself a confession? From this perspective, accusations of confessionalism become indistinguishable from cries of heresy.

I would argue, then, that the trope of the confessional is a disciplinary tool for religious studies, not just in the sense of a tool used *in the* discipline, in the field, but in the sense of a tool *for* discipline. Scholars are trained to be anticonfessional; surveilled by our graduate advisors, by audience commentators and panel respondents at conferences, and by journal editors and peer reviewers for any hint of heretical confessionalism, we are severely disciplined for our failures. Through the disciplinary actions of confessional accusations, scholars learn to self-discipline and, ironically, to carefully *confess* our anticonfessionalism. The barrier between the confessional and the anticonfessional is a biopolitical technology of the academic self, put in place to maintain the shaky boundaries of the discipline as a field of socially dominant groups studying a subject – and subjects – that are racialized, feminized, transed, queered, classed, and colonized.

Scholars whose critical perspectives on power lead us to endorse the decades-long rejection of objectivity, understanding it as a tool for the simultaneous effacement and universalization of dominant subjectivities, automatically fall into the category of the condemned confessional, as do scholars from minoritized groups (see Beliso-De Jesús 2018, 328). Once we understand that this category in the study of religion has less in fact to do with theology and is instead a biopolitical technology of the self that buttresses the position of the most socially dominant scholars in the field, then we can see why the moment any scholar writes about their own communities and their own social location – particularly but not solely as a minoritized scholar – they risk dropping out of the charmed circle and being labeled as confessional. From this perspective, it is no wonder that theology has always led the field in incorporating liberatory methods and perspectives, while the so-called nonconfessional study of religion has caught on years later and often only in specialized program units, conferences, and journals.

### *The Return of the Oppressed*

A number of prominent anticonfessional religionists have been known for scoffing at the experiences of their research subjects with the worlds beyond the human. In a move that hints, as Driscoll and Miller suggest, at “protest[ing] too much” (Driscoll and Miller 2019, 41), some scholars of religion seem intent on proving their nonconfessional credentials by making clear their disbelief in and even disdain for the deities, spirits, ancestors, and other co-presences, to use Beliso-De Jesús’ (2015) evocative formulation, that fill the lives of those whom they research. As should be clear by now, this is hardly the neutral, objective stance it claims to be. Fortunately, a number of scholars have been willing to press us back from the positivist precipice, suggesting that rather than presume for our scholarship that worlds beyond the human do not exist

(methodological atheism) or that we as scholars have no way of knowing whether they exist (methodological agnosticism), we should presume that they *do* exist, at least in the times and spaces where people believe in them.<sup>7</sup>

This suggestion seems to strike some people as a not-so-grown-up version of *Peter Pan*, in which fairies like Tinkerbell only exist as long as people believe in them (clap your hands!). Rather than dismiss it as child's play, though, I would argue that we should instead break our self-imposed epistemological boundaries and consider the wisdom that is often woven through children's stories. Like the adults in *Peter Pan*, I fear, religionists suffer all too often from a failure of imagination and a failure of wonder; is it so hard to accept the possibility of multiple co-existing realities? From where, exactly, does the intensity of this resistance stem?

The discomfort of anticonfessional scholars with the worlds beyond the human, with co-presences, echoes the uncomfortable affect associated with the confessional – revulsion, rejection, *abjection* in Kristeva's (1982) psychoanalytic sense of the term.<sup>8</sup> Driscoll and Miller seem to also acknowledge this affect in a passing comment. They write: "Efforts to jettison the experiential dimensions of 'god' however conceived – more precisely, the uncanny dimensions of experience as a category – [run] the risk of reinforcing social normativity as a strange omnipresent modifier to our methodological efforts" (Driscoll and Miller 2019, 177).

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<sup>7</sup> In the sociology of religion, Omar McRoberts grappled with these questions in 2004 through the lens of "ethnographic conversion" – clearly at least a potentially problematic method for religionists. He concludes by advocating for an aesthetic study of religion that brackets ontological claims but practices ethnographic conversion with elements of religious life that do not involve the world beyond the human.

<sup>8</sup> Kristeva is a difficult scholar to cite in decolonial work, given the profoundly colonialist and racist perspectives that are woven into her reflections on the world concepts of colonized peoples. Drawing inspiration from the work of Siobhan Kelly, who grapples with the intense transphobia of psychoanalysis while also appropriating it for their own work, I have chosen to appropriate Kristeva's work in order to understand the colonial mindset that continues to drive the field.

In an essay on the uncanny – das Unheimliche, literally the “unhomelike” in German – Freud explores the causes of the profound affective discomfort people experience from ghost stories, horror stories, and certain unsettling events in real life (Freud 2003). Predictably, he traces this discomfort back to repression, either individual in terms of “infantile complexes” thought long outgrown or cultural in terms of so-called “primitive beliefs” thought long surpassed. We experience the uncanny, he argues, when (masculine) infantile fears such as – you guessed it – that of castration are triggered, such as in Hoffman’s story about the Sandman stealing eyes, or when supposedly irrational claims such as the return of the dead seem to be proven true right in front of us. Kristeva extends this argument from a Lacanian perspective in *Powers of Horror* through the concept of abjection, arguing that things to which we react with horror – with revulsion, disbelief, and a sense of the uncanny – are not only those that tap into repression but also those that represent rejected aspects of the self, that which is literally thrown away, ab-jected. Bodily waste is Kristeva’s most striking example of abjection, but she makes very clear that, like most psychoanalytic theorists, she understands individual psychological phenomena to have resonances on a cultural level as well.

Against this psychoanalytic backdrop, Driscoll and Miller’s passing use of the term “uncanny” is particularly striking. Indeed, religious studies scholars who protest too much, who in Driscoll and Miller’s terms “jettison...the uncanny dimensions of experience” seem to be reacting precisely to the uncanny and its threatened regression. Insisting stridently on the rationality of the science of religion, they refuse all intrusions of the worlds beyond the human that have been designated infantile and primitive (read: individually or culturally unevolved) by the intellectual culture of which they seek to be or to remain a part. Yet, looking just under the surface of this phenomenon – and certainly this is fully *on* the surface in both Freud’s and

Kristeva's Eurocentric, colonialist writings – this repressed that threatens to return in the experiences of the so-called research “subjects” of the history of religions is actually the *oppressed*: colonized peoples, BIPOC people, queer and trans folks, women, poor people, people with disabilities, minoritized religions, rural people. This is how, again in Driscoll and Miller's words, the “jettison[ing]” of “the uncanny aspects of experience...reinforce[s] social normativity” as a central part of religious studies methods.

It appears, then, that there is a direct path of connection from anticonfessional methods as they have been historically and are still currently conceptualized, through a profound discomfort with the slightest chill breeze of the irrational and therefore the uncanny, to elite, white supremacist, colonialist, ableist cisheteropatriarchy. This explains why linked accusations of confessionalism and normativity assail anyone writing openly in support of, much less from within, marginalized communities. When experiences of the worlds beyond the human bear subterranean connections to oppressed groups who have long been accused of irrationality and credulity, to write from, as, and in advocacy for such groups is to participate in the irrational. Beliso-De Jesús, in this vein, writes of a perpetual “insistence that I simultaneously perform the whitened category of heteromasculine scholar even as my presence is given as an example that the irrational (female) practitioner of color has a seat at the multiculturalist table” (2018, 320). Some scholars react to this nonconsensual binding to irrationality by striving even harder to join the charmed circle of the anticonfessional; some see the alternatives and move cautiously toward them while still defending their place at the center of the field. Others, like Beliso-De Jesús, having discovered that they will be cast in this way no matter what they do, have realized that they have nothing to lose.

Undoing these bonds, disentangling the colonial threads with which the very field is woven, is a monumental task for which there is no simple fix. Nonconsensual bindings typically do not come with bondage shears, but perhaps we can fashion our own, even if from materials – such as the work of Foucault – that are themselves soaked in colonialism. In *Wild Experiment* (2022a), Donovan Schaefer draws our attention to Foucault’s reflections on the speaker’s benefit and the importance of pleasure in the workings of power. Pointing to the apparent rebelliousness and resistance to power and the law that are claimed and enacted by those acceding to the confessional imperative, Schaefer notes that in Foucault’s formulation, “the repressive hypothesis is an idea that brings pleasure” (Schaefer 2022a, 58). Indeed, there seems to be great pleasure and an insistent claim to rebelliousness in many of those scholars who argue in favor of, and publicly perform, the anticonfessional imperative within the study of religion. But we need to remember that, for Foucault, pleasure is not only power’s incitement but also a key source of resistance – and not just pleasure in any singular sense, but bodies and pleasures. As he develops these ideas through the course of *The History of Sexuality*, Foucault moves toward a care of the self that seems to cast resistance in increasingly individualistic terms, yet as Niki Kasumi Clements writes (2021), the long-awaited and posthumously published fourth volume in the series shows readers a Foucault who has begun to distinguish between the harms of confession and parrēsia, which Clements suggests Foucault understands as “speaking truth to power” – as contrasted with the confessional imperative, which consists of (pleasurably) speaking truth compelled by power. Perhaps these ideas – multiplying of bodies and pleasures, and speaking truth to power instead of speaking truth compelled by power – can offer us clues for further developing decolonial methods in a field that was forged in the colonial crucible.

*Emerging from the Confessional: Toward a Methodological Numenism*

Because the dynamics of power in religious studies center so crucially on the forceful rejection of the worlds beyond the human, the key to subverting those dynamics may be to embrace those worlds – Tinkerbell and all. Scholars writing on European and US Catholic traditions have offered important interventions in this regard, such as Robert Orsi’s insistence on “approach[ing] history and culture with the gods fully present to humans” and his critique of epistemologies of absence in religious studies as a shield from the unpredictability, the uncontrollability – perhaps we might say the uncanniness – of what he calls “real presence” (Orsi 2016, 8, 64). Similarly, in the introductory “Triptych” of her 2016 collection of essays, *Acute Melancholia*, Amy Hollywood recalls that “at the beginning of the twenty-first century, I found myself preoccupied with the question of what it might mean to say that the Virgin is real – actual, present, palpable – in one time and place and not another” (2016, 2). Both works point us in the right direction, yet in their emphasis on questions of truth and the “real” both continue to work within a singular perspective that forecloses the possibility of the multiple truths and realities that surround us.

Religious studies, also described by some as the “academic” study of religion (implicitly casting constructive scholars as unacademic), has been based for much of its history in what has come to be called methodological atheism: the presumption, at least for the sake of research, that worlds beyond the human do not exist. While it has long been understood that methodological atheism can be practiced by religious and irreligious scholars alike, it is significant that few methodological atheists study their own traditions. Furthermore, it has become standard practice for anticonfessional religious studies scholars to elide and actively refuse any discussion of their own religious background or even their ancestral religious heritage; among classic Chicago



school thinkers, Charles Long is a meaningful outlier here. With the development in recent decades of the softened approach known as methodological agnosticism, scholars have typically continued to be coy about their own perspectives, experiences, and backgrounds but have offered a shrug instead of a flat denial to claims about the worlds beyond the human. This shift from ‘why, of course it’s all balderdash!’ to ‘I’m sorry, that’s outside my area of expertise’ is a welcome one, but it does not go far enough. In a world where the privileging of some world concepts over others can be literally deadly, religionists must be willing to affirm that the worlds beyond the human exist.

Methodological numenism, as I conceive of it, is a methodological approach that resists both the arrogant imposition of the scholar’s atheism on the world around them and the privileged refusal to engage that characterizes methodological agnosticism. The logical outcome of a lived religion approach yet applicable well beyond the ethnographic modes that attend much lived religion research, methodological numenism accepts the many worlds beyond the human at face value. As anthropologist Lucinda Ramberg says in response to a question from one of the devadasis from whom she learned, “the gods...are there (2014, 78)”. Methodological numenism requires a certain comfort with incongruity; my assertion with Ramberg that “the gods are there” will quickly lead the more philosophically-minded to ask, “which gods?” How can one accept at face value worlds beyond the human that deny each other’s existence?

Ramberg offers a step toward a solution to this question by drawing on Heidegger’s phrase, “worlding the world” – an evocative concept that has been adopted by postcolonial studies scholars, among others (e.g., Spivak 1990), to describe the ways in which people form and live into world concepts, be they life-giving (as resistant worlds often are) or destructive (such as settler colonial worldings of the world of ‘terra nullis’ on occupied land). Worlding,

Ramberg argues, “is not only about the production and transmission of alternative knowledge; it is also about the manifestation of a cosmological, anthropological, and moral space of being. Reducing this worlding work to an object to be understood,” she continues, “elides the possibility that it is also working on us” (2014, 32). Ramberg is neither a devadasi nor a devotee of Yellamma, but her affirmation of the existence of the gods does not get tangled up in tortured questions about truth. Instead, she clarifies her goals this way: “Rather than posing human social relations and symbolic activity as prior to the gods, I want to pursue a question about the articulation between the two domains that presumes the agency of both. We act on the gods and they act on us, but in what ways and to what effects?” (2014, 67).

Asking questions such as these not only accepts the terms of the devadasis’ world without leaving behind the world Ramberg herself has been worlding; it makes the key moves of refusing a singular, monolithic world concept and refusing to understand world concepts as static. In the relations of power that constitute the academy, once we posit a singular, static world and demand that all others be coherent with it or cease to matter except as amusing fictions, we have committed the colonial act of worlding our own world upon that of others. This is what is methodologically and ethically unsustainable in methodological atheism, but methodological agnosticism does not correct the problem because it still worlds a singular world where the gods do not definitively exist. Methodological numenism accepts the long-standing proposition that religion is messy, and it goes a step further by accepting that this means the worlds around us are messy too – and plural. There is – there *can be* – no singular truth or reality for the comparative scholar of religions, because there is no singular truth or reality in the worlds being worlded around us. Erasing our own worlds and denying the worlds of those from whom we learn in favor of a monolithic, secular, scientific world simply perpetuates the colonialist complicities and

the universalist liberal humanism that Masuzawa identifies as key drivers of the development of the field.

Methodological numenism makes irrelevant the distinction that anticonfessional scholars insist on between constructive scholarship and “the academic study of religion.” It makes it possible to imagine a field where scholars world a wide variety of worlds – including atheist worlds but also many others – and may juggle more than one competing world as they travel from home to work and back, or from office to classroom. It opens the field to a space where scholars can write about worlds that align with theirs and those that do not or that partially do, while being open about those alignments and misalignments and while respecting that there will be a fluid spectrum – not a binary – along which scholars move in their relationship to the worlds and the worlders they engage in their research. Most importantly, it places speaking truth to power at the center of religious studies methods instead of on the margins.

Methodological numenism, therefore, also disarms and makes irrelevant the persistent critique of engaged scholarship in religious studies. Contrary to the claims of the fiercest defenders of anticonfessional scholarship, one can name harm and trace the workings of power without making singular claims about the “truth” or “reality” of a world concept. The argument that engaged scholarship is confessional has always been a red herring, coming as it does from the most normative center of the field that is premised on precisely what it accuses engaged scholars of doing: narrowing the world to a singular reality (in this case, that of methodological atheism or agnosticism). Instead, scholars can affirm the non-singular reality and truth of a world being worlded, and the impacts of that world, in the same way that we affirm that social constructs such as gender or race have very real effects in the world without necessarily reflecting an ontological reality. Ramberg, for example, writes that “both devadasi rites and

practices of [anti-dedication] reform are world-making projects with real effects. However, whereas one project entails a violent remaking of the other, the other project does not” (2014, 74). Methodological numenism gives us the space to name harm.

Another objection I anticipate is the slippery slope “what if” argument that attends most efforts to expand access to full humanity: ‘But if we let those people in, what sorts of evils will follow?’ This reactionary concern evokes the fear that lurking just below the surface of so-called confessional scholarship are all sorts of harmful types who will run rampant and destroy the field for liberals once given free rein. Really, theologians should be impressed by the power that anticonfessional scholars imagine they have, even if they should (and already do) also cast a dour eye at their own demonization. For years, anticonfessional scholars have objected to any porousness in the barrier between themselves and constructive scholars of religion by claiming in panicked tones that including the latter would mean allowing in Christian conservatives who would upset the liberal ship – even if some liberal, progressive, or non-Christian constructive scholars might also come aboard. Yet these arguments, similar to the arguments against queer inclusion so carefully unpicked by Janet Jakobsen and Ann Pellegrini many years ago (2003), presume that inclusion comes without ethics.

This presumption is specious for at least two interconnected reasons. First, and perhaps most obviously, the majority of liberatory work in the field has taken place not in the anticonfessional study of religion, where it has been largely unwelcome, but in theology and ethics. So, if anything, lowering the anticonfessional barrier would allow ethical thought *in*, not out. Second, methodological numenism promotes an engaged scholarship that is unafraid to trace the workings of power or to name harm and inequity; if anything, this methodological shift would finally allow scholars who study worlds different from their own to access such tools, and

we might come to embrace the reality that there are multiple ways within our broader field to approach religion. Some people may be inquiring after a singular truth, others exploring multiple worlds and multiple truths. Some may indeed bring in values that others find odious. None of this is new. We need to stop misleadingly assigning these characteristics to “confessional” or “non-confessional” categories of scholarship, and instead speak openly and descriptively about them when we are in conversation with each other. It is the case that some Christian theologians bring an unthinking Christian – and frequently Protestant – imperialism with them to their academic work (and others do not); it is equally the case that some anticonfessional scholars bring a scornful attitude with them toward anything that smacks of engagement with the worlds beyond the human (and others do not). Both biases need to be challenged, and both can be challenged from the perspective of methodological numenism.<sup>9</sup>

It is important to pause for an additional moment on the topic of Christian imperialism in the field, both because of its ubiquity and because of its function as a straw person for anticonfessional scholars. As histories of religious studies have amply demonstrated, the field originated among Christian scholars and has long served as an important tool for the allied forces

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<sup>9</sup> Another common panicked response to any hint of confessionalism is related to pedagogy – both the concern about not creating an exclusionary religious space in the classroom and the concern for teachers in state schools in the US about not violating the First Amendment. Although there is not sufficient space in this article to address these concerns, answers to them are similar to those offered here with respect to research. I would suggest that interested readers consider a few points: First, the multiple worlds perspective suggested here, and how that might translate into the classroom; second, the space opened by methodological numenism for engaged pedagogy; and third, based in that engaged pedagogy, a consideration of the actual harm that concerns them. In most cases, fears of harm center on the imposition by a professor of a singular world concept and/or religious practice or practices that may violate students’ own commitments – in other words, worlding in the classroom a world that excludes some of our students. This is indeed an unjust pedagogy; what those who raise these concerns often fail to consider is that many anticonfessional scholars make exactly this move in the classroom. I would argue that a just and inclusive pedagogy of religious studies imposes neither a particular religious perspective nor a particular atheist or agnostic perspective in the classroom, even “just for the purposes of the course and for the duration of the term.” We can, and should, do better.

of conversion and colonization. Anyone who has read the canonical texts in the field will have encountered works that make use of the comparative study of religion for social Darwinist purposes, “demonstrating” repeatedly the superiority of Christianity (and usually of specific forms of Protestantism). As positivism came to the fore in the field and scholars’ religious commitments faded from public perception, Christian and especially Protestant structures of thought remained, such as emphases on truth and singular realities, a focus on the textual and the cognitive at the core of religion, and a fixation on confession. Methodological atheism and agnosticism have provided a convenient excuse for Christian-identified and culturally Christian scholars to efface their dominant religious positioning; simultaneously, these same scholars use the very real power of Christian imperialism in the field as an argument for jettisoning all religiously engaged and justice oriented scholarship. Methodological numenism refuses to let these scholars off the hook while it also creates space for an honest and incisive assessment of and resistance to Christian imperialism in the study of religion.

I have been arguing for an engaged study of religion, with methodological numenism as a central tool for achieving that goal. Yet this intervention alone keeps us in the realm of the cognitive. Not only is such a move complicit with the Christian (and especially Protestant) imperialism I have been critiquing; taken alone, it also fails to intervene in the complex biopolitics of affect and the body that plague the academy. In concluding, then, I want to return to Foucault’s evocation of “bodies and pleasures” to consider how we might engage a more embodied study of religion as a practice of freedom.

*Bodies of Scholars/hip*

It could be argued that mainstream academia treats scholars who have significant amounts of social privilege – those for and by whom the academy was designed – as though they have bodies of work but not bodies, whereas for those of us who were never intended to inhabit those hallowed halls except as specimens, the logic is reversed. This double standard makes questions of embodied methods complex, since embracing such methods has quite different consequences for different scholars. On the other hand, it is precisely through reclaiming and taking control of the (hyper)representation of their bodies that marginalized scholars have produced such powerful and important work. Furthermore, as Schaefer argued in a recent conference paper, “it is precisely by divorcing the domain of the intellectual, the rational, and the propositional from the domain of the bodily, the material, and the affective that the secular/religious binary asserts a hierarchy of truth over superstition” (2022b, 5; see also 2022a). While Schaefer is exploring the role of the secular in what he terms “European intellectual agendas,” there is no mistaking the fact that the core and the roots of religious studies share these agendas. Thus, embodied methods are a potentially potent tool in dismantling the conduits of power maintained by the disciplinary anticonfessional imperative.

Sorting out precisely what forms embodied methods do and could take in the study of religion is of course another matter – not least because of the wide range of research topics in the field. We all bring our bodies to our research sites, for instance, be they ritual spaces, ancient ruins, sacred texts, or the newest show on Netflix, but the interactions between those sites and our bodies differ significantly for reasons having to do both with them and with us. Using a broad definition of embodied scholarship that includes Schaefer’s bodily, material, *and* affective dimensions adds further complexity to the mix – a complexity that is reflected in the emerging scholarship on embodied methods in other fields, where ideas and experimental methods abound

and there is little agreement on precisely what constitutes embodied research. Far from being a barrier to the concerted development of embodied research methods in religious studies, however, this multivocality is exactly what we need in order to begin to map out the variety of embodied methods that will best suit the variety of bodies – of scholarship and of scholars – in the study of religion.

In a recent book on embodied methods, Torkild Thanem and David Knights (2019) note the long-standing conceptual connection in the European intellectual tradition between analysis and dissection – not just metaphorical dissection, but the violent cutting apart of actual bodies, usually those of marginalized humans and non-human animals. Inspired by Deleuze’s description of his approach to the history of philosophy as “a kind of buggery,” they write that “approaching analysis as an act of buggery, we recognize that the history and future of analysis is one of pores and openings as well as wounds and scars” (113). Beyond engaging more thoroughly with the embodied metaphors we use for research, Thanem and Knights suggest that “buggering analysis” also creates space for flesh – especially, we might imagine, flesh that was once and sometimes still is subject to the violent dismembering of analytical approaches. The two authors advocate for attention to the whole bodies of those on whom our research focuses and attention to our own bodies in the research process. In the various examples they offer from their own research experiences and from previous work on embodied research and writing, they raise a range of possibilities such as attending to affect (one’s own and that of others) as a source of knowledge and insight, writing and researching with a persistent awareness of the body (again, one’s own and those of others), and “embody[ing] the work of analysis” by “express[ing] the vibrant, untidy, and fleshed relations through which we live in the social world whilst searching for the prevailing patterns and aberrant practices which shape our lives” (113).



Scholars applying embodied methods to their own research have likewise offered a variety of approaches. Health communications researcher Laura Ellingson (2006) draws on Judith Butler's ideas about performativity and the discursive construction of the body in describing the insistent, embodied presence of her own cancer history during her research in a geriatric oncology clinic. Foregrounding research methods that some scholars consider autoethnographic and others term simply reflexive, Ellingson writes of engaging her body in her research through attending to sense and affect, of the role her chronic pain played in her fieldwork, and of the impact on her relationships with patients and medical personnel when they became aware that her limp and the scars on her leg were due to surviving bone cancer. Dance scholar Jasmine Ulmer (2015) not only explores the role of embodiment in dance research and the ways that such research can also be communicated through dance, but also relies on Deleuze to explore the possibilities of "choreographic writing," wherein the words move like dancers across the page. Closer to home for religionists, religious education researcher Robert Jean LeBlanc (2019) writes of his embodied participation in religious services and as an athletic coach at a Catholic school; while his participation in most parts of the Mass contributed to his acceptance by the boys with whom he worked despite his Lutheran adherence, his role as a coach offered a casual relationship with the boys wherein they could work out their reactions to his complicated insider/outsider status.

One of the most well-known, albeit controversial, advocates of embodied research is Bourdieusian urban sociologist Loïc Wacquant, who coined the term "carnal sociology" to describe his approach to apprenticing as a prizefighter on Chicago's South Side ([2004] 2022). In a more recent work (2015), Wacquant argues for "a sociology of flesh and blood." Critiquing the "excessively cerebral and passive notion of knowledge" (3) that dominates the social sciences –

and, for our purposes, most if not all of the academy – Wacquant’s “carnal,” “flesh and blood” methods center the body as an agent, not just a subject, of knowledge. “Flesh refers here,” he notes, “to the visible surface of the lived body while blood points to the inner circuitry of life pulsating in the depths of the visceral body” (5). Inspired by this approach and critical of the growing absence of bodies from queer theory and sexuality studies, sociologist of sexuality Jason Orne advocates for a “sexy sociology” that privileges “the messy sexual body” (2017, 13), an approach adopted as well by sociologist and kink educator Julie Fennell (2018, 2022) in her study of BDSM practitioners. And bringing the focus on sex back to the study of religion, Ramberg suggests that we have much to learn by “reading religious occasions as sexual scenes” because of the ways in which religious bodies are frequently enjoined to manage or express their sexuality (2017, 194).

Clearly, embodied scholarship has been discussed and developed the most among scholars whose research engages living, human bodies. Conceivably, these methods could be generatively applied to living non-human animals as well, but what of all those scholars of religion whose work engages bodies in the past, divine or otherwise sacred bodies, bodies of literature, or material objects? I am convinced that embodied scholarship has a place there as well. Wacquant agrees, at least in part, suggesting that a carnal approach “can use a variety of methods so long as these treat the social agent as embodied and embedded” (2015, 5). By way of example, he cites among others an example well known to some religionists: Carlo Ginzburg’s *The Cheese and the Worms* (1980). But Ginzburg and Ramberg are hardly the only scholars of religion to have made use of embodied approaches. Just to cite two brief examples in addition to those mentioned in earlier sections of this article, Carolyn Dinshaw’s quest for a “touch across time” in *Getting Medieval* (1999) and Joseph A. Marchal’s (2020) powerful application of that

perspective to what Marchal terms the “appalling bodies” that echo through Paul’s letters are key examples of embodied, affective approaches to textual studies. And Thelathia Nikki Young and Laurel Schneider offer a moving and engaging approach to ethics by proposing a set of “queer virtues” drawn from queer and trans modes of surviving and thriving, understanding “virtues less in terms of their associations with character and more in terms of *praxis* (motivated action) and *poiesis* (creative transformation)” (2021, 10). No doubt there are numerous others I have not yet encountered in my own reading. Nonetheless, I find it telling that most of the examples I have been able to muster here still hail in one way or another from the edges of religious studies, be it in subfield, methods, the scholars’ own embodiments, locations, and investments, or all of the above. That is neither surprising nor a problem.

Methodological numenism and an engaged, embodied study of religion offer routes by which to rearticulate the bodies of religious scholars/hip that have been disjointed, disarticulated, and silenced by centuries on the specimen table of our field. Although both approaches lean heavily on methodological innovations developed in anthropology and sociology, in the diversity of their uses to date lies significant promise for their application to a wide variety of methods and subfields within the study of religion. Above all, these linked approaches offer a powerful antidote to the anticonfessional imperative in the study of religion and to the limits that imperative places on the presence, engagement, and intellectual contributions of the many scholars of religion for whom the academy was not designed. It is well past time for the field to center the marginalized; perhaps, at last, we can move away from positivism and toward an engaged, embodied, methodologically numinous scholarship.<sup>10</sup> As

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<sup>10</sup> With a fond nod to Ninian Smart, the cycling professor with the flower always in his lapel, for broadening “numen” to “numinous” (akin, he said, to the move from lumen to luminous).

Linda Tuhiwai Smith (Ngāti Awa, Ngāti Porou, Tūhourangi) declares in her classic text, *Decolonizing Methodologies*, “Research begins as a social, intellectual, and imaginative activity. It has become disciplined and institutionalized with certain approaches empowered over others and accorded a legitimacy, but it begins with human curiosity and a desire to solve problems. It is at its core an activity of hope” (2021, 258). I offer these provocations as an activity of hope for the powerful force our field can become.

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