

Article

Religion, Politics, and New Testament Theology: Contesting Relevance and a Constructed Category

Timothy W. Reardon

Bible, Religion and Theology, Eastern Mennonite University, Harrisonburg, VA 22802, USA;
timothy.reardon@emu.edu

Abstract: It has been suggested by some, since the time of William Wrede, that biblical theology should align itself with the scientific study of religion. More recently, these appeals have been linked to a concern for the relevance of the discipline within modern universities and amid a secular, Western world. However, the category “religion” is itself complicated, and the implications of its use are not innocent. This article investigates the socially constructed nature of religion and the political discourse that shapes it in order to assess how the appropriation of this constructed category pertains to the relevance of New Testament theology as a discipline in particular, as well as how this category has already shaped New Testament studies more generally. I suggest that, rather than aiding biblical theology’s relevance, this category obscures a larger discourse that has sought to order social and political space in the modern Western world and beyond and that relevance should be sought elsewhere, including in the dialogue on alternative conceptual constructs that center those stories and persons that have been traditionally marginalized.

Keywords: biblical theology; New Testament theology; religion; politics; relevance; Clifford Geertz; Talal Asad



Citation: Reardon, Timothy W. 2022. Religion, Politics, and New Testament Theology: Contesting Relevance and a Constructed Category. *Religions* 13: 579. <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel13070579>

Academic Editor: Joel B. Green

Received: 12 May 2022

Accepted: 17 June 2022

Published: 22 June 2022

Publisher’s Note: MDPI stays neutral with regard to jurisdictional claims in published maps and institutional affiliations.



Copyright: © 2022 by the author. Licensee MDPI, Basel, Switzerland. This article is an open access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY) license (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).

1. Introduction

Practitioners of New Testament theology (NTT), as with most disciplines, rely on categorical distinctions to define the boundaries, terms, and aims of their field. For NTT, a particularly recurrent category is “religion”, a concept generally taken to be self-evident. Historically, the discipline has wrestled with Johann Philipp Gabler’s fundamental distinction between biblical and dogmatic theology; nevertheless, his subsequent distinction between the “true” historically contingent *theologies* of the texts and the “pure” *religion* to which Scripture attests seemingly casts an equivalent shadow over the discipline (Sandys-Wunsch and Eldredge 1980). Though historical retrospectives generally conclude that Gabler’s search for a religious kernel went unfulfilled, concern for religion never faded from focus, appearing in various forms in Baur (2016) and Wrede (1973) through the turn of this century with the work of scholars such as Räisänen (2000), Theissen (1999), and Hatina (2013).

These latter scholars, among others, following the lead of William Wrede, emphasized the scientific study of religion (*Religionswissenschaft*) with particular concern for “relevance” amid a secularizing and/or pluralistic Western world. For such scholars, centering *Religionswissenschaft* enables NTT to move past its perceived narrow Christian parochialism, making the subject matter publicly accessible, subject to common reason, and thus relevant to modern, post-Enlightenment people. As Hatina writes, “If a New Testament theology is to have a meaningful voice in mainstream North Atlantic Western culture, then it must be formulated in such a way that it can respectfully and intelligently interact with both secularism and religious pluralism” (Hatina 2013, p. 4). The way in which this respectful interaction must occur is within the parameters of the science of religion; thusly, the discipline might be saved from social and academic irrelevance.

Simultaneously, however, the academic study of religion itself has undergone what Richard King calls a “Copernican turn” (King 2017), a turn not significantly represented, accepted, or acknowledged by these advocates of NTT as *Religionswissenschaft* (cf. Räisänen 2005, p. 407). This turn has called into question the category of “religion” itself as a universal, *sui generis* phenomenon and has sought to lay bare the discursive and political foundations of the discipline. Over the last few decades, scholars such as Talal Asad, Jonathan Z. Smith, Russell T. McCutcheon, Timothy Fitzgerald, Tomoko Masuzawa, and others have variously contended that the modern concept religion is a socially constructed phenomenon of Enlightenment origin, codependently birthed alongside “the secular” as a way to discursively order the political and social world under the sovereign authority of the liberal nation-state. This category is not simply the grouping of like with like, but the discursive disciplinary ordering of social–political space. Masuzawa writes, “‘World religions’ as a category and as a conceptual framework initially developed in the European academy . . . [and] quickly became an effective means of differentiating, variegating, consolidating, and totalizing a large portion of the social, cultural, and political practices observable among the inhabitants of regions elsewhere in the world” (Masuzawa 2005, p. 20). Indeed, Nelson Maldonado-Torres argues that “The concept of religion most used in the West by scholars and laypeople alike is a specifically modern concept forged in the context of imperialism and colonial expansion” (Maldonado-Torres 2017, p. 547).

In what follows, through attention to the discourse by which “religion” has been constructed and to what the category itself does, I aim to show that not only articulating NTT through the lens of the science of religion is a poor strategy for securing meaningful relevance for the discipline, but that it is politically fraught. We begin by discussing the socially constructed nature of religion, which leads to a consideration of the political implications and interests involved in such categorizations. We then consider a few particular examples of how such categories have political and material implications, particularly for those with less societal power. Then, our attention turns to the specific emergence of the discipline of religious studies; finally, we look at Clifford Geertz’s definition of religion and Talal Asad’s influential critique of that definition. This last point is particularly important, as Theissen’s work relies heavily on Geertz; Asad’s critiques also pertain, to some degree, to other articulations of religion, such as Peter Berger’s, on whom Räisänen relies; furthermore, amid this discussion, I touch on key assumptions about religion, including the place of religious belief. By way of conclusion, I offer a few quite preliminary reflections on what might instead lead to meaningful relevance for NTT.

2. Religion as a Constructed Category

Perhaps the most fundamental task is to de-naturalize our conceptions of religion, understanding their categorical and constructed character. Typically, religion is assumed to be an autonomously identifiable, coherent category, whose articulation has distinct analytical value. Though the question “What is religion?” is fundamental, there often appears among those emphasizing NTT as *Religionswissenschaft* little question *that* religion—a *sui generis* category of which Christianity is a subtype—is. Nevertheless, not only is it important to query *what* religion is or *whether* it can or should be profitably applied to NTT, but more foundationally, we should ask whether religion has an autonomous essence at all to which we can justify the substantive, phenomenological, functionalist, or comparative investigation of religion. Furthermore, we must ask about the discourses that produce such a conception. What are the effects of these discourses and whom do they benefit? Thus, we should ask “*whence* (the category of) religion?” and “*what* does (the category of) religion *do*?”

A cursory perusal of most religion(s) textbooks gives the impression that, though the definition of religion is complicated and contains some fuzzy edges, there really is something “out there” (*sui generis*) called religion that can be defined (cf. Smith 1998), a “transhistorical and transcultural phenomenon” that has an “autonomous essence” that is easily distinguishable from other aspects of life, such as economics, politics, and “the secular” (Asad 1993, p. 28). This phenomenon is so transparently natural for some (recognized

in beliefs about supernatural beings; an experience of the holy; a cosmic, meaning-giving function; or sets of practices, myths, or rituals) that Max Weber famously began his study of religion by refusing to define it but rather simply taking for granted that what is commonly understood as religion a priori occupies a transparent set that suffices as the basis of his investigation (Weber 1963, p. 1). That is, though we may not be able to define religion from the outset, we seem simply to know what religion is.

Nevertheless, this superficial assertion is misleading. As Craig Martin notes, “there are no features that are uniquely common to all the traditions we typically call religions” (Martin 2017, p. 14). Substantive definitions fail to encompass the totality of the category under a single essence, inevitably excluding some form of colloquially understood religious reality. For instance, one might define religion as pertaining to supernatural matters, which could include most “religious” phenomena, though certain forms of Buddhism and Christianity would be excluded, and other things such as Ouija boards could be included. Such ambiguity also pertains to other organizing principles, such as belief systems, concern with the meaning of life, or matters of faith. Similarly, functional definitions can be helpful, though they also prove to be less than (or too) comprehensive (see Martin 2017, chp. 1).

Why the difficulty? Simply put, “because the colloquial use groups together dissimilar things” (Martin 2017, p. 16). Nevertheless, this should not cause a significant issue. My concern is not that religion is difficult to define. Wittgenstein demonstrates that general concepts do not require a distinct set of common essential properties, sharing some features and differing in others, having family resemblances (See Schatzki 2002, pp. 11–14; cf. Stowers 2008). Our question is not whether we can define a reality that approximates this concept more or less sufficiently, but what is the discursive move that associates these realities? Why are they seen as similar, and what work does the construction of the category perform that binds them, if they do not simply share a common essence? Furthermore, how does this categorization obscure the elements and subcategories ordered to that category or concept? Theodore Schatzki observes, “In, for example, the human sciences, however, generalizations too often veil the wide variety of factors that shape the activities, processes, or formations they are about” (Schatzki 2002, p. 12). The problem with a universal definition of religion is not so much the particularity of the historical elements, but that the definition itself is “the historical product of discursive processes” (Asad 1993, p. 29).

More to the point, critical religion scholars have argued for decades that religion is not simply “out there” as an apparent and distinguishable phenomenon; it is a constructed category that serves to organize social, economic, and political spaces to specific ends and is particularly instrumental to the modern, sovereign nation-state. That is, religion does not have an autonomous essence—it does not exist apart from human beings; rather, it is a constructed category to which we assign what we identify as “religions” and “the religious.”

Humans create categories to help articulate the world around them. Such categories are necessary and fundamental elements of language and conceptualization (see Bruner et al. 1956, pp. 1–22). Yet, categorization is not simply a neutral, objective process of assigning like with like. It is not simply collecting and sorting. What is identified as a category is influenced by extrinsic factors, including political power, and these categories shape and are shaped by the elements and subcategories assigned to them. Categories are used *interestedly* to organize reality with material political, social, and economic consequences. Religion is no different.

Religion is a discursive creation, as is race, Spain, or driving on the right side of the road. Such constructed categories lack independent essence and are, in principle, never settled; they have movable boundaries and are discursively and conceptually negotiated. This is not to say that the “things” populating these categories do not exist or are completely human creations. A category is not itself the objects, subcategories, and concepts assigned to it. Thus, religion is not God or the gods, beliefs, noumenal experience, rituals, a sense of cosmic order or *nomos*, etc. Though it may “contain” or be characterized by those things in its breadth of reference, the category itself orders those realities and the (social and political) spaces they occupy (and are excluded from). Nor is it to say that the category does

not really “exist” or have tangible material impacts. Social constructs, as they form and structure systems and naturalized conceptions, have real material effects and existence apart from individual intentions (cf. [Fong 2014](#); [Cavanaugh 2016](#), pp. 187–88; [Schilbrack 2020](#)). Though race, for instance, is socially constructed and does not have independent essence, race as a social construction has material impact, systemically and beyond the will of individual actors alone, structuring societies. Religion is also a naturalized category with material impact through the disciplinary organization of the social–political space.

3. The Modern, Political Emergence of Religion

Religion is also not a transhistorical concept. Reflecting the work of Peter Berger, Thomas Hatina advocates pursuing NTT under the guidance of academic religious studies precisely because, he asserts, it is a universal human phenomenon centered on an inward “raw faith experience,” and it gains import because it participates in “a conversation that is very old and very broad. It is a conversation that wrestles with identity, meaning and legitimization. It is, in short, the conversation of religion” ([Hatina 2013](#), p. 210). This is the repeated *mythos* of religion; nevertheless, this conversation is not that old, and such formulations veil their political impact. Indeed, McCutcheon and Arnal assert that “the phenomenology of religion is in fact a phenomenology of the modern state” ([McCutcheon and Arnal 2013](#), p. 30).

Most religion scholars recognize there is, in fact, no concept equivalent to religion that predates the Protestant Reformation ([Martin 2017](#), p. 4). It is well documented that other terms thought to refer to religion, such as *religio*, *dharma*, *dīn*, *thrēskeia*, etc., do not map onto the supposedly persistent concept religion without significant difficulty or distortion ([Smith 1962](#); [Smith 1982](#); [Cavanaugh 2009](#), pp. 60–69; [Nongbri 2013](#), pp. 26–34; [Barton and Boyarin 2016](#), pp. 4–5, 15–38; [Fitzgerald 2017](#), pp. 446–51).

The English word “religion”, which shares conceptual overlap with similar European-language terms, most apparently developed from the Latin *religio*, which first emerged in Latin literature in the first century BCE and was used in antiquity to refer to the general observation of moral and dutiful obligations. This included a soldier serving Rome or a senator’s obligation in the Senate ([Fitzgerald 2017](#), p. 447). Transitioning in European locution, it could refer to that which is set apart for God in distinction from that which is for ordinary use. Thus, one could find discussion of religious and secular priests. The latter were not ungodly but dedicated to common service rather than distinct monastic life. Religion was only later associated with the body of “Christian truth”; finally, during the Enlightenment, Christianity became a subtype, a religion, of a general *sui generis* category, religion. In fact, “religion” really developed as a form of non-contingent and non-particular universal Christianity, by which other religions were judged and through which Christianity was initially seen to be the most advanced and developed type. Nevertheless, the construction of Christianity as a model “religion” brought with it the expectations of disciplinary compliance to the newly ordered Enlightenment world.

This conceptual history, however, is not simply the history of an inability to comprehend or disembody the essential reality of religion (which is a modern creation) from an unnatural mixture with politics, society, or economics. As Fitzgerald notes, there is an implicit sense in our scholarship of religion, antiquity, and theology that there really are distinct domains that have been confused throughout history, but having emerged from the primordial uncivility and of the pre-scientific world, we are able to see with clear objectivity what those inhabiting that time could not, i.e., that religion was always there, a universal concept distinguishable from others spheres of life and pertaining to faith, the divine, and concern for ultimate meaning: “We now ‘do’ history; or we now study ‘religion’. They were unable to do so then because they hadn’t yet understood that what they confused is really distinct” ([Fitzgerald 2007](#), p. 11). Yet, this is projection.

The seminal and oft-cited work of Talal Asad brought to the fore the codependent emergence of the pair “religion” and “the secular”, which he links to the interests of the emerging liberal nation-state:

The insistence that religion has an autonomous essence—not to be confused with the essence of science, or of politics, or of common sense—invites us to define religion (such as any essence) as a transhistorical and transcultural phenomenon. It may be a happy accident that this effort of defining religion converges with the liberal demand in our time that it be kept quite separate from politics, law, and science—spaces in which varieties of power and reason articulate our distinctively modern life . . . Yet this separation of religion from power is a modern Western norm, the product of a unique post-Reformation history. (Asad 1993, p. 28)

Religion was constructed as an isolated sphere for alternate authorities deemed in tension with the interests of the sovereign nation-state. The twin emergence of “religion” and “the secular” as oppositional and mutually defining spaces during the Enlightenment enabled this discursive disciplining of distinct spheres of authority.

Importantly, the claim is not that the secular emerged and removed religion from the center of society, but that religion itself (as well as “the secular”), as an autonomous, separable category, was constructed by the liberal discursive disciplining of political space (cf. McCutcheon 2018, p. 12; McCutcheon and Arnal 2013, p. 140; Smith 1962). In this reconfiguration of social imagination and categorization, the Church became an authority over the religious sphere, a realm defined primarily as inner, moral, voluntary, spiritual, and increasingly by *belief*, or as Locke asserted, “soul maintenance” (Locke 1950, p. 18). The state, in turn, assumed (or increasingly developed) sovereign secular authority, manifesting a simplified political space in a rather seismic shift in the European metaphysic. The liberal Enlightenment metaphysic imagined a simplified space, characterized by the flattening of hierarchies and individuals as distinct rights bearers connected (atomistically) to a single sovereign head, whose function was not so much the pursuit of the virtuous but to protect each individual and their rights from their neighbor (Milbank 1997, p. 275; Cavanaugh 2011, pp. 18–21). Furthermore, this division of the social–political space was also imprinted on the individual person, with the body belonging to the state and the soul belonging to God. This dualism inscribed on both the social body and individual bodies participated with other such hierarchical disciplinary oppositions, such as reason/emotion, public/private, culture/nature, male/female, white/black, etc. J. Kameron Carter, for one, demonstrates the deep racial logic to such oppositions, creating a racial, patriarchal, and Eurocentric socio-political order (Carter 2008, pp. 79–121).

Central to this metaphysic was the investing of the state with increased sovereignty, so as to serve as the guarantor of individual rights. “In the state . . . borders mark out a unitary space in which the individual is subject directly to the center, which has the right to enforce its will through a monopoly on the means of legitimate violence within those borders” (Cavanaugh 2011, p. 18). Theoretically, religion as the primary *other* to the emerging secular is materially excluded from this space, and a narrative of the liberal state’s function in protecting society from irrational religious violence emerges as a central element of the modern *mythos*. Indeed, it is difficult to imagine a popular recounting of the story of post-Reformation Europe without some account of society freeing itself from religion, religious violence, and ecclesial authority. William Cavanaugh’s *Myth of Religious Violence* (Cavanaugh 2009) aptly critiques this narrative. Cavanaugh does not deny the existence of “religious violence”, as applied to those entities structured as religious; rather, he demonstrates the utility of the myth for the modern liberal nation-state and that so-called religious violence is not categorically worse than the violence committed by other realities, especially the liberal nation-state.

The rhetorical strategy, however, is not new, and it allows for the distinction of “legitimate” violence from that deemed “illegitimate.” In the United States, such rhetoric of legitimate and illegitimate violence, to which the power to define “violence” itself is crucial, is often used against popular protest movements and is akin to the free designation of “terrorism” against those groups deemed to act against the interests of states. The modern liberal nation-state assumes authority over legitimate violence and defining violence, often masking its own violence in the process (See Butler 2020). As the guarantor of rights, the

nation-state reserves its own right to monopolize violence and invoke exception to accepted norms around violence. Asad also adds a rhetorical violence: “liberal violence . . . (as opposed to the violence of illiberal regimes) is translucent. It is the violence of universalizing reason itself. For to make an enlightened space, the liberal must continually attack the darkness of the outside world that threatens to overwhelm that space” (Asad 2003, p. 59). In the modern construction of “the secular”, religion serves as that outer darkness. The development of the category “religion”, in this sense, has never been purely descriptive—not the grouping of objectively identified like elements—but has been rather prescriptive, disciplinary, and transformational. The search for a definable, theoretical essence of religion “invites us to separate it conceptually from the domain of power” (Asad 1993, p. 29). Such a concept, “religion”, seems hardly suited for imposition on the biblical text or NTT and certainly brings with it a problematic “relevance.”

The modern policing of religion and proper boundaries can be somewhat convoluted, as is noted by Fitzgerald, whose tongue-in-cheek description of modern liberal notions of authentic religion lays this bare:

It is well known that religion is essentially peace-loving, nonviolent, nonpolitical, concerned with the inner spiritual life and the other world. Religion is kind, tolerant, gentle, nonpolitical and nonprofit-making. Religion is a matter of personal faith and piety, essentially separated from the nonreligious secular state, from politics, and from economics. Religion is concerned with personal and family morality, but not with laws, which are the affair of the state. Religion is essentially that domain of private experience in which the individual soul concerns itself with the rewards and punishments of an afterlife in another world.

On the other hand it is equally well known that religion is essentially barbarous, violent, and irrational, causing conflicts through religious terrorism and religious nationalism. This view of religion as essentially violent and irrational is popular today, especially since 9/11. It is said—frequently said—that if religion is confused with politics it becomes dangerously unstable, such as a Molotov cocktail. It ceases to be true (pure) religion, and becomes a compound of incompatible elements that will blow up in our face. (Fitzgerald 2017, p. 435)

Though one might be tempted to see this simply as fickleness and a lack of clarity, what Fitzgerald identifies is the disciplining of “religion”, expressing the criteria by and realm within which true, authentic religion is expected to operate.

Attempts to find modern relevance through the submission of NTT to the academic study of religion should not naively ignore the political discourse by which “religion” was created and via which it operates. Rather than a value-neutral categorization of a natural universal, the articulation of the discreet categories “religion” and “the secular” has proven to be a tool of powerful interests. Kwok Pui-Lan argues that secularism functions as a colonializing reality by which Western states consolidate power throughout the world, adding that “secularism deserves to be a serious topic of scrutiny in postcolonial critique” (Kwok 2021, p. 33). Furthermore, Fitzgerald argues that the metaphysical remodeling that attended the emergence of these categories resulted in part from “powerful interests in banking, trading, and manufacturing, with the transformation of land-use rights into private property, and with the commodification of human beings in the forms of slavery or wage labor” (Fitzgerald 2017, p. 452). Indeed, the emergence of the category religion and the naturalization of the liberal metaphysic have served to mask the *un*-naturalness of global capitalism. Simply operating within this realm without a critical stance perpetuates these political and social interests.

4. Religions and the Imposition of Religion

In the intervening years between its emergence and the present, the category religion has not become innocently descriptive. Rather, religion remains an interested socially constructed category and continues to be used to manufacture imagined space with dis-

tinct material consequences, and the boundaries of this category remain malleable to suit powerful interests.

Amid modern examples of the political imposition of religion, several scholars note the creation of “Hinduism” as a religious category, which, they argue, did not exist in pre-colonial India (e.g., Balagangadhara 1994, p. 150; Cavanaugh 2009, pp. 87–92; Fitzgerald 2000, pp. 134–55). While the British negotiated their colonial authority over India, the circumscription of certain social obligations referred to in Hindi as *dharma*—including public law, temple rituals, and caste obligation—as “religion” enabled colonial power to differentiate “Hinduism” (a general set of non-British social practices and authorities) from governance, economics, and other aspects of life, disciplining alternate authorities by imposing a familiar and manageable order.¹ Categorizing religion served Britain’s colonial endeavors.

In the United States, constructed categories such as race, nationality, and religion have played particularly important political roles in organizing society, with particularly dramatic impact on indigenous nations and peoples. Currently, categorical constructions are at the heart of *Brackeen v. Haaland*, a case due to be heard soon before the Supreme Court, in which a white couple from Texas is seeking to overturn the Indian Child Welfare Act (1978; commonly known as ICWA), a nearly half-century-old piece of civil rights legislation designed to keep Native American children who are in the adoption system within native households. The matter of the case is a simple custody dispute, yet it has risen to the Supreme Court because of powerful interests in extraction industries and the future interpretation of what is referred to as “federal Indian law.”

The Indian Child Welfare Act is regarded as a cornerstone piece of indigenous civil rights legislation (and a particularly effective piece of child welfare legislation), which came after centuries of cultural and physical genocide perpetuated by the U.S. government and nongovernmental organizations, including the forced removal of indigenous children from their homes and placement in boarding schools designed to rid the children of their native identities.² The basis of the ICWA is federal Indian law, which categorizes membership in indigenous nations and people groups as a *political* designation. In *Brackeen v. Haaland*, however, the litigants argue that the ICWA is unconstitutional because it privileges one *race* above another, an audacious move by the white couple from Texas.

The ruling hinges on the assignment of socially constructed categories articulated by power. If the ICWA were overturned and Native American identity were legally defined by race, this would threaten the basis of all federal Indian law, resulting in a cascade of consequences that would impact the basic afforded rights of indigenous people across the U.S., potentially opening native territory for, among other things, extractive industry and oil pipeline projects that many indigenous nations have been fighting against for years. This is not simply a custody dispute; the contestation of this constructed category is the site of the negotiation of powerful capital interests. Thus, it is no surprise that the Texas Attorney General has put his weight behind the case in support of the Brackeens and overturning the ICWA and that the Brackeens are represented *pro bono* by Gibson Dunn, a law firm that has among its biggest clients multiple oil companies seeking access to tribal land in order to, among other things, complete oil pipeline projects.

Brackeen v. Haaland highlights categorization as a politically powerful reality regarding *race*; however, the U.S. also has a rather checkered history concerning *religion* and indigenous peoples (see Irwin 2000, pp. 295–316; McNally 2015). A current example is that of the Apache people who seek to prevent the construction of a copper mine at *Chi’chil Bıldagoteel*, also known as Oak Flat, in Arizona, by appealing to constitutional protections for religion. The difficulty, however, is gaining federal recognition for specific practices or sacred sites as appropriately “religious.” A distinct barrier is that “religion”, as recognized by U.S. law, is conceived in the image of modern Christianity—privatized, individual, and centered on belief and experience. Thus, it becomes difficult for indigenous practices—which are often embodied, material, and communal in ways that are not recognizable to those assuming Christianized notions of religion—to receive religious protections, being

defined most often in terms of “spirituality” (see McNally 2015). Thus, claims to sacred land or the right to use peyote in tribal rites, for instance, though at times legislated, prove difficult to be attained through courts. Given these conceptual deficits, U.S. courts (as well as the U.S. Forest Service) frequently deny federal religious protections for land right claims, being unable to see these as related to an “undue burden” on the practice of religion, which is imagined as an “inner” reality and centered primarily around beliefs.

The shape and recognition of categories such as religion serve a political purpose. In the case of tribal religious protections, one might be justified to infer that religion is categorically restricted *in order to* consolidate sovereign authority over material, public, and political matters within society, so as to profit from things such as the lucrative copper mining rights of Oak Flat at the expense of the local indigenous community. The fuzzy boundaries of religion in U.S. law often seem to shift for the benefit of state power and powerful economic interests.³ These concrete examples further point to the malleable and constructed nature of religion as well as its political use and import. NTT might most profitably engage the concept of religion in a *relevant* way not by submitting to this conceptual veiling of power but by providing alternate conceptions and stories governed by a theological vision fostered in dialogue with the text, tradition, reason, experience, and the complexity of the reading body that centers those who have been excluded from such power, offering an alternate political vision through a responsible reading of the text. NTT is not responsible for manufacturing a workable notion of religion for or working within an understanding of religion to be imposed by powerful interests. Rather, NTT should situate itself within and contribute to the pluriform dialogue of powerful, world-structuring alternative stories that call into question the impositions of those powerful interests, articulating a distinct textual and traditioned witness, and indeed witnesses.

5. Biblical Theology and the Scientific Study of Religion

Returning to the historical narrative, biblical theology (including NTT) and the scientific study of religion have developed amid these socio-cultural pressures. With the prevailing demand that all knowledge be subject to universal rational principles, neither Scripture nor tradition could be taken as its own foundation; rather, universal rational principles and methods were expected to ground that which stood behind Scripture, now understood as “a text” (cf. Legaspi 2010). The philological study of the Bible emphasized the recovery of history and authorial intention. In response, Gabler envisioned a historical discipline to serve as a new foundation for dogmatic theology, with particular attention to the articulation of “pure religion” (as Christian truth) understood through the historical investigation of the biblical text (Sandys-Wunsch and Eldredge 1980). Gabler’s program was, in many ways, an attempt to preserve Scripture’s relevance amid the philosophical pressures of his day.

In short order, however, Kant seemingly pulled the rug out from Gabler’s historical method. For Kant, Scripture was only ecclesially useful, and individuals only benefitted to the degree that their reading of Scripture corresponded to the universal (non-particular and inward-focused) religion of pure reason (Kant 1960, pp. 11, 144–45). Pure religion was a universal truth accessed by reason apart from the contingent facts of history. At best, Scripture and tradition were secondary tools through which one might articulate pure religion, which was restricted to moral knowledge. *Religions* were contingent variations on this universal theme, or as Kant put it, “vehicles” for religion (Kant 1991, p. 141). Kant’s religion was a transcultural and transhistorical universal, relegated to the inner, subjective sphere, a formulation that also served Kant’s political interest to free individuals from “heteronomy”, subjection to authority other than human reason, including the authority of the church and its canon (DiCenso 2011, p. 2).

Religionswissenschaft was built upon such a universal concept of religion, though by its emergence as a distinct discipline, there were significant Hegelian undercurrents. F. Max Müller, who is often credited as a seminal figure in the study of religion, for instance, offered a Hegelian progressive history, where Christianity emerged as the fullest development of

pure religion (Müller 1873). Conversely, Judaism (as also in Kant) represents its antitype, trapped in materialistic, parochial, and physical religion (Carter 2008, pp. 111–21). Indeed, it is not surprising that this both played into and would help foster anti-Semitism, given the conception that deviant, undisciplined religion served as the mythological other in the modern liberal narrative and Judaism represented a particularly deviant form in this scheme. Judaism was the foil to the pure religion of interiority and belief, and despite the general rejection of anti-Judaism in current scholarship, the conceptual realities that defined religion, belief, and interiority (e.g., Hatina’s emphasis on “raw faith experience”) remain central defining features for many. Religion as a discipline, according to Tomoko Masuzawa, still formulates its subject as a progressivist and developmental movement toward the enlightened position of neutral objectivity, possessing what Masuzawa calls a “scientistic” bent (Masuzawa 2005, p. 69). Much of modern scholarship understands the problematic origins of the field while leaving unquestioned the universal categories or conceptual divisions upon which the discipline is founded.

Although Theissen, Räisänen, and Hatina offer their own distinct approaches, for each, religion is unquestionably a universal *sui generis* phenomenon. For Hatina, “religion is a social universal” (Hatina 2013, p. 184), and his main concern is anthropology through a “phenomenology of religious experience” (Hatina 2013, p. 199). Indeed, for Hatina, religion enables one to answer the fundamental question, “What does it mean to be human?” (Hatina 2013, p. 7, see also p. 171). Hatina’s formulation falls directly within the logic of the modern liberal social construction of religion, without offering or broaching a critical appraisal of this discourse. Religion is an inner experiential reality that does not structure social or political ways of being within the world but rather offers an experience and sense of meaning: “at the heart of every religion lies a mysticism: a profound experience of, or connection with, a transcendent reality” (Hatina 2013, p. 190). Though this may go a long way in soothing the existential *anomie* of the modern person, it also masks the political reality at work in this disciplined definition.

A trend in religious studies is to emphasize that the function of religion is to provide coherence and meaning and that this functional reality is religion’s transcultural and transhistorical essence. However, Catherine Bell argues the contrary: “It is a relatively recent thing for scholars to emphasize meaningful and systemic coherence in relation to what religion is all about. Only in the second half of the twentieth century, for the most part, has the provision of coherence been seen as the defining role of religion, that is, what we theorists think it should do when religion clearly can no longer explain the nature of the universe or act as the authoritative source of morality” (Bell 2002, p. 107). However, assuming that this is the age-old question of religion, as seems to be apparent with Hatina, fails to ask, more fundamentally, “how discourses of religion construct the very object that they seek to explain” (King 2017, p. 8). Indeed, Hatina not only explicitly affirms the transhistorical and transcultural autonomy of religion as a human universal, he also imagines a sort of soteriology, a progressive movement through time where the phenomenological study of religion helps erode myths and difference, enabling a world of tolerance and peace through the further uncovering of a form of universal, rational religion (Hatina 2013, p. 202–3). This soteriology, however, is not new but reflects an ideology that is embedded within the discipline of religious studies at its foundation. It is the modern liberal myth of progress in religious form. Though Hatina is aware that a departicularized Christianity has been used to undergird such universal concepts of religion, he asserts that his project has legitimacy because it begins not with Christianity but with universal religious phenomena (Hatina 2013, p. 222). However, that is precisely the problem. The category religion and the universals therein contained remain built on the foundation of the liberal Western emergence of “religion” as a disciplining of Christian tradition.

Furthermore, in the field of NTT and New Testament studies more generally, such assumed conceptions of religion often retroject foreign disciplining categories onto the past, which conveniently helps to legitimate the naturalness of those ordering categories in the present. In the study of antiquity, Simon Price, for example, laments the distorting

imposition of “Christianizing” tendencies onto the past: “The influence of prejudice and the imposition of arbitrary culture-bound categories, especially ones derived from Christianity, are a perennial problem in the study of the imperial cult The most pervasive [Christianization] is our assumption that politics and religion are separate areas” (Price 1984, p. 12). These conceptions assume, for instance, that primary elements of religion are experiential faith, existential meaning, and the primacy of belief. Without critical awareness, it is perhaps difficult to conceive of “religion” not defined by voluntary ascent, through initiatory belief, grounded in feelings of existential meaning. Thus, for example, A. J. Festugière begins his *Personal Religion among the Greeks* with this assertion: “There is no true religion except that which is personal. True religion is, first of all, closeness to God. Every religious ceremony is but empty make-believe if the faithful who participate in it do not feel that thirst for the absolute, that anxious desire to enter into personal contact with the mysterious Being who is hidden behind appearances” (Festugière 1954, p. 1). Here, the prioritization of personal belief is elevated as religion’s *sine qua non*.

Similarly, it was common in the past to associate the rise of mystery cults with a desire to overcome a sense of existential *anomie* and to accommodate increased demand for personal salvation, religious experience, and assurances of immortality amid a growing lack of confidence in traditional deities (Brückner 1908; Heitmüller 1911). More recent scholarship, however, has called this picture into question (Beard et al. 1998; Price 1984, pp. 15–16; Rive 2010). It is increasingly clear that Greco-Roman cultic practices were vibrant and public, tied very much to civic and political life (Beard et al. 1998; Sourvinou-Inwood 2000a; Sourvinou-Inwood 2000b), and even the mystery cults, Walter Burkert argues, rather than being an Eastern invasion into traditional Greco-Roman piety, “were a special form of worship offered in the larger context of [civic Greco-Roman] religious practice” (Burkert 1987, p. 10). Modern religious assumptions and historical endeavors designed to find the genetic link between Christianity and mystery cults have over-emphasized personal elements, which these cults do not categorically stress (Burkert 1987, p. 28; cf. MacMullen 1981, p. 55).

New Testament theology often instinctually emphasizes “religious” themes, putting primary emphasis on salvation (understood in terms of accounting for personal sin), morality, and belief. Regarding salvation, it is not uncommon for some to assert a progressive development from the Old Testament to the New Testament where a more spiritual salvation emerges from antiquated notions of national, material, political, and social salvation (e.g., Marshall 1998, p. 94). What should be clear by now is that my contention is that the academic study of “religion” as a socially constructed concept should not be pursued as a primary structure for NTT, but that NT studies should also develop a critical awareness concerning how the modern politically derived category of religion has influenced and become embedded in our interpretations and that this course of action would ultimately be more “relevant.”⁴

6. Geertz, Asad, and Belief

It is now worth turning specifically (though not comprehensively) to the influential critique of Clifford Geertz’s definition of religion by Asad (1993, pp. 27–54). Gerd Theissen’s *The Religion of the Earliest Churches* is particularly reliant on Geertz’s work. What is central to Geertz and Theissen’s conception of religion and is summarily critiqued by Asad is the centrality of belief/faith and a cognitive conception of religion as an overlay to a base “common sense” reality (cf. Geertz 1973, pp. 87–125).

Amid an academic landscape that privileged Durkheim and conceptions of religion that posited “direct correspondence between religion and social structure”, Geertz offers a definition that investigates religion as an autonomous area of human experience (Mitchell 2017, p. 327). He does this in part by separating out distinct areas (and “perspectives”) of life, which saw “common sense” (distinct from religious, scientific, and the aesthetic perspectives) as properly basic. His definition articulates a universal human category that spans culture and time. Geertz defines religion as:

“(1) a system of symbols which acts to (2) establish powerful, pervasive, and long-lasting moods and motivations in men [*sic*] by (3) formulating conceptions of a general order of existence and (4) clothing these conceptions with such an aura of factuality that (5) the moods and motivations seem uniquely realistic”. (Geertz 1973, p. 90)

For Geertz, religion is a cultural, “semiotic” reality, where “[Culture] denotes an historically transmitted pattern of meanings embodied in symbols, a system of inherited conceptions expressed in symbolic forms by means of which men [*sic*] communicate, perpetuate, and develop their knowledge about and attitudes toward life.” (p. 89). What is true of Geertz’s notion of culture is also true of his conception of religion. Both culture and religion exist as cognitive–linguistic systems that impose meaning from without, being extrinsic to the person, and serving as models *of* and *for* reality (Geertz 1973, p. 92).

For Asad, this is a primary point of contention. Asad argues that Geertz’s cultural systemic overlay lacks any coherent mechanism of authorization. It is not simply that systems have an irresistible sway or that they are external realities functioning at the cognitive level. Asad writes, “Geertz moves away from a notion of symbols that are intrinsic to signifying and organizing practices, and back to a notion of symbols as meaning-carrying objects external to social conditions and states of the self” (Asad 1993, p. 32). For Asad, this is a fundamental error. Discourses are only authorized and meaningful in relation to other discourses, specifically those in which persons and communities are formed; they do not have an external authority but are to an extent *internal*. This should not be confused with the reductively “inner” relegation of religion; rather, Asad argues that religious belief, practice, knowledge, activity, etc., cannot be divorced from the material, social, embodied, and lived realities of those who practice these realities. Geertz, on the other hand, sets forth a notion of religion that becomes an epiphenomenal reality, abstractable from a normative base (Geertz 1973, p. 91). In this sense, Geertz inscribes the modern liberal metaphysic and the twin realities, “religion” and “the secular”, onto this universal cultural definition.

By the end of Geertz’s treatment, the role of religion is quite reduced. As an abstraction, its primary role is to intervene in moments of incoherence. Problems of (1) suffering, (2) lack of understanding, and (3) evil and injustice are remedied by religion’s “aura of facticity”, which “posits a world where these [three problems] are not characteristic of the world as a whole” (1973, p. 108). Asad rightly critiques how Geertz reduces the function of religion to a “god of the gaps” and a positive attitude amid suffering (Asad 1993, p. 45). Indeed, Geertz goes on to identify religion as fostering a primarily *passive* disposition, not characterized by the pragmatic concern to change things but by the simple acceptance of incoherence “by faith” (Geertz 1973, p. 111). According to Asad, “This modest view of religion (which would have horrified the early Christian Fathers or medieval churchmen [*sic*]) is a product of the only legitimate space allowed to Christianity by Post-Enlightenment society, the right to individual *belief*.”

Indeed, religion for Geertz is primarily defined by belief. “The basic axiom” for all religions is that “[the one] who would know must first believe” (Geertz 1973, p. 110); yet, such an assertion is transparently dependent on Western conceptions of religion. Thus, Asad aptly replies, “I think it is not too unreasonable to maintain that ‘the basic axiom’ underlying what Geertz calls ‘the religious perspective’ is *not* everywhere the same. It is preeminently the Christian church that has occupied itself with identifying, cultivating, and testing belief as a verbalizable inner condition of true religion” (Asad 1993, p. 48; cf. Lopez 1998). More than that, such definitions demonstrate the modern tendency to separate pure “religion” from power. Asad writes:

[W]ith the triumphant rise of modern science, modern production, and the modern state, the churches would also be clear about the need to distinguish the religious from the secular, shifting, as they did so, the weight of religion more and more onto the *moods and motivations* of the individual believers. Discipline (intellectual and social) would, in this period, gradually abandon religious space,

letting “belief”, “conscience”, and “sensibility” take its place.” (Asad 1993, p. 39, italics mine)

Here, Asad firmly grounds Geertz’s definition as a distinctively modern liberal formulation, complicit in the consolidation of power. Such a definition is necessarily articulated by power, and subjection to it would hardly be a step towards relevance. Furthermore, one wonders what it would mean to emphasize NTT as a *discipline* not simply an articulation of beliefs. Admittedly, this would take NTT far afield of its Gablerian roots, but not only is the subjection of NTT to the constructed category of religion problematic, but so are the uncriticized elements entailed with that decision, including the prioritization of beliefs, cognitive content, and a discretely descriptive focus. What if “belief” should be understood within, as, and as the outworking of practice, and what if NT *theologizing* functioned as such a practice?

Many NTTs give distinct attention to belief. Similarly, the science of religion has historically centered “belief” as perhaps *the* quintessential element of religion, often seen as the first step to the appropriation of a religious system. What could be more universal than beliefs and religious “faith”? Yet, Müller himself noted in his time the difficulty of finding conceptions of belief in many “uncivilized races”: “that the idea of believing, as different from seeing, knowing, denying, or doubting, was not so easily elaborated, is best shown by the fact that we look for it in vain in the dictionaries of many uncivilized races” (Müller 1897, p. 448). Interestingly, Müller associates the lack of conceptions of “belief” with an intellectual deficit on the part of the “uncivilized races” and not with the uniquely Western application of the concept in the guise of a universal given. My desire is not to deny that anyone *believes* in what they worship; however, belief itself is not simply a content but a way of reflecting on and practicing one’s “religious” reality. In the vein of Asad’s response to Geertz above, many do not in fact prioritize or reflect on what they “believe”, holding its acceptance naturally and without critical attention.

Catherine Bell contends that “belief” is how we characterize “the specific illusions of others” (Bell 2002, p. 106). It is what others believe is not naturalized and abnormal for us. In this sense, belief is an object with content that has risen above the naturalized plane to receive particular scrutiny. This tends to be how the science of religion presents belief, as mental content that overlays reality with an alien coherence. Bell, however, questions that this is how belief and religion actually function (Bell 2002, p. 107). Rather, Bell maintains that belief is a type of social practice “rather than a (true or false) linguistic statement or mental conviction” (Bell 2002, p. 108). Or, as Michel de Certeau asserts, “I define ‘belief’ not as the object of believing (a dogma, a program, etc.) but as the subject’s investment in a proposition, the *act* of saying it and considering it as true—in other words, a ‘modality’ of the assertion and not its content” (De Certeau 1984, p. 178). What both of these conceptions have in common is a refusal to reduce belief to a cognitive object and mental content. These definitions offer something more embodied and enacted. Stanley Stowers, citing Thomas Schatzki and Ludwig Wittgenstein, notes that Wittgenstein rejected the Cartesian notion of the mind as an *inner* container or machine and that believing, as a mental state, does not refer to mental objects but a holistic embodied expression of bodily states of affairs. The mind is a bodily activity instituted by practices, and such practices and believing are socially dependent: “Activity is intelligible to the actor and others in virtue of its place in socially constituted and historically inherited, even if evolving, practices” (Stowers 2008, p. 440).

For a discipline such as NTT that is so focused on the history of ideas, one wonders if this provides a useful point of departure. Perhaps viewing NTT not in terms of a historical descriptive enterprise but rather as a type of social practice defined by dialogical interaction amid difference, a sort of radical democracy, that does not seek closure and “unity” as a historical or rational kernel to extract from the text but sees the text—in its diversity, the diversity of tradition, and the diversity of the body of readers who meet from complex situations and experiences by the power of God’s Spirit—as a site of practice and formational encounter through interpretation and theologizing—to view the *theology* of

the New Testament as a practice without closure and without kernel (and, similarly, not as a mental object or content simply to be won or grasped) but as a site of negotiation and encounter consistently in flux. Though this is rather abstract, it does suggest an alternate approach that no longer seeks to emphasize unity over diversity, but seeks unifications amid diversity, grounded by the distinctly contingent reality of the tradition of the church, including the grounding and centering position of Scripture. After all, the modern scandal of Christian tradition is its irreducible particularity. Thus, belief functions as a mode, as an act, as a bodily activity, not as the object-content of a Cartesian mental container.

Asad's critique of Geertz's assertion that rituals are primarily symbolic similarly emphasizes the particularly embodied nature of these rituals, not simply their cognitive content. Asad contends that the identification of activities and rituals as symbolic is an imposition of the anthropologist. Those who practice these rituals do not see them as symbolic. They are first "identified as symbolic by the outside researcher, and then seen as appropriate for interpretation" (Asad 1993, p. 61). The distorting gaze of the anthropologist, Asad maintains, manufactures this primarily symbolic reality, enabling treatments of religion as coping practices, such as with Geertz. Asad, instead, emphasizes the importance of performance, whereby "apt performance involves not symbols to be interpreted but abilities to be acquired according to rules that are sanctioned by those in authority: it presupposes no obscure meanings, but rather the formation of physical and linguistic skills" (Asad 1993, p. 62).

What is essential is not a cognitive-symbolic reality, but an embodied practice of virtue development. One is formed into the nature and body of rituals much similar to playing the piano, so that through practice one creates a competency whereby one needs not think about the activity, but the virtue, formation, and activity flow naturally from them. Pointing to the Benedictine rule, Asad notes that these liturgical practices are not rituals designed to help cope with existential meaninglessness or give a sense of order but are about the practiced acquisition of Christian virtues: "As in the case of medieval monastic programs, discourse and gesture are viewed as part of the social process of learning to develop aptitudes, not as orderly symbols that stand in an objective world in contrast to contingent feelings and experiences that inhabit a separate subjective one" (Asad 1993, p. 62). Again, perhaps NTT, a discipline often concerned with the recovery of a theological kernel, might imagine itself as clearing ground for enabling and participating in a theological practice of developing "aptitudes" amid the diverse dialogue of the canon, tradition, and the church universal without the necessity to isolate a unity beyond Scripture, tradition, the triune God, and the diverse intersectional and complex constructed embodied subjectivities of Christ's body. Such an approach would necessarily include the interpreter and her readers in the equation.

Geertz seems to naturalize a division of space created in the mold of Western modernity, where religion is an adjunct to the "common sense" picture of the world. Yet, this notion of "common sense" is actually quite odd unless one assumes precisely what Asad accuses Geertz of, asserting that religion is functionally an adjunct framework imposed upon "normative" existence. This formulation hardly seems to suffice as an apt description of anyone's understanding of the practices that infuse one's own life that have been categorized (for them) as religion, and given that Geertz's notion of "common sense" assumes one's "sense" of normative reality that is also somehow shaped and molded by religion, it is difficult to imagine that "religion" is only that which functions outside "common sense" reality. This seems to necessitate somewhat distinct boundaries between Geertz's articulated domains (common sense, science, religion, and the aesthetic), which can only be an imposition, especially on non-Western, non-modern cultures.

Yet, if the social conceptions and practices isolated as religion are instead the prevailing quotidian reality for a society, one might certainly imagine a situation in which the question of belief is not primary or even conceptualized. That is, it is clearly possible to imagine a society for which the question "Do you believe in God?" makes as little sense as asking if one believes in the sky. Though obviously different in kind, one might imagine that the question "Do you believe in private property" is not actively considered by most

U.S. citizens for whom private property functions essentially as a fact of nature, as does Capitalism. Functioning within Capitalism for Americans does not require, in Heideggerian terms, a *vorhanden* (present-at-hand) reflection and belief. Similarly, the rites of those societies designated as “religious”—as well as the rites of U.S. Capitalism—compose with general day-to-day life a simple *zuhandenheit* (ready-to-handed-ness). In such a society, the knowledge of gods, rites, and social practices is not discreet and esoteric but basic and practical, and faith is not something to be held onto *in spite of* knowledge but the product of practical ready-to-hand knowledge (cf. Asad 1993, p. 47). Such was the situation, Asad insists, of premodern Christian belief, where “Familiarity with all such (religious) knowledge was a precondition for normal social life, and belief (embodied in practice and discourse) an orientation for effective activity in it.” Belief is a practice and activity. It seems to me that a particular requirement for “relevance” is asking how NT *theologizing* might be articulated as a practice and activity of the body and not primarily a discipline of dislocated description. Uncovering what the concept religion *does*, we might then ask ourselves what might NTT *do*? Moreover, in this way, we might understand the relevance of the discipline quite differently.

7. Concluding Thoughts on Relevance

All of this, of course, depends on how we understand relevance. Relevance to whom and to what end? Many New Testament scholars are understandably concerned about the relevance of the discipline in particular. Amid an academic landscape where confessional scholarship finds no coherent place and within a modern landscape where traditional religious language is increasingly foreign, how might NTT be relevant at all? Certainly, speaking the language of others is a step in overcoming these issues, and adopting a more universal field of inquiry as a basis theoretically addresses this problem to a significant degree. However, is this “relevance” if these categories are inherently constructed to veil power and to structure the world? Furthermore, does this relevance assume a unified world under the modern liberal metaphysic? This is not to dismiss these concerns at all. It is certainly true that the discipline of NTT must also not linger in closed confessional walls unable to address the real concerns and questions of a pluralistic world. Nevertheless, the assumption that this is accomplished by submission to the science of religion does not provide a simple solution. The assuming of the mantle of religious studies and “religion” more generally is not an innocent proposition. Rather, it masks a distinct discourse of power.

Religion is not a universal and *sui generis* reality, but a construct. It is not value neutral, but participates in a political, economic, and social ordering of space, conformity to which hardly makes NTT more relevant. Indeed, David Chidester’s comments are apt here: “The disciplinary history of the study of religion is also a history of discipline, a dramatic narrative of the discourses and practices of comparison that shaped subjectivities on the colonized peripheries and at European centers” (Chidester 1996, p. xiii). The modern conception of religion is, in fact, designed to make those things that it designates as “religious” categorically *irrelevant* to economic and social-political power.

Relevance, however, may be conceived as addressing these discourses of power that seek a forced rational unity, by participating in unmasking these discourses through the diverse dialogue of powerful alternate stories, offering NTT as a practice of this storytelling that takes readers, tradition, complex experiences, and the text seriously for a world often uncritically subjected to modern liberal and colonial narratives. As Fitzgerald adds, “From the point of view of State power, whether US, Chinese, or other, some leaders—mullahs, imams, the Dalai Lama, Buddhist monks in Vietnam and Burma, Jesuit priests in Latin America, or *whoever cleaves to a powerful alternative view of the world* that challenges the values and institutionalized practices of capitalism—pretend to be religious but are really political” (Fitzgerald 2017, pp. 435–36). NTT cannot help but be political when telling such an alternate story, and NTT only benefits from responsible approaches to the text that emphasize our embodied locations and non-dominant perspectives. Indeed, Schüssler-Fiorenza writes, “Biblical scholars are called to contribute as critical transformative intellectuals to a radical

democratic biblical vision for the overcoming of domination in the global *cosmopolis* that is our spiritual home” (Schüssler-Fiorenza 1999, p. 14). NTT must give up its pretensions to a value-neutral description and embrace the normative task so often obscured by its history, and this is not to be performed simply by appropriating a discourse designed to veil discourses of power.

Much more can be said of course, but NTT, from this angle, benefits by embracing a dialogue of diversity, locating itself within tradition(s), orienting itself to specific readerly communities, emphasizing ethical responsibility, and highlighting openness to underdetermined interpretations (Fowl 1998, pp. 10–11). In this way, the text becomes a site of contestation, not of ultimate meaning, but of meaning together in process, and it is the textual practice itself, at the site of the text and within tradition(s), that is a *theological* practice by which the community is formed and relevant meaning can be ascertained, though always provisionally. In short, despite a slow but consistent flow of work suggesting that NTT finds relevance through “religion”, rather than contributing to the relevance of NTT, such a move would contribute negatively to the real relevant need of political, critical, and formational theological activity that is centered in the textual rite of Christ’s body.

Funding: This research received no external funding.

Data Availability Statement: Not applicable.

Conflicts of Interest: The author declares no conflict of interest.

Notes

- ¹ Admittedly, however, this account speaks of the people of India as passive recipients, who do have their own agency in the process. Such agency is the focus of Jason Ānanda Josephson’s investigation of the Japanese political effort to incorporate Western categories of religion, the secular, and superstition (Josephson 2012; see also Isomae 2017). Helpfully, Josephson’s account speaks to the agency of those in Japan in the process and distinguishes a threefold distinction between the categorical imposition of religion, superstition, and the secular.
- ² In a particularly notorious quote from 1892, Captain Richard Pratt articulates the intention of these schools as to “kill the Indian, and save the man” (Pratt 1973).
- ³ This is undoubtedly the legacy of the “Doctrine of Discovery”, which still lies at the base of the imagination of settler colonialists worldwide and their conception of a right to “the land” (See Augustine 2021). The colonization of native peoples continues to this day, though most non-indigenous U.S. citizens, for instance, believe that settler-colonialism is a legacy of the past. However, these two cases are current examples of the Doctrine of Discovery’s persistence.
- ⁴ What I hope is also clear, however, is that this does not bring us to a more historical or “objective” reality that has simply been obscured by the modern category, but to a recognition of the way that our reconstructions are necessarily articulated by context and power. Thus, for instance, Barton and Boyarin’s important work, *Imagine No Religion* (Barton and Boyarin 2016), while advancing the field considerably, still posits that properly extricating impositions of the category religion would help us to see the past *as it was* (See McCutcheon’s (2018, chp. 2) critique). However, the point is not that utilizing the category “religion” simply obscures our comprehension of what actually *was*, but that our reconstructions are always articulated by power, interest, and the context of the modern investigator. I do not mean that we should neglect historical investigation but that we should approach such investigation, within NTT at least, understanding the political moves that necessarily attend our reconstructions and narration as integral elements of theologizing, not as imperfections to flee from. This is perhaps more imaginable when we let go of our notions of history as a modern science. Thusly, we would make an *ethics* of interpretation, as Schüssler-Fiorenza has advocated, primary (Schüssler-Fiorenza 1999, pp. 28–29). Still, even this ethics would not be grounded in an *a priori* rationality but negotiated in the developing and shifting traditions within which we are formed.

References

- Asad, Talal. 1993. *Genealogies of Religion: Discipline and Reasons of Power in Christianity and Islam*. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Asad, Talal. 2003. *Formations of the Secular: Christianity, Islam, Modernity*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.
- Augustine, Sarah. 2021. *The Land Is Not Empty: Following Jesus in Dismantling the Doctrine of Discovery*. Harrisonburg: Herald Press.
- Balagangadhara, S. N. 1994. *‘The Heathen in His Blindness ...’: Asia, the West and the Dynamic of Religion*. Studies in the History of Religion 64. Leiden: Brill.
- Barton, Carlin A., and Daniel Boyarin. 2016. *Imagine No Religion: How Modern Abstractions Hide Ancient Realities*. New York: Fordham University Press.

- Baur, Ferdinand Christian. 2016. *Lectures on New Testament Theology*. Edited by Peter C. Hodgson and Robert F. Brown. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Beard, Mary, John North, and Simon Price. 1998. *Religions of Rome*. 2 vols. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Bell, Catherine. 2002. "The Chinese Believe in Spirits": Belief and Believing in the Study of Religion. In *Radical Interpretation in Religion*. Edited by Nancy Frankenberry. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Brückner, Martin. 1908. *Der sterbende und auferstehende Gottheiland in den orientalischen Religionen und ihr Verhältnis zum Christentum*. Religionsgeschichtliche Volksbücher für die deutsche christliche Gegenwart, 1/16. Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr.
- Bruner, Jerome S., Jaqueline J. Goodnow, and George A. Austin. 1956. *A Study of Thinking*. New York: Science Editions, Inc.
- Burkert, Walter. 1987. *Ancient Mystery Cults*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Butler, Judith. 2020. *The Force of Nonviolence: The Ethico-Political Bind*. London: Verso.
- Carter, J. Kameron. 2008. *Race: A Theological Account*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Cavanaugh, William T. 2009. *The Myth of Religious Violence: Secular Ideology and the Roots of Modern Conflict*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Cavanaugh, William T. 2011. *Migrations of the Holy: God, State, and the Political Meaning of the Church*. Minneapolis: Eerdmans.
- Cavanaugh, William T. 2016. *Field Hospital: The Church's Engagement with a Wounded World*. Minneapolis: Eerdmans.
- Chidester, David. 1996. *Savage Systems: Colonialism and Comparative Religion in Southern Africa*. Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press.
- De Certeau, Michel. 1984. *The Practice of Everyday Life*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- DiCenso, James. 2011. *Kant, Religion and Politics*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Festugière, André Jean. 1954. *Personal Religion among the Greeks*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Fitzgerald, Timothy. 2000. *The Ideology of Religious Studies*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Fitzgerald, Timothy. 2007. *Discourse on Civility and Barbarity: A Critical History of Religion and Related Categories*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Fitzgerald, Timothy. 2017. Critical Religion: "Religion" Is Not a Stand-Alone Category. In *Religion, Theory, Critique: Classic and Contemporary Approaches and Methodologies*. Edited by Richard King. New York: Columbia University Press, pp. 435–54.
- Fong, Benjamin Y. 2014. On Critics and What's Real: Russell McCutcheon on Religious Experience. *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 18: 1127–48. [CrossRef]
- Fowl, Stephen E. 1998. *Engaging Scripture: A Model for Theological Interpretation*. Malden: Blackwell.
- Geertz, Clifford. 1973. *The Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays*. New York: Basic Books.
- Hatina, Thomas R. 2013. *New Testament Theology and Its Quest for Relevance: Ancient Texts and Modern Readers*. London: Bloomsbury.
- Heitmüller, Wilhelm. 1911. *Taufe und Abendmahl im Urchristentum*. Religionsgeschichtliche Volksbücher für die deutsche christliche Gegenwart 1/22–23. Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr.
- Irwin, Lee. 2000. Freedom, Law, and Prophecy: A Brief History of Native American Religious Resistance. In *Native American Spirituality: A Critical Reader*. Edited by Lee Irwin. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press.
- Isomae, Jun'ichi. 2017. Religion, Religious Studies, and Shinto in Modern Japan. In *Religion, Theory, Critique: Classic and Contemporary Approaches and Methodologies*. Edited by Richard King. New York: Columbia University Press, pp. 87–93.
- Josephson, Jason Ānanda. 2012. *The Invention of Religion in Japan*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Kant, Immanuel. 1960. *Religion with the Limits of Reason Alone*. New York: Harper & Row.
- Kant, Immanuel. 1991. *Kant: Political Writings*, 2nd ed. Edited by Hans Siegbert Reiss. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- King, Richard. 2017. The Copernican Turn in the Study of Religion. In *Religion, Theory, Critique: Classic and Contemporary Approaches and Methodologies*. Edited by Richard King. New York: Columbia University Press, pp. 1–20.
- Kwok, Pui-Lan. 2021. *Postcolonial Politics and Theology: Unraveling Empire for a Global World*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox.
- Legaspi, Michael C. 2010. *The Death of Scripture and the Rise of Biblical Studies*. Oxford Studies in Historical Theology. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Locke, John. 1950. *A Letter Concerning Toleration*. New York: Liberal Arts.
- Lopez, Donald S., Jr. 1998. Belief. In *Critical Terms for Religious Studies*. Edited by Mark C. Taylor. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, pp. 21–35.
- MacMullen, Ramsay. 1981. *Paganism in the Roman Empire*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Maldonado-Torres, Nelson. 2017. Religion, Modernity, and Coloniality. In *Religion, Theory, Critique: Classic and Contemporary Approaches and Methodologies*. Edited by Richard King. New York: Columbia University Press, pp. 547–54.
- Marshall, I. Howard. 1998. *Luke: Historian and Theologian*, 3rd ed. Downers Grove: IVP Academic.
- Martin, Craig. 2017. *A Critical Introduction to the Study of Religion*, 2nd ed. New York: Routledge.
- Masuzawa, Tomoko. 2005. *The Invention of World Religions; Or, How European Universalism Was Preserved in the Language of Pluralism*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- McCutcheon, Russell T. 2018. *Fabricating Religion: Fanfare for the Common E.G.* Berlin: De Gruyter.
- McCutcheon, Russell T., and William Arnal. 2013. *The Sacred Is the Profane: The Political Nature of "Religion"*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- McNally, Michael D. 2015. From Substantial Burden on Religion to Diminished Spiritual Fulfillment: The San Francisco Peaks Case and the Misunderstanding of Native American Religion. *Journal of Law and Religion* 30: 36–64. [CrossRef]
- Milbank, John. 1997. *The Word Made Strange: Theology, Language, Culture*. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Mitchell, John P. 2017. Defining Religion: Geertz and Asad. In *Religion, Theory, Critique: Classic and Contemporary Approaches and Methodologies*. Edited by Richard King. New York: Columbia University Press, pp. 327–34.

- Müller, F. Max. 1873. *Introduction to the Science of Religion*. London: Longmans, Green, & Co.
- Müller, F. Max. 1897. *Contributions to the Science of Mythology*. 2 vols. London: Longmans Green.
- Nongbri, Brent. 2013. *Before Religion: A History of a Modern Concept*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Pratt, Richard H. 1973. Official Report of the Nineteenth Annual Conference of Charities and Correction (1892). In *"The Advantages of Mingling Indians with Whites", Americanizing the American Indians: Writings by the "Friends of the Indian" 1880–1900*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, pp. 260–71.
- Price, Simon R. F. 1984. *Rituals and Power: The Roman Imperial Cult in Asia Minor*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Räisänen, Heikki. 2000. *Beyond New Testament Theology: A Story and a Programme*, 2nd ed. London: SCM.
- Räisänen, Heikki. 2005. What I Meant and What I Might Mean . . . an Attempt at Responding. In *Moving Beyond New Testament Theology? Essays in Conversation with Heikki Räisänen*. Edited by Todd Penner and Caroline Vander Stichele. Publications of the Finnish Exegetical Society 88. Helsinki: Finnish Exegetical Society, pp. 400–43.
- Rive, James B. 2010. Graeco-Roman Religion in the Roman Empire: Old Assumptions and New Approaches. *Currents in Biblical Research* 8: 240–99. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
- Sandys-Wunsch, John, and Laurence Eldredge. 1980. J. P. Gabler and the Distinction between Biblical and Dogmatic Theology: Translation, Commentary, and Discussion of His Originality. *Scottish Journal of Theology* 33: 133–58. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
- Schatzki, Theodore R. 2002. *The Site of the Social: A Philosophical Account of the Constitution of Social Life and Change*. University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press.
- Schilbrack, Kevin. 2020. A Metaphysics for the Study of Religion: A Critical Reading of Russell McCutcheon. *Critical Research on Religion* 8: 87–100. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
- Schüssler-Fiorenza, Elisabeth. 1999. *Rhetoric and Ethic: The Politics of Biblical Studies*. Minneapolis: Fortress.
- Smith, Jonathan Z. 1982. *Imagining Religion: From Babylon to Jonestown*. Chicago Studies in the History of Judaism. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Smith, Jonathan Z. 1998. Religion, Religions, Religious. In *Critical Terms for Religious Studies*. Edited by Mark C. Taylor. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, pp. 269–84.
- Smith, Wilfred Cantwell. 1962. *The Meaning and End of Religion: A New Approach to the Religious Traditions of Mankind*. New York: Macmillan.
- Sourvinou-Inwood, Christiane. 2000a. What is Polis Religion? In *Oxford Readings in Religion*. Edited by Richard Buxton. Oxford: Oxford University Press, pp. 13–37.
- Sourvinou-Inwood, Christiane. 2000b. Further Aspects of Polis Religion. In *Oxford Readings in Religion*. Edited by Richard Buxton. Oxford: Oxford University Press, pp. 38–55.
- Stowers, Stanley. 2008. The Ontology of Religion. In *Introducing Religion: Essays in Honor of Jonathan Z. Smith*. Edited by Willie Braun and Russell T. McCutcheon. New York: Routledge, pp. 434–49.
- Theissen, Gerd. 1999. *The Religion of the Earliest Churches: Creating a Symbolic World*. Minneapolis: Fortress.
- Weber, Max. 1963. *The Sociology of Religion*. Boston: Beacon.
- Wrede, William. 1973. The Task and Methods of 'New Testament Theology'. In *The Nature of New Testament Theology*. Edited by Robert Morgan. *Studies in Biblical Theology* 2.25. London: SCM, pp. 68–116.