

Article

The Myth of Secular Philosophy: Philosophy of Religion's Origin and Fate

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Abstract: Philosophy of religion (PoR) embodies the crisis and contradiction of the modern separation of reason and religion. The false assumption that reason is linked to the secular, and that religion is inferior to science or philosophy, creates a challenging situation for the field of PoR. This article shows how the split of reason and religion takes life in a secularization story, the myth of secular philosophy, that PoR implicitly challenges by its very existence. By making explicit the institutional uniqueness of PoR and showing how it challenges the myth of secular philosophy, the article argues that PoR embodies an alternative, and truer, vision of philosophy in which global diversity and inclusion is part of the very essence of the philosophical project.

Keywords: philosophy of religion; philosophy; science and religion; faith and reason

1. Introduction

The power of philosophy of religion resides in its weakness. Poised between many departments, eclectic in its range, capacious in its concerns, it is not easy to say what philosophy of religion actually is.

I will argue that a revolutionary reassessment of what philosophy itself means is implicit in the field of philosophy of religion, and that philosophy of religion is best positioned to represent the full breadth, diversity, and power of philosophy's potential.

Philosophy, however, like the rest of our culture, assumes that it is separate from religion, a belief that is linked to our image of science, which is also widely assumed to be separate from religion. This sense of reality, partly confirmed by the organization of academic disciplines, finds its most powerful justification in a story, inherited from the Enlightenment, that sees religion as the enemy of reason, and something reason replaces as culture evolves. Though philosophers of religion are acutely aware of the major flaws in this narrative, it remains enormously powerful and marginalizes philosophy of religion in the process.

The basic intuition the story yields is that philosophy and science are rational, whereas religion is somehow intrinsically irrational, or non-rational, and thus categorically different than, and inferior to, philosophy and science. For the sake of convenience, we can call this The Myth of Secular Philosophy. Even from the brief summary above, it is easily recognizable. Told in a bit more detail, it goes something like this:

Philosophy arose as the precursor of secular rationality and natural science. By separating itself from the myths and religion of its surrounding environment, philosophy paved the way towards a scientific world free from superstition. Philosophy, in short, is not religious, but secular, and while it may reflect on ideas of divinity and the sacred if it likes (academics call this "philosophy of religion," at least as a subfield in philosophy departments), this reflection is not intrinsic to philosophy nor its central concern, and while philosophy may reflect on ultimate reality, this is metaphysics, not theology. Theology, like faith, belongs to and characterizes religion. Philosophy, like reason, belongs with and characterizes the secular.¹



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This story dominates professional philosophy today, yet its influence is not widely recognized for a at least three reasons. First, the story is largely taken for granted, and rarely explicitly stated or argued for. Second, the story functions to animate and legitimate the very forms and organization of knowledge in philosophy, theology, and philosophy of religion. Finally, contemporary academic philosophy in general does not acknowledge the fact that institutional forms, like the university itself, shape the content of what counts as knowledge.

The fact that our very structures of knowledge also embody narratives and attitudes has a corollary for people interested in knowledge, namely, attention to the institutional forms of knowledge and knowledge production should be recognized as important and valuable dimensions of truly critical philosophy—that is, philosophy that seeks to be self-aware of its own nature and limitations.² I will suggest that a survey of the institutional structure of philosophy of religion reveals the power of the Myth of Secular Philosophy, and the need to challenge that myth if we wish to reshape the field in concrete ways.

I have previously developed such a perspective vis-à-vis analytic philosophy (Loncar 2016) and the topic of science and religion (Loncar 2021) and aim here to develop that critical philosophy in relationship to my own core field: philosophy of religion. The very power of the university's institutional forms would suggest the value and even necessity of subjecting them to critical philosophical inquiry. I know, however, of few instances in which this has been done, and even fewer that apply directly to philosophy of religion.³ The goal of this article is to theorize the institutional forms of philosophy of religion as a mode of answering the question, "What is philosophy of religion?" in a way that is descriptively valuable as well as philosophically potent, and in doing so to point towards new ways of envisaging the field itself. This is necessary because at least some members of the field, myself included, regard it as in crisis.⁴ One need not share this view, that the field is in crisis, to appreciate the salience of the following argument, but it motivates the urgency and cross-disciplinary relevance of the following considerations.

As I see it, the crisis in philosophy of religion is downstream of a general cultural crisis, present in philosophy in a unique way. The lack of diversity that is a central concern of many is the most notable symptom of the crisis. It arises, however, from the fact that philosophy, and the academy more generally, developed in institutional contexts shaped by Christianity. As Christianity has yielded to the process often called secularization, it has generated legitimate and far-reaching inquiry into the influence of assumptions, norms, and patterns of exclusion that Christianity and its intertwining with Western colonialism has left on scholarship.

As a result, there is a growing recognition that what passes under "philosophy of religion" is an overwhelmingly Christian tradition of thinking and writing, which by that fact excludes from the center of consideration all traditions that are not Christian or not presentable in forms closely analogous to those through which Christian considerations have been taken up in modernity.

Recent statements of this kind of concern can be found in Thomas Lewis's *Why Philosophy Matters for the Study of Religion* and a recent edited volume, *Reconfigurations of Philosophy of Religion: a Possible Future*, in which many of the authors articulate cogent concerns about the Christian and Western biases of philosophy of religion as currently practiced. In particular, Kevin Schilbrack has developed a lucid and powerful analysis of the concept of religion and its function (Schilbrack 2022; Cf. Schilbrack 2014; Lewis 2015; Kanaris 2018).

In a recent article, "Science and Religion: An Origins Story," I have explored how the history of science and religion reveal that the way we think about science and religion today arises from the way in which faith and reason came to be separated in the medieval university. This was part of a growth in the division of labor, or differentiation process, that led to the highly specialized character of the modern world and its institutional forms of knowledge.

Philosophy of religion today inherits this history of the fragmentation of faith and reason into separate institutional spheres and thus an institutional analysis of it helps us see how a different understanding of philosophy itself, and its relationship to religion, is implicit in the literal structure of our field.

2. Philosophy of Religion: What Is It?

First, we should begin with the obvious. The phenomena referred to by the term philosophy of religion (henceforth, when referred to as the special object of this article's inquiry, PoR) have in common a connection to the modern university system. That much all can agree upon. Charles Taliaferro, in his excellent overview of the field in the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, can, in one paragraph, say that "the roots of what we call *philosophy of religion* stretch back to the earliest forms of philosophy" and then note that "the evident role of philosophy of religion as a distinct field of philosophy does not seem apparent until the mid-twentieth century." Each one of these claims is plausible and I think true, yet it creates an intriguing puzzle to wonder how they are connected.

For example, there can be no "distinct field of philosophy" when philosophy is not a distinct academic discipline, which it did not clearly become until the German research university began in the nineteenth-century. Some attention to these institutional dynamics is needed, because philosophy of religion is a strange hybrid of multiple aspects of the university and its complex cultural history. What, then, does PoR refer to? Here a heuristic taxonomy is useful.

In particular, PoR refers to aspects of the three major institutional forms that characterize the modern academy, all of which reflect the self-evident idea that philosophers of religion are people interested in religion and see this interest as somehow connected with, or even internal to, their understanding of philosophy itself.

Institutional Forms of PoR:

1. University departments/division, the three most relevant of which for PoR consist of: (a) Religious Studies/Religion departments (in which philosophy of religion is generally an "area" or "subfield" represented by one or more core faculty); (b) theology departments (which for this context will also include Divinity Schools), in which members of the faculty may either specialize in philosophy of religion or be considered "theologians" whose work overlaps closely with PoR. Such work may also be called "philosophical theology." Though different in some accounts, for classificatory purposes I include self-styled "philosophical theology" under PoR. And last, but certainly not least, (c) departments of philosophy, in which, once again, like Religious Studies, PoR is a recognized subfield, one often paired, due to its relative lack of prestige in analytic philosophy, with an expertise in one or more other, more mainstream analytic subfields, like epistemology, metaphysics, and philosophy of language. As we will see, and readers, depending on their institutional context, will know with varying degrees of familiarity, these various areas play significant roles in shaping the accepted or preferred sense of PoR. But the point here is establishing the main academic phenomena to which PoR refers.
2. Specialized publication and presentation venues and their agents and content. These include but are not limited to book series, PoR classes, subject editors at university presses, academic journals, and conferences undertaken by associations whose members mutually recognize each other as contributors to and/or representatives of PoR and whose contents are academic articles, lectures, books, etc.
3. The resulting academic "field," primarily comprising (1): the institutional homes and personnel creating (2): the activity and results of (1).

It is important to distinguish an academic field from a discipline. The latter is a narrower concept that applies to a field often sufficiently professionalized to engender fully funded and self-regulating territory in the university.

An essential fact revealed by this analysis is that PoR is spread across multiple disciplinary locations: philosophy, theology/divinity schools, and religion departments. PoR is

thus a *transdisciplinary* field. In order to appreciate this significance of this situation, we can consider the normal trajectory of a successful academic field.

First, *the most professionally successful fields in the academic ecosystem engender their own departments*. Notably, PoR lacks its own departments. Unlike economics, anthropology, philosophy, or theology, we lack whole departments of PoR. This status, call it *weak disciplinary integrity*, is quite important for an understanding of PoR's circumstances and potential, and we will return to it below. There are not many direct analogies to PoR's weak disciplinary integrity. The typical story in the establishment of academic disciplines follows the logic of professions generally, which is that of competitive enclosing of a domain into a distinct jurisdiction, regulated and defined by a body of experts whose expertise consists in some specialized knowledge (e.g., Law, Medicine, etc.).⁵

In academia, disciplines usually grow out of a more general area. Historically, this more general area has been Philosophy, which began as the first university faculty long before it turned into a modern "department", and whose semantic range was closer to words like "learning" and "knowledge" than to its current narrow sense. Growing and becoming more specialized, the field may then attain sufficient autonomy to assert itself, and, if successful, establish its own separate departmental identity in the world, complete with all the accouterments of (1) and (2) above. Examples since the nineteenth-century include psychology, which went from being a subfield of philosophy to an increasingly distinct field that eventually achieved its own disciplinary status, complete with departments at major universities; economics, which grew from political economy (part of philosophy), and sociology, which was the most self-conscious of the new disciplines, seeking to replace the role of theology and metaphysics in its most influential and founding figure, August Comte, and thereby laying out one of the most common forms of the secularization narrative (from religion to philosophy to science).⁶

Partly in recognition of what August Comte and the field of sociology were both discovering and asserting about modern society and the changing role of religion, many of the early and influential and large-scale stories of modernity, philosophy, and religion saw in this process a story of philosophy's self-transcending, or self-nullification, into science. The growth of fields by breaking off from philosophy into specialized, then separate areas, became a story of philosophy's decline-through-success, a story that the late Heidegger uses to argue philosophy has ended.⁷

So if PoR is put into this framework, it appears to be on a trajectory of decline—rather than gaining strengths, it is under pressure, and like many areas, being eliminated in some universities. A key question, then, is: why does PoR have this weak disciplinary integrity, despite being a fascinating and highly important field?

A partial answer to this question comes from considering the transdisciplinary character of the field. Though grouped together, the institutional arrangements that give PoR its various homes are not historically equal in age nor are they necessarily friendly to each other.

PoR stands as a complex inheritor of the secularization of the academy (and here I am focused more on the Anglophone institutional context, with reference to America's stranger distinction between religion departments and divinity schools). Divinity schools, themselves either results of a kind of broadening or secularization of what were originally religious colleges (e.g., Harvard and Yale both began as places for ministerial training, then later developed distinct schools of Divinity), and their sometimes identical siblings, the seminary (typically an educational establishment explicitly created by and for a particular religious community, denomination, etc.), long antedate any independent domain of the university set aside to study "religion."

The shift from Seminaries/Divinity schools to Religion/Religious Studies departments is a self-conscious secularization, and broadening, of the study of religion. More specifically, departments dedicated to the study of religion represent the explicit *de-confessionalization* of the study of religion. The notion behind de-confessionalizing the study of religion being that religion studied by those professionally mandated to *represent* some particular form

of it constitutes a less free form of academic inquiry. There thus exists both historic and occasional contemporary hostility between some departments of Religion and Seminaries or Divinity Schools. Put crudely, but in a way that many will instantly recognize, the tendency today is for Religion departments to think of themselves as “secular,” that is, to represent themselves as having no normative or confessional agenda (as they see it). This position in turn supports an occasional bias (whether justified or not is irrelevant to my current concerns) against Seminaries/Divinity schools. These may often be institutionally perceived by their Religion department cousins as “normative” and objectionably confessional, and thus out of step with the broader, secular university.

Meanwhile, from the other side, many in the seminary context, or who would have no objection to being so placed (even if they are, contingently, in a secular Religion department), regard this characterization as at best unfair, at worst, the projection of a now seriously dated form of secularism with its own ideological agenda, normative commitments, etc.

In practice, there is usually plenty of friendly interaction, particularly for people in PoR, as we know perfectly well that we live across these many borders. Yet the discrepant institutional realities of PoR are salient and should not be neglected, as such sociological and historical difference is, too often, neglected as if it were irrelevant to philosophical concerns. Each, for example, produces a (this is *typical*, not literal, description) different predominant set of pressures, whether on teaching, based on different student bodies (e.g., ministers-in-training are different than secular undergraduates), scholarship (tenure committees may have significantly different priorities in Religion departments than in seminaries, for example), or both. In the case of scholarship, these pressures can directly affect the publishers and interlocutors that the aspiring PoR professor aims to work with and please.

One example that raises another relevant issue should help clarify these pressures. A PoR specialist will, almost certainly, do different kinds of work to receive tenure if they are in a philosophy department than if they are in a religion department or seminary. An analytic philosophy department, for example, will wish to see publications reflecting participation in the broader community of analytic philosophy; straying too far from the relevant journals, book series, and interlocutors can thus be disastrous for one’s professional success in such a context.

Here we arrive at a breathing point from our analysis, where we have amassed a sufficiently detailed and textured sense of what falls under PoR to say something about its character today:

PoR is an embattled field positioned between at least three distinct institutional and departmental domains (Seminaries, philosophy departments, and self-consciously ‘secular,’ non-confessional departments for the study of religion), each exerting various and contradictory (with respect to each other, qua institutions) pressures on PoR practitioners.

Although this description apparently leaves out all issues of content, it is quite useful for generating the following observation: the weak disciplinary integrity of PoR, combined with the different and sometimes incompatible agendas of its institutional homes, means that the field of PoR lacks the capacity to act directly on itself, and this incapacity for reflexive, or autonomous, action is in fact crucial to its character and, as I will argue below, its promise.

Clarifying and developing what this claim amounts to brings us to the next section, for the observation just made is inseparable from the previous attempt to characterize PoR.

3. Autonomy and Its Discontents

Autonomy refers to effective agency with respect to itself, and is thus intrinsically reflexive. Kantian autonomy, the idea that freedom requires the law one obeys be willed by one’s own will, and not imposed from the outside, embodies the more general Enlightenment assertion of the independence of reason from all authority. With this in mind, we

can see that the weak disciplinary integrity of PoR reflects its relative lack of disciplinary autonomy—it is affected by what is happening in philosophy, theology, etc.

In light of this, let us consider a question about PoR's disciplinary autonomy:

What are the implications of the resources necessary to answer the question—
What is Philosophy of Religion?—with respect to the question itself?

This question takes its complex form from the fact introduced in the prior section: that of the importance of autonomy or direct reflexivity, the power to act directly upon oneself as a field. Reflexive constructions tend to have a peculiar complexity and compression. They thus merit analytical decomposition before we take them up again at face value. This question, which I will call the transcendental implications question (from Kant's sense in which "transcendental" pertains to the *conditions of the possibility* of something), can be thought of as follows. First, answering any question requires drawing on some knowledge base. Typically, in academia, the knowledge base drawn on for a question is thought to be part of the domain of the question itself. So, an economics question should draw on economic knowledge for its answer. There may always be secondary data in play, but the idea here is straightforward and important. If you try to answer an economic question like a historian, a historian might be happy but the economists would likely be disgruntled.

So, what happens when we ask questions that seem to demand we draw on data that are not, obviously or primarily, what we consider part of the domain from which the question arose? At least two things might happen. Either the question can be rejected as an improper question for its domain, or it can lead to an expanded sense of what might constitute that domain of knowledge or inquiry.

In a related context, I have called this kind of situation one in which the *local internality* of a domain is threatened. That is, if an economic question seems to require an answer that looks like history, and not economics, then that question breaches the sense of local internality of the academic economics community, and it introduces something external to its standard self-representation. Academics (as fields) generally do not like this. Introducing local externality, that is, foreignness with respect to some self-defined domain, is transgressive.

In this case, however, I am relying on the fact that I hope the preceding section is intelligible and plausible enough that most readers will have found it helpful in at least some respects. Indeed, it merits notice on two levels. First, the fact that it is not from philosophy of religion, as an academic field (e.g., there was little from (2) that I was able to draw upon in the preceding description), that I drew the data for the field's characterization.

Rather, knowledge of our field is based, very broadly, in history and social and institutional analysis. Second, it is significant that this very fact may point to the virtue and promise of what is otherwise, for PoR practitioners, a frustrating aspect of their field: the fact that it cannot even be adequately described on its own terms.

The capacity for internally sourced self-description is both an ideal and impossibility of every academic field. The power to determine its own standards and conduct characterizes the ancient distinction of the university itself.

At its founding, the university created a distinct kind of legal and epistemic territory in the Middle Ages, which, in a fractal manner, each faculty (Medicine, Law, Theology, and the Arts) reproduced, and which has in turn continued to be reproduced in, and stand as the hallmark of, academic departments, namely, the power of self-governance (see [Loncar 2021](#)). Law professors cannot say what counts as medicine, just as biologists do not get to say what counts as philosophy, or philosophers what counts as nuclear physics. Only in the case of catastrophic failures of self-governance does a department enter into "receivership" and become temporarily ruled by the member(s) of an external field.

A common language and culture comprise the assumed background of every communal endeavor; otherwise, basic forms of communication and social coordination become difficult. But in contemporary academia, it is usually thought to be a privilege, and a distinctive one at that, to say that what counts as a description of one's own field is itself an instance of that field—that is, a philosopher's answer to the question: "What is philoso-

phy?" is thought to be a philosophical answer, ideally. If it turned out that the answer was actually a neuro-scientific one, then academic philosophy might be in trouble, because it could not describe itself on its own terms, and would thus be beholden to another domain to receive its identity.

Disciplines rely on autonomy, and autonomy is deeply related to linguistic control over the boundaries of one's area. Since what constitutes academic domains, *qua* matter, is primarily different combinations of written and spoken words (scholarship and teaching), this means academic autonomy implies some degree of reflexive linguistic control, that is, the power to say something about one's domain in such a way that it enforces the border of that domain in the very act of its utterance. To take a simple example, consider what teachers do in introductory courses: they introduce students to the content of a field, and their style of doing so also constitutes the student's first sense of what the field, as such, is.

Thus, one implication of the preceding description for the character of PoR is that it lacks this kind of power, or possesses it in a weak form. So far, this can be seen as a specified expression of its weak disciplinary integrity. But there is more to be said.

For, a crucial implication of the foregoing description is that PoR as a field represents the intermixed histories and even contemporary realities of at least three different institutional domains of the modern academic system. What they all have in common is a concern for highly general yet enormously complex, detailed and significant domains of human concern.

Both philosophy and religion have the justified, even if, to their colleagues, alarming, reputations of potentially dealing with practically everything. Generality could be said to characterize any academic discipline just insofar as it can be reduced to a singular set of theories and methods. In that sense, an economist can consider anything "economically," that is, using economic methods. Whether that is actually useful or valid is a separate question. But such generality derives from the extension of some fairly specific body of theory to which all other things are being related. The theory itself is specific and could be clustered (not without internal controversy among economists, of course) around a few leading concepts, such as scarcity, incentives, and markets, etc. in the case of economics.

Philosophy is different in this sense from most all other areas of academic inquiry, and, like religion and theology, it has a problem with defining and understanding itself. So, the dependence on locally external knowledge to characterize PoR suggests first of all a connaturality with both of the areas from which it takes its hybrid name.

More than this merely suggestive commonality, however, PoR actually *embodies uniquely* a historical reality that currently no discipline cognizes as its distinct object or mode of inquiry, namely, the history, interconnection, and current significance of those questions, topics, texts, and practices we *institutionally separate* as "philosophy" and "religion." Philosophy of religion lacks disciplinary autonomy, and thus the power to act directly upon itself, *precisely because it embodies both the interconnection and separation of philosophy and religion.*

Institutionally, the modern university has separated philosophy and religion; intellectually, this separation has not succeeded, and representatives of both "sides" of the divide continue to work at the institutional interstices of the academy. That's us: philosophers of religion.

What is therefore unquestionably a weakness with respect to academic power is a tremendous intellectual opportunity. For one way of characterizing PoR, then, is the field that, with varying degrees of self-consciousness, seeks to ascertain the relationship and significance of philosophy and religion, drawing on whatever means are necessary for that pursuit. A maximally self-conscious version of the field, so characterized, would have necessary and profound footprints in each and all of the different institutional settings that house it: seminaries and philosophy and religion departments.

For, PoR, understood through the analysis offered above, embodies the fact that philosophy and religious concerns were once inseparable, and it maintains the importance

of their relationship in its very divisions across different departmental and ideological sectors of the academy.

Moreover, such a description shows that what was apparently an external description of factors necessary to characterize philosophy of religion as a set of academic phenomena can actually, and should now be properly, regarded as *an internal description from a new viewpoint*, one that, it is true, expands the bounds of PoR, not for any arbitrary reason, but through the emerging consciousness latent in the field's own character that, once articulated, begins to illuminate what the field itself actually is and thus can be.

To make this more concrete, in the remainder of this section, I will revisit the preceding's section's material but this time from the perspective of the concerns with which I began the article.

The historical reality of Christian dominance in Philosophy of Religion can now be seen as an understandable factor relating to the dominance of Christianity in Western European culture and its educational institutions. In England, the teaching profession only separated from ordained ministers to become its own field in the nineteenth-century (Chadwick 1975, p. 42). Similarly, even dissenting Christian traditions were not capable of earning degrees at Oxford and Cambridge until, again, the nineteenth-century. These examples should remind us how natural, from a historical perspective, it is that education reflects the dominant religious tradition of the society.

As Christian societies have secularized and pluralized, the dominance of one viewpoint, in this case Christianity, has become unacceptable on at least two grounds. First, the failure of that dominant viewpoint to represent and often even fairly describe the concerns of other, minority, groups, traditions, and perspectives. Second, the distorting influence of the modern Christian tradition's own assumptions, at least as they are translated into a modern academic field. Some critics may emphasize one of these, or another concern, but they are mutually reinforcing and *prima facie* reasonable objections.

We can see concretely how the different traditions in PoR speak to the issue of the field's Christian history. On one side, we find scholars in religious studies departments to be predictably sensitive to and self-conscious of this bias in the field. Most of the valuable recent books on the topic share this awareness and offer proposals that speak to it. On the other hand, members of the least historically conscious segment of the field, that is, those who are analytic philosophers or oriented towards them as primary interlocutors, seem correlatively less concerned, on the whole, with the problems of Christian bias and representation in the discipline. Put perhaps more fairly, they have less, if any, salutary pressure from their departmental colleagues to consider it.

Note that both of these trends or facts can be wholly explained by reference to the institutional/disciplinary dynamics introduced above, with no reference made, or required, to the personal consciousness, beliefs, or disposition of the individual scholars. Quite simply, if a PoR practitioner is in a conventional Religious Studies department, more overtly "traditional," that is, un-self-consciously Christian, perspectives will likely be objectionable to one's colleagues and create problems; likewise, if one is an analytic philosopher, setting aside the impractical idea of wholly retraining oneself professionally, one needs to speak to a community of colleagues (as peer-reviewers, writers of letters for tenure-review, etc.) that have a fairly standardized convention dictating what academic articles and books should look like in that subfield, and that convention does not include highly historical, social, or self-critical forms of argumentation. Precisely such forms might, alternately, be welcome in other areas of philosophy of religion, or perhaps by scholars in religion departments and some seminaries/divinity schools.

This diversity of consciousness and approach could be seen as an asset when the field self-consciously recognizes the need for these and other forms of work and actively creates contexts in which the possibility of their talking to each other was purposefully realized (like this special issue facilitates). Absent that, it is true, the subfields of PoR can become, like in any academic area, simply silos that ignore the existence of other forms of the field. Such pretense—that only one, viz. "*our form*," of the field is important or

legitimate—damages the field as a whole because it contributes to the centrifugal and fissile forces that tend towards PoR's destruction as a coherent area of inquiry.

Once any faction of a discipline so isolates itself as if to establish its own discipline, or *de facto claims* it is entirely representative of it, this creates a pressure away from the existing center. That pressure, in a field with strong disciplinary integrity, may be harmless, and even productive, as it does not contribute to an active decline of stability and coherence. But, if a field is like PoR and has weak disciplinary integrity because it lacks departments, that same pressure can be fissile, contributing to the further weakening and fragmentation of an already unstable academic constellation of forces.

Does anything follow from this approach about how, ideally, the field should look?

This question brings us to the concluding section of the article, where we will take the discovery in this section of the content of PoR being in part its own history and reality, and see what that might mean for the field as a whole.

4. The Future of Philosophy of Religion

The best thing PoR can do to reimagine itself is to become be aware of itself *as it actually exists*. Because of the forces of secularization embedded in the Myth of Secular Philosophy, in which religion is plotted as inferior and deficient vis-à-vis philosophy and science, the philosophy of religion literally encodes the modern cultural contradiction between religion and reason. It manifests that contradiction institutionally by the fact that, unlike any other field of philosophy, it literally exists in two or more departmental areas, and these areas—philosophy and religion faculties—are otherwise seen as competitors, as Immanuel Kant described in his *The Conflict of the Faculties* over two-hundred years ago (Kant 1996, pp. 233–328).

All university disciplines share the backdrop of the myth of secular philosophy, a story that positions religion in an intrinsically inferior position to philosophy and science.

At least three things are crucial to note about this myth. First, secularity is untheorized but positive, and linked closely to two other positive, and often synonymous concepts: reason and science. The triumvirate of secularity, rationality, and science is present not only in philosophy departments but in the public and scientific perception of science itself. Second, this myth describes not just or even primarily ideas in individuals' minds, but the actual organized self-concept of modern disciplinary philosophy in the leading Western universities. A department of philosophy does not think it has to justify asking why a "religious" project belongs in its department; it is assumed that the study of religion is, at best, an ancillary and often dubious side project. This power to exclude religion without argument or discussion means the myth has institutional and disciplinary power, and thus it plays a legitimating and ideological function in shaping hiring, funding, and hierarchies of academic value, for the entire academy is formally organized around the idea of science in the broadest sense.

Finally, the myth of secular philosophy is essentially a variation on the broader story of secularity, which, from the Enlightenment to the "new atheists," has provided a narrative linking the prestige of science with the total domain of rationality and portraying both as antipathetic to religion, creating what Charles Taylor has called the "subtraction" narratives of secularization (Taylor 2007, p. 22). Religion fades, Reason rises, Science triumphs. A story beautiful in its simplicity and power, it has only one problem: it is not, and has never been, true.

An alternate, imagined history might go something like this:

An Imagined Genealogy of Philosophy of Religion, circa 2077

Once upon time, philosophy emerged as a distinct way of life in the ancient Mediterranean world. By the claims of its own founders and their disciples (Thales, Pythagoras, Empedocles, Socrates, Plato, et al.), this way of life was derived from many other cultures, including the religious practices of the Egyptians, the Persians, and the teachings and traditions ascribed to Orpheus. Philosophy was thus from its foundations so concerned with religious things that a great scholar could even claim the word "philosophy" to

be the only word in Greek antiquity that comes close to corresponding to our sense of “religion” today.

Philosophy found its highest expression in its reflection on the gods, which it called theology. Christians took over this idea of philosophy and emerged as a powerful alternate tradition of philosophy in the Roman Empire, one that, through its political triumph, would end up preserving and transforming the ancient idea of philosophy. This was so much the case that monasticism, the highest life of the Christian church, was referred to as the philosophical life from its earliest history well into the Middle Ages. This tradition of philosophy was transformed by the rise of the European university but only in the nineteenth-century would philosophy undergo a conscious crisis of identity as it sought to position itself as a field of comprehensive knowledge and one academic discipline among others. Theology and philosophy were formally separated in subject matter and, with the secularization of the university system, theology’s cultural importance diminished even as philosophy increasingly forgot its history and aspiration to help humans become “as much like the divine as possible.”

The last fragments of philosophy’s religious origins in academia lie in an area that first concerned itself with the truth and coherence of religious claims (a task academic theologians largely abandoned), and later dissolved into a variety of pursuits whose principle of unity seemed to fade into academic convenience. Here our historians lack clear information, but some speculate that by the early twenty-first century a revival of philosophy took place. Yet academic records on the matter remain inconclusive.

If this imagined history were true, it would explain a great deal about not only philosophy of religion, including the institutional divisions analyzed in sections II and III, but also the state of philosophy and theology today. It would suggest that they are all suffering from a variety of maladies, including a strong form of historical amnesia combined with a predilection for false memories, suggesting a possibly traumatic event or series of events in their history.

The resulting condition would then seem to be an identity-crisis, although one that is repressed to varying degrees—never with complete success. Rather, repressed content seems to recur in the forms of overtly religious material in “philosophical” texts; a strange but persistent feeling among many thoughtful theologians that their concerns are not so different from Plato, Aristotle, or Plotinus, and that figures like these might actually be foundational for understanding their own tradition; and a growing suspicion, sometimes leading to frustration among PoR practitioners, that the contemporary division of philosophy and religion is at best a myth and, at worst, a total distortion of philosophy’s own history.

Moreover, if this imagined history were true, the founders of “Western” philosophy were happy to admit debts (whether we regard them as real or not) to Egypt, Iran, India, and elsewhere. What possible good reason could exist, then, for excluding all those traditions, and more, from our conception of philosophy or especially PoR? Embracing the richness of global traditions is something PoR can model to other fields, showing it is a return to the openness of philosophy’s multicultural origins.⁸ In fact, I would suggest (though it could appear biased) that philosophy of religion, because of its bridging function between disciplines, is arguably the most expansive and self-critical form of contemporary philosophy, as seen, for example, in science, religion, and philosophy, where some of the most important recent work has been done by philosophers of religion (Cf. [Sideris 2017](#); [White 2016](#); [Rubenstein 2022](#)). Were we to be so lucky that this fiction turned out to be fact, it would mean PoR could be at the vanguard of making philosophy more inclusive of its own past as well as present parties whose perspectives and positions have been silenced and suppressed.

That would be one version of philosophy of religion that could well be, if not an ideal, certainly a promising, path to reimagining the field. It would include and validate the

existing forms, but also provide a strong justification for both expanding the field and making its own history and character a central part of its self-image.

I end here with a suggestion and a provocative claim. The suggestion is that we imagine that the history I offered is true, and ask whether it would not be a better foundation for our field than any of the prevailing histories, whether it would not, in fact, make so much sense of our situation and concerns that its power to provide intelligibility might, on its own grounds, give us reason to think more about how history, real or imagined, motivates and makes possible different ways of being in the world, as individuals, communities, and institutions.

The provocative claim?

That imagined history is true, believe it or not. But that is another, much longer, story.

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Notes

- ¹ For a detailed paraphrase and discussion of what I am calling the Myth of Secular Philosophy, see [Gay \(1996, p. 72 ff\)](#). Gay was himself judiciously sympathetic to the Enlightenment; for more critical historiographical developments, see (e.g., [Buckley 1987](#); [Fitzpatrick et al. 2004](#)).
- ² Cf. “Philosophy and Critical Theory” from [Marcuse \(1968\)](#). My thanks to an anonymous reviewer for pointing me to this relevant text by Marcuse.
- ³ See [Frodeman \(2013\)](#), [Frodeman and Briggie \(2016\)](#), [Loncar \(2016\)](#), and, though not about institutions per se, highly relevant to the metaphilosophical issues at stake here: [Hösle \(1988\)](#). See the excellent article by [Whitney \(2018\)](#), which provides a lucid institutional overview of the field. Whitney highlights the challenge and potential of philosophy of religion in the context of the current university, including the commodification of higher education.
- ⁴ Since I wrote the first draft of this article, the institution from which I received my PhD in Philosophy of Religion (Yale), with no explanation to its alumni, eliminated its program in philosophy of religion, a fact I cannot help but feel as illustrative of the acute professional relevance of this Special Issue.
- ⁵ The classic study here, on which I am drawing, is sociologist [Abbott \(1988\)](#).
- ⁶ Cf. [Comte \(2014\)](#), and for a critical appraisal of Comte’s current influence, [Smith \(2014\)](#).
- ⁷ The crucial work here is [Dilthey \(1922\)](#), whose second volume is foundational for later treatments, but which remains untranslated; thus, the most accessible and well-known form of this argument can be found in [Heidegger \(2007\)](#).
- ⁸ See Van Norden’s excellent critique of the narrowness of Western philosophy, *Taking Back Philosophy: A Multicultural Manifesto*.

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