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Essay

Doing What, by Whom, for Whom and How?: An Essay on Interests, Modes, Methods and Other Dynamics in “Theology” and/or “Religious Studies”

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Abstract: The essay begins with a methodological exploration of aspects of the continuing contested relationship between modes of engaging in the study of religion, which are often described in English as “Theology” or “Religious Studies” and more sharply differentiated in the German language as *Theologie* and *Religionswissenschaft*. By reference to the example of some of the conflicts that emerged around the formation of the European Academy of Religion, the essay shows how these two modes can solidify into opposing scholarly camps. While acknowledging the economic pragmatics that can come to the fore in institutional settings, it notes that the primacy of “Theology” was rooted in a Christendom social, religious and legal inheritance, while the emergence of Religious Studies and *Religionswissenschaft* represented an Enlightenment aspiration towards freedom from such. However, the purpose of this essay is neither to take sides between these broad camps, nor to argue that the differences between them are unimportant. Rather, it is centrally concerned with critiquing both modes for having too often proceeded without a sufficiently self-conscious embrace of the contextual impact upon them of social, political and economic frameworks, interests and/or the individual positionalities taken in relation to these. To support its arguments, the essay deploys aspects of the theological and socio-political legacies of the Czech and German theologians Josef Hromádka and Dorothee Soelle, alongside methodological insights and arguments from the British Religious Studies scholars Richard King and Malory Nye. In conclusion, drawing on Ninian Smart’s call for “axioanalysis” in the study of religion, the essay sets out a series of questions to both “Theology” and/or “Religious Studies” which it posits could help to facilitate an important and needed transformation in both “Theology” and “Religious Studies”. Within such a transformation, if socio-political contextuality and positionality are embraced and embedded as necessary (but not exhaustive or exclusive) for both critical and constructive scholarship in “Theology” and “Religious Studies”, then an “engaged” approach to the study of religion might prove able to facilitate a fruitful “shared borderland” between the “hinterland territories” claimed by these otherwise often broadly differential modes of study.

Keywords: theology; religious studies; *Religionswissenschaft*; methodologies; methods; epistemologies; study of religions; ideologies; secular; decolonization



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1. Biographical and Professional Transparency

The central contention of this essay is that what are usually differentiated from each other as either “Theology” or “Religious Studies”, and which can sometimes be in conflict, have both all too often proceeded without a sufficiently self-conscious embrace of the contextual impact upon them of social, political and economic frameworks, interests and/or the individual positionalities taken in relation to these. Especially because of this contention, as author of this essay, it is important for me to be as transparent as possible with the reader in terms of disclosing the socio-political context and the professional and biographical positionality out of which this paper was written.

For the majority of my professional academic career within university settings, although occasionally making more theological contributions, I have generally operated in a mode of study and research that would likely more often be described by others, and by myself, as “Religious Studies”. However, my initial academic formation was undertaken within a highly traditional Christian “Theology” curriculum of the University of Oxford in the mid-1970s. Within that undergraduate study, the main element that went beyond (a certain kind of Christian and Jewish) scriptural studies and the (mainly) historical study of (Christian) doctrine was the introduction of a new paper in the (very western form of) philosophy of religion. Indeed, this initial training and development were undertaken in a way that could probably accurately be described as having been “in parallel” with my preparation to become an ordained Christian minister in the Baptist tradition of Christianity.

My subsequent Master of Philosophy research, undertaken while working as a Baptist minister, proceeded in what was, in many ways, the methodologically very different (because it is much more contextually engaged) mode of Social and Pastoral Theology. By the time that I undertook my doctoral research, I was operating in what would normally be identified as a “Religious Studies” mode, albeit within a framework of perspectives, orientations and methodological inflexions which were strongly informed by a concern to be religiously, socially and politically “engaged” rather than claiming to proceed on the basis of the kind of scholarly “detachment” advocated by some proponents of “Religious Studies”. Finally, during much of my academic career, I have been especially engaged in “Religious Studies” research of a kind that has been strongly informed by social scientific methods and has been explicitly conducted at the interface between scholarly work, government funding and public policymaking (Weller 2007, 2009).

2. The Relationship between Theology and Religious Studies

This essay aims to make a methodological contribution from within a British and wider European context to wider international debates about the relationship between what is generally called “Theology” and “Religious Studies” and the differences and intersections between them. However, the central purpose of this essay is neither to take sides between these broad camps, nor to argue that the differences between them are unimportant. Rather, as noted at the outset of the essay, it is centrally concerned with critiquing both modes for having too often proceeded without a sufficiently self-conscious embrace of the contextual impact upon them of social, political and economic frameworks, interests and/or the individual positionalities taken in relation to these.

In Germany, until more recent times, despite a number of important exceptions,¹ there has often tended to be a sharper differentiation between these modes in German institutional contexts, where the linguistically more differentiated terminologies of *Theologie* (understood in terms of “confessional Theology”) and *Religionswissenschaft* (understood as the “scientific” study of religion) are more usually in use. In Britain, again, despite the existence of exceptions, many of the institutional forms and settings through which universities engage in study and research around religion have not been so sharply differentiated, either in their historical origins and evolution or in their contemporary forms. As an autobiographically related example of this, the organizational unit of which I became a part when, in 1990, I first joined what was previously known as the Derbyshire College of Higher Education, and later became the University of Derby, had historically been called “Theology”. At the time I arrived, it was in process of becoming what was first known as “Theology and Religious Studies”. In due course, it became “Religious Studies” and then “Religious and Philosophical Studies” before being closed by the University in 2001. Indeed, especially in British institutional contexts, both the labels that are chosen and/or ascribed to university departments, as well the realities of the modes of research and teaching that go on within them, can, in practice, often be quite fluid. In fact, it is not uncommon that what is institutionally labelled as “Theology” or as “Religious Studies” can be found in the organizational units that may bear public labels which suggest the opposite.

From the perspective of a more German scholarly environment, this, in many ways, highlights what can be seen as a typically English trait of not being sufficiently *konsequent*. Such “fuzziness” is also found in the name of the national body that was originally founded as the Association of University Departments of Theology and Religious Studies (AUDTRS) and is now called Theology and Religious Studies—UK (TRS-UK). In this body, alongside the thirty-four universities listed as having academic units that are in membership, there are also thirteen more sharply focused (and sometimes quite contrasting) disciplinary associations—from the British Association for the Study of Religion (BASR 2023a) to the Catholic Theological Association of Great Britain (CTAGB 2023).

In many ways, this kind of approach is also reflected in the so-called Units of Assessment (UoA) of the UK’s periodic Research Excellence Framework (REF), which is the national system for the benchmarking of research quality and the selective distribution of public funds for research, within which the relevant UoA has been called “Theology and Religious Studies”. Therefore, especially when taking into account the more “external” perspective of bureaucratic accountability mechanisms, the sharpness of distinction between “Theology” and “Religious Studies” that is theoretically advocated by some individual scholars can, in institutional settings, often be relativized within the context of a pragmatic approach that recognizes the need to “huddle together in a cold climate” within many universities in which religion or belief is marginalized as an appropriate focus for contemporary study and research.

In taking the kind of approach that it does, TRS-UK is somewhat reflective of the current broad approach of the American Academy of Religion (AAR).² Thus, TRS-UK states, as its first objective, that: “TRS-UK serves, represents, supports, and promotes the academic study of religion and theology in UK higher education institutions” (TRS-UK 2023). Another part of the AAR’s “mission” is stated to be “to foster excellence in the academic study of religion” (AAR 2023). In both of these statements, the word “academic” appears to function as signifying that there is thought to be at least a common quality of study and research across “Theology” and/or “Religious Studies” that distinguishes them from what may be other legitimate approaches in different contexts. If so, the question also arises of what might be the shared characteristics, if any, of such an “academic” approach? And what might the specific differences be from other approaches where it might not be appropriate to use the word “academic”? How far might more substantive ontologies and epistemologies come into the articulation, development and application of “academic” procedures? And therefore, how far might any apparently common methodological procedures be equally capable of being applied with integrity by religion and belief “insiders” as well as “outsiders”?

3. A Recent Example of Two “Camps”

These questions are important in practical as well as theoretical terms because while, in Britain, “Theology” and/or “Religious Studies” manage broadly to work together within the framework of TRS-UK, in the wider European and global academic spaces, things are not always so straightforward. However, rather than taking the well-worn approach of citing a range of individual scholars who support one mode or the other and/or who, in some instances, argue for greater fluidity between them (for overviews of such from various perspectives, see King 1990; McCutcheon 1999; Warriar and Oliver 2008), in this and the following section of the essay, I will primarily set the scene for such debates by reference to organizations and institutionalized bodies and their approaches to and positions taken within these contestations.

As particularly illustrative of this, in 2016 a new pan-European body was launched under the name of the European Academy of Religion (EuARE). This sought to project itself as echoing, in a European context, the name, role and profile of the American Academy of Religion. In response, on 27 May 2017, a statement was issued by the European Association for the Study of Religions (EASR 2023) and the International Association for the History of Religion (IAHR 2023), in which they jointly declared that they “. . . are not in support of

the newly established ‘European Academy of Religion’” (EASR 2017). One reading of this might simply be that of a kind of academic “turf war” between an existing European level body and a newcomer also with European aspirations. Indeed, a part of the EASR-IAHR statement points out that the EASR has been in existence since 2000, and itself at the time had twenty-four member associations. Therefore, it was argued that the creation of another association for the academic study of religion in Europe “is superfluous and represents an objectionable disregard of existing organizational structures in the field” (EASR 2017).

However, a closer look at the debate suggests something more than territorial competitiveness alone, which may also underlie unspoken reasons for the EuARE initiative itself. This becomes clearer when the EASR-IAHE statement cites what it calls the EASR’s and IAHR’s “shared perspective on religion as an object of scientific research and scholarship”. In relation to this, it states that both organizations’ constitutions promote and welcome “all forms of research on religion that are carried out in an impartial and non-confessionally motivated manner” (EASR 2017). The EASR has, as one of its member organizations, the previously mentioned BASR, which, as we have already noted, is one of the affiliated disciplinary associations of the TRS-UK. The BASR’s constitution states that its object is to “promote the academic study of religion/s, understood as the historical, social, theoretical, critical and comparative study of religion/s through the interdisciplinary collaboration of all scholars whose research is defined in this way”, with the addition of the qualifying statement that it is “not a forum for confessional, apologetic, or similar concerns” (BASR 2023b). As a member organization of the EASR, the BASR supported the EASR’s position with regard to the EuARE (BASR 2017), while the EASR is, on a global level, affiliated with the IAHR. On its website, the IAHR states its self-understanding as being that it is “dedicated to the scientific study of religion” and that it is “not a forum” for what it describes as “confessional, apologetic, or other similar concerns” (IAHR 2023), although perhaps ironically, the AAR—which includes “Theology” alongside “Religious Studies”—is a member organization of the IAHR!

While noting the presence of the word “science” in the name of the University of Bologna Institute that facilitated EuARE’s formation (the *Fondazione per le scienze religiose Giovanni XXIII*), the EASR/IAHR statement maintains that “Despite its name, we regard this Academy as not representing the non-confessionally based and globally oriented approach that is essential to the study of religions as an academic discipline” (IAHR 2023). Here, again, we see the word “academic” being used as a marker for something that is deemed to be important and distinctive about this particular kind of study and research of religion. However, in this instance, and contrary to its use by TRS-UK and the AAR (which both leave open a more *substantive* meaning of their use of the word “academic”), what was intended clearly carries with it a sense of more clearly boundary-making methodological approaches and assumptions. Indeed, this can clearly be seen when the EASR-IAHR statement articulates its position as being that, while “The pursuit of normative theology and engagement in interreligious conversation are legitimate activities in their proper context”, they fall “outside the generally accepted definition of the study of religions as a field of evidence-based research” (IAHR 2023).

4. Some Broader Historical Contexts for the Debates

The historical context for this is the fact that, for the majority of its existence, “Theology” in Western universities has tended to reflect the hegemony of the Christendom and Constantinian forms of Christian religion, with all that was entailed in this in terms of the exercise of forms of social, political and legal power within which claimed theological truth acted to draw the boundaries of social and political community and acceptability. Examples of this can clearly be seen in the history of English universities during the period following the Restoration of the Monarchy until only a century and a half ago, during which time Dissenting Christians and Roman Catholics, as well as Jews, atheists, Freethinkers and others, were by law excluded from participation and from qualifying for degrees in England. This was because they could not, in conscience, assent to the 39 Articles of the Church of

England either on graduation (as in Cambridge) or on matriculation (as in Oxford) as the price demanded for demonstrating their civic loyalty. In response, Dissenting Christians formed their own Dissenting Academies so that their religious leaderships could have access to training for an “educated ministry” and laypeople could have opportunities in the emerging professions of civil society (Weller 2022).

In relation to the overall heritage of universities, the removal of such impediments is not so long ago in terms of institutional history. While, in England, laws no longer prevent diverse Christians, Jews, Muslims, atheists and others from studying religion in universities, what Foucault (1988) calls “regimes” of truth and/or “power/knowledge” continue to operate. However, this now occurs in a more diffuse and permeating way of which those who benefit from them are often not conscious, but which those who are in practice excluded can all too easily identify. Thus, until the rise of the “secular” human sciences of anthropology, sociology and psychology, “Theology” in western universities tended to have an almost exclusive focus on Christianity (and, within that, often only on particular traditions within it). By contrast, other Christian traditions of religion or belief have generally been studied and researched largely to the extent that they were of apologetic relevance and/or were the focus of a more “detached” textual–linguistic–historical interest in illuminating some aspect of the dominant tradition’s scriptures, main “sacred” languages and history.

Indeed, it was concerns such as these that were reflected in the observation made in the EASR-IAHR joint statement that the programme of the EuARE’s founding conference was “strongly dominated by themes relating to Christian theology. . .” (EASR 2017). Because of this inheritance, it is perhaps not surprising that conflicts such as those around the founding of EuARE occur. It is also a reminder of the fact that, as with the concept of the “secular” (which, in its currently dominant form, is reactively emergent out of a Christendom history and therefore in many ways takes a “Christian-shaped” form), the concepts and concerns of the “Religious Studies” and *Religionswissenschaft* modes of study have also not emerged ahistorically in their own right. Rather, their evolution in contemporary Western universities has generally occurred in a continuingly *interactive* way in relation to “Theology”. And understanding this can assist in better assessing such conflicts, regardless of one’s own evaluative position in relation to them.

5. Interactivity, Productivity and the Transformation of “Theology” and “Religious Studies”

From the perspective of both individual scholars and institutionalized bodies working primarily from within the mode of “Religious Studies”, this continuing *interaction* has often (although not always) been an interaction of *protest against*, and an attempt at *liberation from*, the academic tutelage of dominant truth regimes of particular inherited forms of Christendom theology and theologizing. And these concerns are not completely superseded—as some might want to advocate—simply because it might be argued that “secular” truth regimes are stronger in universities. Nor are they superseded in light of the undoubted fact that academic “Theology” in universities has itself diversified substantially beyond its more traditional shapes and forms to embrace feminist theologies, liberation theologies and the like, or that other Christian religious traditions are, not only in universities but also in many Christian seminaries, often now approached with an attempt at understanding in the terms of the logics of their own primary traditions, beliefs and practices.

In fact, I would assert that it can cogently be argued that, historically speaking, many of the changes that have occurred within “Theology” in terms of the more recent developments of practical, pastoral, contextual and liberation theologies have come about only out of the critical interactive relationship between the emerging human sciences (such as ethnography) within “Religious Studies” and what has more traditionally gone on under the label of “Theology”. However, just as traditional “Theology” has benefitted from the critiques developed by the human sciences and deployed via the interactive evolution of “Religious Studies” with “Theology”, it could plausibly equally be argued that “Religious Studies”

might (and arguably might need to) benefit from being exposed to the kind of more fundamental questions of life and humanity that “Theology” at its best can pose. As the former Head of Department of Theology and Religious Studies at the University of Leeds, the Church historian Adrian Hastings argued in an essay called “Pluralism: the Relationship of Theology to Religious Studies”, published in 1990, that:

We may note here that if Religious Studies is in its way very much wider than Theology, Theology also remains in its way very much wider than Religious Studies. Religious Studies is, inevitably, the study of religion—all religion, including the relationship between religion and anything else. But Theology is not, as such, necessarily about religion at all. It is about existence in its totality, seen in the light of faith. (Hastings 1990, p. 233)

If, then, what is usually called “Theology” might, from this wider perspective, also positively be able to contribute to the self-critique of what is usually called “Religious Studies” then, just as the critiques from “Religious Studies” found “touch points” with developments that were articulated in terms of “Theology’s” own transforming self-understanding, such approaches from within “Theology” could find developing points of contact that are emerging from within “Religious Studies” own developmental dynamics. In any case, it is the argument of this essay that, however such transformations have come about, both within “Theology” and within “Religious Studies”, the critical “touch points” have very often been located precisely in the need to take more seriously the socio-political contextuality of the intellectual work and the socio-political positionality of the scholars who produce it. And this will be further developed in the remaining sections of this essay.

6. Exemplars of Socio-Political Contextualization and Positionality

As not only examples of but also exemplars in support of the argument of this essay that, both separately and in their interaction with each other, “Theology” and “Religious Studies” need to take more seriously the socio-political contextuality of their intellectual work, as well as the socio-political positionality of their scholars, the next section of this essay discusses four selected scholars and aspects of their work that are particularly relevant to this. Two of these would normally be identified with “Theology” (the Czech, Josef Hromádka, and the German, Dorothee Sölle) and two would normally be identified with Religious Studies (the British scholars, Richard King and Malory Nye).

6.1. Josef Hromádka: Socio-Political Contextualization and Positionality in “Theology”

In what is now “another world” of the mid-1980s in what was then the Czechoslovak Socialist Republic, the author of this essay was sitting in a pub in Prague together with a Madagascan friend who was studying Theology at Prague’s Charles University. We were joined at our table by a young man in uniform who turned out to be one of the country’s border guards. As we got talking, this young man asked my friend what he was doing in Prague. My friend replied that he was a student. The border guard then asked, “What subject are you studying”, and my friend answered “Theology”. Now, both my Madagascan friend and the border guard were talking in what was not the first language of either of them but what was, for my benefit, the common conversational language of English. Responding to my friend’s revelation that he was studying “Theology”, the border guard said, “Oh, geology! That’s interesting!” My friend replied “No, no—not geology, Theology!” The border guard said, “Theology!—What? Here in Prague?! That’s impossible! Never!”

This incident is instructive in a number of ways. First, the border guard did not expect “Theology” to be a subject of possible study in a university in the context of a state defined by an ideological commitment to Marxism–Leninism. And yet, including during the period of Communist Party rule in Czechoslovakia, at Charles University, it did remain a possibility for students to study Theology. And this underlines that “Theology” can have a remarkable vitality even in contexts that, in ideological terms, might be assumed to be inhospitable to any notion of the value of studying and researching religion as a lived

phenomenon, such as at the Charles University during that period. While that ideological context of “really existing socialism” was one which many would almost axiomatically see as having been inimical both to the practice of religion and to the study of it, it is important also to consider the extent to which from “really existing capitalism” there might be a set of parallel but different challenges for the study of religion, whether in terms of “Theology” or “Religious Studies”. Indeed, one of those who might offer helpful resource to a contemporary reflection on this is the Christian theologian, Josef Hromádka.

Hromádka was a doctoral alumnus of Charles University and later (1950–1966) Dean of the Comenius Faculty of Protestant Theology, Josef Hromádka (See [Salajka 1985](#); [Opočenský 1990](#); [Secretariat of the Christian Peace Conference \(International\) \(1998\)](#)) who, as a pastor and theologian of the Evangelical Church of Czech Brethren, following exile in the USA (1939–1947), specifically chose to return to Czechoslovakia at a time of significant geopolitical uncertainty in Europe as a whole, and at a point of imminent political change with the Communist Party’s accession to power in his country. In this period, such figures as the US Secretary of State, John Foster Dulles, were arguing that the states of “really existing socialism” were expressions of “godless terrorism” ranged against what, at the time, was often called “Christian civilization”. This was on the basis of an argument that these states were seeking the destruction of a Christendom culture, the appropriation of Church property and at the least restrictions on religious freedom, if not, in at least some settings and periods, the outright persecution of religious believers. In the light of this, Dulles, who played a significant role in the World Council of Churches’ (WCC) Churches’ Commission on International Affairs (CCIA), tried at the WCC’s 1948 Amsterdam Assembly ([Kuem 2016](#), p. 120) to enlist the (at that point largely Protestant) WCC into an ideologically broad, anti-Communist ([Milliband et al. 1984](#)) front.

But informed by what he saw as a theological understanding of history and a critique of Christendom ideologies and structures, Hromádka refused to accept co-option into the anti-Communist discourse and crusade which figures such as Dulles sought to promote. He argued instead that Christian believers living in either socialist or capitalist societies *both* faced challenges to their Christian religious faithfulness and integrity. And indeed, it was following an intervention from [Hromádka \(1948](#), published in ([Secretariat of the Christian Peace Conference \(International\) 1998](#), pp. 6–14)) to the WCC Amsterdam Assembly, in which he offered a biblically informed critique of capitalist society, that the Assembly declined to follow the siren voice of an anti-Communism that would have uncritically aligned the Christian Churches with “bourgeois capitalism” during the Cold War. It chose instead to articulate a Christian vision of a “responsible society” as being of relevance to a state with any social system, whether that of “really existing socialism” or of “bourgeois capitalism”.

Building on that historically important theological stance, and in a context where (in contrast to the vast majority of other institutions in what might be called civil society), the Christian Churches could be found on both sides of the emerging so-called “Iron Curtain” across Europe, Hromádka went on in 1958 to convene the Prague Christian Conference, which then evolved into the international Christian Peace Conference (CPC), as a Christian ecumenical organization based in Prague. While helping to contribute to keeping the channels of communication open across East and West, it also became an important forum for an emergent Christian–Marxist dialogue in Europe and beyond, until in 1968 the Soviet tanks ended the Prague Spring, followed by Hromádka having a heart attack and then dying, which some interpreted as his dying of a broken heart. Hromádka’s theological and political legacy in many ways became overshadowed by the ensuing so-called “normalisation process” that followed and for many years restricted many of the initially creative energies of the CPC until it later succeeded in connecting with liberation theology developments in the Two Thirds World.

Today, Hromádka is (sadly) little known outside of his native country, and our times seem far on the other side of the practical end of what was known as “really existing socialism”. But, regardless of whether we operate primarily in terms of “Theology” and/or

“Religious Studies”, we may have become so immersed within the capitalist system in which we as individuals, our universities, our faith communities and our ways of studying and researching religion are shaped by it that we do not really see it. If so, the work associated with Hromádka could stand as an academic, professional and human resource for the importance of critical engagement with the wider social, political and economic contexts in which one as an individual and as a professional is embedded. In the final analysis, both Hromádka’s ability not to fall captive to ideologies³ and his courage not to withdraw from wider social and political realities but rather fully engage with them to try as much as might be possible to discern the signs of the times in history and to act in relation to them were rooted in a fundamentally theological orientation, which he articulated as follows:

All the sense of work lies in the desire, in the midst of today, to have the courage in the sovereignty of faith to recognize and understand the sense of the present moment, the relation between today and yesterday, the hidden connections of history, and to be able, with the desire for the courage of faith, to approximately determine the direction of the way which the Lord designates for our life and death. (Hromádka, in Salajka 1985, p. 4)

6.2. Dorothee Sölle: Socio-Political Contextualization and Positionality in “Theology”

Perhaps not surprisingly, out of the crucible of their country’s experiences with Nazism (including those of the co-option of large parts of their Churches and much of their university system into the Nazi system), a number of theologians of German heritage have also been notably strong in their advocacy of the importance of theological critique in relation to social, political and economic environments, including those of capitalism. Among these, one of the most emblematic was, perhaps, the German liberation theologian, political activist and feminist Dorothee Sölle⁴ (1927–2004), who was famous (and in the eyes of some, infamous) for advancing the argument that “Every theological statement must be a political statement as well”. This statement was, in itself, for many controversial, as it was bold because it was critiqued as a reductionist approach to “Theology”. However, it was intended in at least two complementary ways:

1. The argument was, on the one hand, *descriptive* of what Sölle held to be the case in relation even to theological articulations that claim to be independent of such an understanding, in relation to which the question is raised of what political interests do, in fact, any and all theological statements serve.
2. On the other hand, it was also something that Sölle argued should rather be *consciously embraced* so that, in articulating “Theology”, one should always consciously recognize its political implications and that, rather than this resulting in reductionism, the methodological self-awareness in doing this is precisely the best available mechanism for avoiding the inevitable “passive” positioning by others that in any case occurs relative to all theological statements.

Examples of this in Sölle’s own life and work include, among other things, the regular *Politisches Nachtgebet* (political night prayers) that she and her husband, Fulbert Steffensky, organized in Köln between 1968 and 1972 and which engaged “Theology” and spirituality against the Vietnam War and the Cold War. For Sölle, love (as Christian praxis) was very much at the heart of “Theology”. But such “love” was not to be limited to a personalist interpretation but integrally included political dimensions (Weller 2021). In her work, which, in many ways, was as much that of an activist as that of a more classical theologian,⁵ she was known for other sharply provocative pronouncements such as “Vietnam is Golgotha”; “The Third World is a permanent Auschwitz”; “God has no hands except our hands” and “We should eat more at the Eucharist and we should pray more when eating”. In her 1970 book, *Beyond Mere Obedience*, as a German Christian theologian (and therefore very unlike later uses of the superficially similar term “Islamofascism”), she coined the term “Christofascist” to describe certain kinds of Christian “fundamentalism”. And in perhaps

her (Sölle 1975) best known book in English, *Suffering*, she critiqued what she, again in a sharp turn of phrase, called “Christian masochism” and “theological sadism” in making a call for human beings to struggle together against oppression, sexism, anti-Semitism and all forms of authoritarianism.

Building on the example of these two in many ways different⁶ but in some ways similar “engaged scholars” working primarily under the rubric of “Theology”, perhaps one should ask the question: what is it within the colonially rooted capitalist economic and cultural (and, might one also go so far as to say, “religio-ideological”) system that impacts upon and shapes the way that not only “Theology” but also *Religionswissenschaft* and “Religious Studies” functions in universities today? And this is a question which will now be explored in relation to the socio-political contextuality of the intellectual work and the socio-political positionality of two British scholars who have been strongly identified with the modality of “Religious Studies”, in many ways, as over and against that of “Theology”, namely, Richard King and Malory Nye.

6.3. Richard King: Socio-Political Contextualization and Positionality in “Religious Studies”

In relation to the aspiration towards neutrality most often found among those who pursue Religious Studies, the introduction to Jeremy Carrette’s and Richard King’s co-authored 2005 book *Selling Spirituality* is particularly illuminative. And this is especially so in relation to the way in which aspects of both religion and the study of it have become absorbed into, and changed by, contemporary market economy capitalism. In relation to this, the introduction stated that their book set out to “. . . address the politics of knowledge” in “an explicitly political project that . . . seeks to challenge the commodification of life as well as disrupt the domestication of diverse cultural traditions, practices and communities” and to do so by drawing “. . . attention to the pernicious social effects of neo-liberalism and the corporate takeover of society that such shifts represent” (Carrette and King 2005, p. x).

Within the legacy of his own “redundancy” that occurred at the University of Derby as part of the 2001 closure of Religious and Philosophical Studies there, a rather understandably sour note of “thanks” was added to the book’s introduction to the effect that: “Richard would like to make special mention of the University of Derby, UK, for making him personally aware of the effects of market forces in the workplace and for providing a case study of the transformation of the university education into a retail enterprise” (Carrette and King 2005, pp. x–xi). But lest such a critique should be seen as being rooted only in understandable anger arising from the direct experience of the impact particular managerial decisions have on both what had been one of the University’s then leading research areas and also upon one’s professional and personal life, it should be noted that, in many ways, *Selling Spirituality* also built on King’s previous critical work in relation to the influence upon what is often claimed to be the more “neutral” approaches to studying and researching religion than what goes on under the label of “Theology” of the kind of Orientalism that has shaped the Western university system and analyzed by King (1999) in relation to the “mystic East”, thus complementing Said’s work in relation to Islam and Muslims (Said 1979).

This brings us back to the question of the kind of “secular” within which Western universities, and both “Theology” and “Religious Studies” within them, operate and which, as well as arguably being a “(reactively to) Christian secular”, is neither an economically nor culturally neutral, nor “genderless” nor “colourless” form of the “secular”. And in this context, “Religious Studies” cannot hope any more than “Theology” (and perhaps, in some ways, might be less capable) to study and research religion as if immune to the effects of how social, political and economic contexts, frameworks and interests operate.

6.4. Malory Nye: Socio-Political Contextualisation and Positionality in “Religious Studies”

Writing out of an originally formative intellectual background in the anthropology of religion, Malory Nye (2019) has sought to develop an important strand of reflection on what he has called “Decolonizing the Study of Religion”. In this, he has been trying to

develop a post-colonial critique of the way in which religion is studied and engaged with in universities, and especially in relation to those modes of study and research that lay claim to an objectivity of method over and against “Theology”. Nye’s paper begins with the challenging words:

The ways in which contemporary scholars talk about religion remain steeped in the ongoing legacies of European colonialism and assumptions of white supremacy. There are various lines of descent for the study of religion, and like much of the humanities and social sciences, they all lead back to colonialism, and in particular the 19th- and early 20th-centuries. (Nye 2019, p. 2)

He then goes on to pose the even sharper question of: “. . .to what extent can we say that the study of religion is so deeply the product of colonialism that its structures, presumptions, and methods are irredeemably flawed? Is the study of religion a rotten fruit of the poisoned tree of colonialism?” (Nye 2019, p. 2). A part of this is about what is and what is not taught in university curricula. In relation to this, the study of religion finds itself in a wider context of, for example, the “Decolonizing SOAS” initiative (SOAS 2023b) initiated in 2017 by the School of Oriental and African Studies in the University of London (SOAS).

In comparison with the heritage and content of some disciplines, Nye notes that the study of religion has the at least potential advantage of having “an important function in exploring and transmitting ancient sources and philosophies from Asia, Africa, and elsewhere (and is not so ‘obviously’ white as some humanities disciplines such as philosophy, classics, and medieval history)” (Nye 2019, p. 12). At the same time, he argues that what prides itself as a more pluralistically inclusive study of religion nevertheless generally proceeds within what he calls “a framework of colonially structured modernity” (Nye 2019, p. 12). Furthermore, he argues that, in trying to understand, critique, challenge and overcome this, it is important to acknowledge that the ways in which the emergence of the human science disciplines occurred within the long-established universities were in the context of institutions that were what Aníbal Quijano (2007, p. 168) refers to as part of the “colonial structure of power”.

While empire in its original sense has ended with political decolonization, Nye notes that, “Despite the fairly recent take up of the term in mainstream academia, decolonization is not the same as ‘inclusion’ or ‘diversification’: it is not about a paternalistic offering of inclusion to outsiders”. Rather, he underlines that, “The metaphor of the ‘seat at the table’ (or the space on the syllabus) for such diversity is part of such white paternalism. In contrast, decolonization is a challenge to these assumptions of power and the structures that are formed to maintain them” (Nye 2019, p. 24). In relation to how such a process can be started, in terms of how scholarly debate is conducted, with who and to what end, Nye argues that “Decolonization is about changing how people think, talk, and act through a radical engagement with a plurality of voices and perspectives that have been historically marginalized and silenced” and that “Decolonization is not about ‘finding space’ at the table: it is about changing the room” (Nye 2019, p. 5).

Such an approach echoes the notion of “pluriversity”, as articulated in the work of Achille Mbembe, who explains what he, in the South African context of post-apartheid decolonization, means by this as an aim for the university, which he describes as being “a process of knowledge production that is open to epistemic diversity” (Mbembe 2016, p. 4). In arguing for this, Mbembe anticipates the critique that such a position leads to epistemological, cultural and ethical relativism by arguing that such an approach “does not necessarily abandon the notion of universal knowledge for humanity”. Rather, Mbembe argues that pluriversity embraces the possibility of a universal knowledge for humanity “via a horizontal strategy of openness to dialogue among different epistemic traditions” (Mbembe 2016, p. 5).

7. Empirical Grounding and Axioanalysis: Questions for “Theology” and “Religious Studies”

Perhaps what Mbembe argues on a broader front might have something to say regarding the specific and more focused question here concerning the relationship between “Theology” and/or “Religious Studies” in a “secular” university. As a Christian theologian writing an introductory textbook for a past generation of Theology undergraduates, Maurice Wiles succinctly expressed it in his compact book *What is Theology?*: “The exact relation between Christian theology and religious studies depends partly upon how the two titles themselves are understood” (Wiles 1976, p. 13). In light of this and all that has been discussed in this paper so far, including the important argument from Mbembe in favor of “. . . a horizontal strategy of openness to dialogue among different epistemic traditions” (Mbembe 2016, p. 5), I would suggest that we should, perhaps, not speak of a methodological debate between the singular concepts of “Theology” and “Religious Studies” but of a plural debate between theological methodologies and the methodologies of various forms of Religious Studies.

What this means for someone whose professional approach comes more from the “Religious Studies” end of the “Theology” and/or “Religious Studies” conversation is that, in critique of “Theology”, I stand close to what the scholar who is often revered as the “father of Religious Studies” in the UK, Ninian Smart, used to argue in critique of “Theology” rather than in alignment with the attempts of many in the EASR and, especially, the IAHR to exclude from the validity of the “academic” study of religion the making of evaluative judgements and the exploring of truth claims. Thus, for me, as for Smart: “The real problem with traditional theology is not that the latter goes in for judgements and constructs worldviews, but that on the empirical and descriptive, historical side it so restricts enquiry through the modes of its institutionalization” (Smart 1984, p. 268).

My other main problem with “Theology” is when it, at least apparently, seeks to proceed methodologically without some degree of empirical engagement. Concretely, for example, a consequence from this would be that if “ecclesiology” can properly be considered as branch of “Theology”, then it seems to me that it is no longer responsible to “do ecclesiology” without it being informed by what has come to be called “congregational studies” (see Guest et al. 2004). Equally, in relation to “Religious Studies”, it is important that this can, and also, where possible, *should*, be carried out in a way that is grounded in and contextualized along the lines of what the German scholars Michael Klöcker and Udo Tworushka call *Praktische Religionswissenschaft* (see Klöcker and Tworushka 2008; Weller 2009).

In relation to both “Theology” and/or “Religious Studies”, as one becomes more aware of the regimes of knowledge found in both major tendencies within the academic study of religion, many professional and personal questions are raised, with the dimension of ethical self-criticism often mediating between them. Choosing conscious “scholarly engagement” rather than being “passively shaped” in one’s study and research of religion, whether undertaken primarily as “Theology” or as “Religious Studies”, entails a willingness both professionally and personally to try to live and work in a self-aware way and being prepared to do so with all the sense of ambiguity that comes about from the making of active choices that have practical consequences. In this, there is no professional rule book by which to proceed. But there is also no need for personal or professional paralysis. Returning once again to Josef Hromádka, who knew (including painfully) about such matters in his life as a theologian and citizen, he put it as follows:

. . . any attempt at understanding the meaning of historic events, any definite conviction or vital decision is inevitably one-sided. It is a decision for a certain course over against another course, and it draws a line between what I consider right and wrong—I do not recognise any so-called objectivity without conviction. Only dull indifference can boast of objectivity. (Hromádka, in Salajka 1985, p. 4)

For someone operating primarily in a “Religious Studies mode” of scholarship, as also in Theology, this entails the need to be transparent about one’s own personal religious or other positionalities, whether religious or non-religious. From within contemporary

“Religious Studies”, there are now a range of other methodological approaches (see, especially, Flood 1999) that have been developed partly in reaction to, as well as developed from, earlier phenomenological approaches to the study of religion such as that advocated by Ninian Smart. However, because alongside his major contribution to the emergence of “Religious Studies” in British universities, Smart argued against an a priori exclusion of the question of religion or belief truth-claims, I would advocate that what Smart called “axio-analysis” both can and (necessarily) should be something for scholars in both “Theology” and “Religious Studies” to undertake since, as urged by Smart, it

...seems to be part of the procedure for one who approaches a religion cross-culturally that he or she should stimulate some degree of self-awareness. It is as though we should undergo axioanalysis—a kind of evaluational equivalent to psychoanalysis: what has been called more broadly ‘values clarification’. Or perhaps we might call it ‘own-worldview analysis’. (Smart 1984, p. 265)

While neither transparency nor axioanalysis guarantee objectivity or good scholarship, both at least allow others in the university and public arenas to take such factors into account when contributing to, and making their evaluations of, published research. Therefore, in concluding, I would like to share the following questions that I used to pose to doctoral students from all university disciplines in a seminar on the topic of “The Societal View of Research/The Uses Made of Research”. Although originally formulated in relation to research alone (rather than research and teaching) and intended as more generically applicable across various disciplines, they are presented here with the words “and especially that in Theology and/or Religious Studies” inserted into the originals:

- Who funds your research and teaching, and especially that in Theology and/or Religious Studies?
- Are some forms of funding incompatible with some kinds of research and teaching, and especially that in Theology and/or Religious Studies?
- How does the source of the funding impact on the processes and content of your research and teaching, and especially that in Theology and/or Religious Studies?
- Is your research and teaching, and especially in Theology and/or Religious Studies, seen in the wider society as generally useful, generally “use-less” (in an instrumental sense) or potentially dangerous?
- Do different “stakeholders” and/or “interest groups” see your research and teaching, and especially that in Theology and/or Religious Studies, differently?
- Do you feel you have any responsibility for the “uses” that may be made of your research and teaching, and especially that in Theology or Religious Studies, by others?
- If you do feel such a responsibility, what can you do to address this?

If individuals who work in either “Theology” or “Religious Studies” ask these and other similar questions, then we can perhaps all engage in “academic” scholarship in both “Theology” and “Religious Studies” in interaction with each other and with the social, cultural, political and economic systems in which we find ourselves, in ways that are more self-aware, more ethically responsible and, because of that, more critical—in both the scholarly and societal senses of the word. In more structural terms, and in closing, I would also like to argue that it would be of benefit to individual scholars, to the “secular” university and to the wider society if what collectively goes on in universities, including in “Theology” and/or “Religious Studies”, was also seriously to interact with the following policy bullet points taken from the “Decolonizing SOAS Vision” that was adopted by SOAS’ Academic Board in November of 2017 (see SOAS 2023a) as part of its commitment to addressing the need for decolonization across its curricula. However, as with the above series of questions, the following is again presented here in an adapted form of questions posed especially to the fields of Theology and/or Religious Studies asking what it means to be engaged in:

- Supporting further recognition and debate about the wide, complex and varied impacts of colonialism, imperialism and racism in shaping our university, especially in Theology and/or Religious Studies;
- Embedding within our policies and practices a deeper understanding that these impacts produce and reproduce injustices and inequalities within education, especially in Theology and/or Religious Studies;
- A stronger commitment to actively making redress for such impacts through ongoing collective dialogue within the university and through our public obligations, especially in Theology and/or Religious Studies;
- The provision of institution-level support to embed this understanding in [our] contribution as a public university in the service of the wider world, and especially in Theology and/or Religious Studies.

If both sets of concluding questions were asked in serious ways that lead to action, then they could help to facilitate an important transformation within which socio-political contextuality and positionality are embraced and embedded as being necessary (but not exhaustive or exclusive) for rooting both critical and constructive scholarship in “Theology” and “Religious Studies” in a methodological process of social and personal reality-matching, the products of which—unlike those of particular kinds of religious dogma or critical theory alone—are then more capable of being dialogically contested. In this way, what could be called an “engaged” approach to the study of religion might prove able to facilitate a fruitful “shared borderland” between the “hinterland territories” claimed by these otherwise often broadly differential and sometimes conflicting approaches.

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Notes

- ¹ For example, Potsdam University’s Department of Jewish Studies and Religious Studies. As well as being one of only two Universities (the other being Bremen University) where Religious Studies departments are centrally responsible for training schoolteachers who are not attached to any religious confession in LER (Lebensgestaltung, Ethik and Religionskunde, or Conduct of Life, Ethics and Study of Religion), it also co-operates closely with the University’s Institute/School of Jewish Theology.
- ² For comprehensive awareness, in relation to the AAR, it should be noted that the main reason for the foundation of the separate North American Association for the Study of Religion (NAASR 2023) was the “broad tent” approach of the AAR.
- ³ It should be acknowledged that there are those who, especially following the “fall of Communism”, evaluated Hromádka as a Communist “fellow-traveller”, noting, among other things, that he was awarded the Lenin Prize in 1958. But such judgements were usually made by those from outside his social-political setting, where, in the context of what he saw as a judgement on “Christendom” models of society and grace for the opportunity of building something new, he opted for the possibility of a socialist transformation and strongly welcomed the Prague Spring as the fruit of the efforts in Christian–Marxist dialogue, to which he had made a major contribution, and the potential start of a new stage in the history of socialism. But he was also clear in his analysis of the political consequences of the Warsaw Pact intervention in his country in a letter written in his personal capacity to the Soviet Ambassador. In this, he spoke of a “tragic error” and an “immeasurable disaster” as a result of which “The moral weight of socialism in this country and in the world will be shaken for a long time”. And this was also reflected in a Memorandum that he afterwards wrote, as President of the CPC, to members of its Working Committee meeting in Massy, France, 1–4 October 1968. For both of these, see Opočenský (1990), pp. 427–45.

- ⁴ More properly, her name was Dorothee (Steffensky-) Sölle, but in most English publications, her surname is written without the umlaut as Soelle. Her double-barrelled surname, adopted following marriage to her husband, Fulbert Steffensky, is usually omitted.
- ⁵ In connection with this, it is perhaps worth noting that Sölle never held a Professorship in Germany, being Professor and resident for six months a year at Union Theological Seminary in New York between 1975 and 1987, although in 1994, she received an Honorary Professorship from the University of Hamburg.
- ⁶ Hromádka's formulations, though sharp, were always written carefully. Sölle perhaps felt the necessity, in a complacent West German society that had still not really (on either a familial or a political level) confronted the legacy of National Socialism, to be much more provocative in both formulation and expression in order to be able to even gain a hearing.

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