

A Call for Positive Metaphysical Agnosticism: Creating a Synergistic Relationship between the Individual and the Community in the Religious Studies Classroom.

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Abstract

The religious studies classroom has become an increasingly dynamic “place” in the last several decades, and this trend will continue with rapidly developing technology and the proliferation of online college studies and globalization. It is no longer uncommon for a class studying religion to be composed of students from all around the world and a diversity of religious beliefs and practices and comportment to religious phenomena. Positive metaphysical agnosticism (PMA) is a way to ameliorate conflict and create a synergistic relationship in the classroom of religious studies. PMA is a synthesis and extension of Tillich’s self-world polarity of Individuation and Participation, Husserl’s phenomenological reduction, and Eliade’s phenomenology of religion. For Tillich, the first ontological element that constitutes the basic self-world polarity is “individuation and participation.” The individual participating in the academic study of religion in the “world” of the classroom can perform an epoche analogous to Husserl’s phenomenological reduction and “bracket” their own religious beliefs and practices, suspending judgement regarding the metaphysical claims and implications of other religions. Eliade’s phenomenology of religion promotes the study of religious phenomena on its own terms, giving the student a positive and open comportment to the religious beliefs and practices in the suspension of metaphysical judgement. This approach is positive to religious phenomena while being agnostic regarding the metaphysical claims and implications of religious phenomena, and is a catalyst to a synergistic relation of the individual student to the religious studies classroom.

The religious studies classroom has become an increasingly dynamic “place” in the last several decades, and this trend will continue with rapidly developing technology and the proliferation of online college studies and globalization. It is no longer uncommon for a class studying religion to be composed of students from all around the world and a diversity of religious beliefs and practices and comportment to religious phenomena. How does a teacher cultivate a synergistic relationship in the classroom, in which each student can fully participate with the class in this situation? I propose what I call Positive Metaphysical Agnosticism (PMA). PMA is a synthesis and extension of Tillich’s self-world polarity of Individuation and Participation, Husserl’s phenomenological reduction, and Eliade’s phenomenology of religion. Before beginning to elaborate upon this proposal, however, it would probably be useful to indulge in a bit of circumspection upon the situation in the best sense of hermeneutical reflection.

I achieved my Ph.D. in Religious Studies at the University of Iowa in May of 2009. I was fortunate to be able to do my Ph.D. at the University of Iowa. Outside the field, not many people realize that the Department of Religious Studies in Iowa City was a top ten department for studying and research in religion at public universities in the USA at the beginning of the 21st century. Its history is interesting. It was the first department at a public university in the USA to devote itself to religious studies. John D. Rockefeller provided the initial funding to the University of Iowa to found the School of Religion in 1927. This was a progressive move. It would be approximately 40 years before other public universities in the country took similar action. Religion is a preeminent part of culture and it was incorporated into the university curriculum.

At the time, most of the University of Iowa students were Christian or Jewish, and they were from the geographical area, and it may be that some administrators and professors were focused on helping their students understand their own religion better. The paradigm shifted, however, to focusing on the world religions as an academic study in an increasingly globalized world. By the time I was doing my Ph.D. there was a requirement for all Ph.D. students to be “cross-trained” East and West. That meant, for instance, that even students focusing on subjects like Church History or New Testament Studies (and myself, studying philosophical hermeneutics) had to take a four-credit course with a Comprehensive Exam in the Asian Religious Traditions with Janine Sawada (now at Brown University).

This was one of the most meaningful academic experiences I had during my program at the University of Iowa. Janine Sawada’s area of expertise is in the religious and philosophical tradition of early modern Japan and her teaching style is exquisite, with just the right kind of humor negotiating the spectrum between seriousness and levity, at appropriate moments, of course.

In the second year of my program, 9/11 occurred. At the University of Iowa there is a large Muslim student and professors association. As soon it was clear what exactly had happened, the campus Muslim Association released a statement of declaration that this act was not done in the true cause of Islam and that Islam was a religion of peace and inclusion. They held nightly and then weekly meetings where the entire campus and city were welcomed to come take part, including question and answer sessions. The Department of Religious Studies immediately began a search and hired Reza Aslan as a Visiting Professor of Islam. I remember that year

every time I see one of his new publications or another interview on television, including The Daily Show with Jon Stewart on Comedy Central! Reza left after one year to finish writing one of his books and then the department hired Ahmed Souaiaia. I had the privilege of being his Teaching Assistant for two courses, the new Judaism, Christianity & Islam course and Introduction to the Qur'an.

My current position as an online Associate Professor of Arts & Humanities at American Public University did not exist when I began my Ph.D. program. I published my first peer-reviewed journal article in 1990. I taught my first college courses in the Introduction to Philosophy in 1992 at my hometown community college (at the time, I had a Master of Divinity degree from Princeton Theological Seminary). I continued teaching courses part-time at a variety of colleges throughout the years, presented at a number of conferences and published another peer-reviewed article. It was then that I determined that I should do my Ph.D. program and I have been teaching full-time online for the last several years.

In the online classroom, each student has the opportunity to post an introduction at the beginning of the class and “speak” on every topic of discussion every week, as well as respond to any classmate and the instructor. Every communication is posted to the “world” of the online classroom for the duration of the class. Additionally, there is a unique quality of anonymity and equality in the online classroom. In my experience, this has led to an increasing awareness and dialogue regarding the students’ beliefs and practice regarding religion. I have had students who have actively discussed their beliefs and practices of most world religions, including Islam, and a diversity of others, such as nature religions, vodou, Norse religions, Hindu Saktism and tantrism as well as agnosticism and atheism.

In this dynamic environment, the challenge of the instructor is to create an online classroom that can act as a catalyst for the synergistic relationship between the individual student and the class community. The theologian Paul Tillich describes the dialectical relationship between the individual and the community, in this case, the online class.

Individual <-----/-----/-----/-----> Community/Class

Paul Tillich – Individuation & Participation

Different cultures and philosophies and religions and states and individual differences within these, have different dialectical relationships of the individual and the community. Some are further along the left side of the spectrum, toward the individual, and others are further along the right side of the spectrum, toward the community. However, these relationships are not static, they fluctuate along the spectrum, back and forth, on many different levels, like a conversation going back and forth. They are dialectical. For Tillich, individuation and participation is one of the three pairs of ontological elements in polar relation that constitute the basic self-world polarity.¹

Individualization is not a characteristic of a special sphere of beings; it is an ontological element and therefore a *quality* of everything. It is implied in and

¹ See Tillich's *Systematic Theology*, II.1.B.3: Individuation and Participation

constitutive of every self, which means that at least in an analogous way it is implied in and constitutive of every being (Tillich, 1976: 174-5).

Every human is a centered "self" that strives to realize its individuality *through* its participation with others. One can isolate either pole to deal with it theoretically, but the human self comes to be in the dialectic of individuation – participation. If there is no relation with others, there is no individual. If there is nothing individuated, no self, there is nothing substantial that can relate with others. One could say that every individual both belongs to others and is distanced from others. In the ontological sense, it is only the human being that has a "world." It projects the "world" as a total system of relations in which it participates in its individuality. Ontologically, "world" can mean, at its most diminutive level, what immediately concerns the human being in its projected ability to be in the foreseeable future. In its most expansive meaning, "world" contains the known universe and every imaginable potential for human being in the cosmos, but here we are concerned with the online classroom as the "world" for the individual student. In terms of the dialectical relationship, the individual student becomes a fully individuated member of the class by fully participating in the "world" of the online classroom in dialogue with her fellow students. In the religious studies classroom, this involves the freedom and dynamism of sharing her individual religious beliefs and practices if she so desires, and having those validated within the context of the academic study of religion and the diversity of beliefs and practices of her classmates.

Edmund Husserl – The Phenomenological Epoche (bracketing)

How can the individuation – participation dialectic be maximized with something so subtle and substantive yet diverse and subjective as religious beliefs and practices? Edmund Husserl is an early 20th century philosopher who developed an intellectual discipline to reduce what we are conscious of to its pure phenomena in order to develop a philosophical basis for knowledge, epistemology. This discipline is referenced to in several manners. One can do the phenomenological reduction, or practice phenomenological "bracketing" or perform the phenomenological epoche (abstaining from judgement). After seeing how this epistemological practice works, we can consider its application to the metaphysical claims of religious beliefs.

The phenomenological premise of the intention of consciousness can be simply illustrated by reference to visual "profiles." Husserl's analysis of perception pointed out the fact that we see only a "profile" (*Abschattungen*) of any object that we perceive, and yet we project the concept of the object as a whole upon this perception. We see, for instance, a ball. But we always see it from a particular angle and we project the reality of the ball as a three-dimensional object in space and time upon our sheer visual perception, including the presumed other side of the ball that we do not actually see. This also happens intellectually and the reader might ask herself what kind of ball her imagination projected for this visual thought experiment. Depending upon one's historical circumstance, it might be a baseball, basketball, soccer ball, or some other kind of ball, and the physical characteristics of this particular ball are also projected upon the visual perception. In any case, there is always more to the ball than is actually seen from any one perspective. No matter from what perspective, part of the ball is revealed, and part is always hidden.

The phenomenological reduction reduces the visual perception to its pure phenomena, what is given (without assuming what is hidden) without the concept of “ball” and all of the assumptions of our intentional consciousness. It “brackets” our concept of the ball and whatever goes with it (baseball, basketball, volleyball etc.) and focuses on the pure phenomena of a certain shape and pattern of colors in our visual field, which is quite limited to what our consciousness is actually paying attention to at any given moment in time. It is the beginning of a psychological scientific consciousness. Take the following question: Are you going to the ball? Depending upon circumstances, this could mean going to get the ball that has bounced across the street or dressing up in a tuxedo and black bow tie or gown. Depending upon the circumstances, one meaning could have been assumed over the other. In 1940’s jazz slang the word means something altogether different, and depending upon one’s experience and prejudices this could be understood or misunderstood.

This can be done with any intention of consciousness, no matter how complex. When all assumptions about what is hidden are set aside, and all judgements regarding our comprehension of the “truth” of our worldview exist in a state of suspension, the epistemological foundation of knowledge can be established. Husserl talks about the subjective “natural attitude” that assumes the truth of the world out there, with all of our assumptions and prejudices with it. In contrast, in the phenomenological epoche, all Being, the whole world is bracketed. *“I do not doubt that it is there as though I were a skeptic; but I use the “phenomenological epoche” which completely bars me from using any judgment that concerns spatiotemporal existence..”*².

Husserl refers to the “transcendent” as that which is transcendent to one’s pure mental experience of reality.

That is to say, everything transcendent that is involved must be bracketed, or be assigned the index of indifference, of epistemological nullity, an index which indicates: the existence of all these transcendencies, whether I believe in them or not, is not here my concern; this is not the place to make judgments about them; they are entirely irrelevant.³

Here the question arises as to whether the metaphysical claims of religious beliefs and practices fall naturally under Husserl’s phenomenological reduction or whether they are a special case. It would seem that these, which are part of humanity’s corporate life-world, could and would also be subject to the epoche.

In relation to every thesis and wholly uncoerced we can use this *peculiar epoche* (epoche – abstention), *a certain refraining from judgment which is compatible with the unshaken and unshakable because self evidencing conviction of Truth.* The thesis is “put out of action,” bracketed, it passes off into the modified status

² Ideas; General Introduction to Pure Phenomenology, Edmund Husserl, trans. by W.R. Boyce Gibson, Collier Books, New York, 1962. The title of Paragraph 32 is: The Phenomenological Epoche. I am using the internationally accepted paragraph system for Husserl’s work.

³ The Idea of Phenomenology, Edmund Husserl (translated by William Alston and George Nakhnikian, 1964) The Hague, 1964. Lecture II, para. 39.

of a "bracketed thesis," and the judgment *simpliciter* are into "bracketed judgment."⁴

Applying the phenomenological epoche and bracketing one's personal religious beliefs and practices means a certain suspension (Aufhebung) of judgement regarding the metaphysical claims and implications of our particular religion. This is a subtle intellectual discipline and can be quite difficult and disconcerting for the students, especially those who are relatively new to the academic study of religion, in contrast to the confessional approach. However, it is not as though the student must reject or turn their back on their own religion. Husserl continues in *Ideas*, paragraph 31: *we do not abandon the thesis we have adopted, we make no change in our conviction . . . we set it as it were "out of action," we "disconnect it," "bracket it." It still remains there like the bracketed in the bracket...* (italics his). Paragraph 32 begins a new section titled: The Phenomenological Epoche, and he speaks of "Being" and "the whole world" as bracketed, and writes, "*I do not doubt that it is there as though I were a skeptic; but I use the "phenomenological epoche" which completely bars me from using any judgment that concerns spatiotemporal existence...*"(italics his).

Here the religious studies instructor and student bracket the metaphysical claims of their own and all religions in order to take an academic approach to the study of religion. The class can consider the metaphysical claims of all religions, while keeping them in brackets, abstaining from judgement regarding the truth of these claims.

Mircea Eliade – Phenomenology of Religion

While there are many different academic approaches to religious studies, Mircea Eliade describes the phenomenology of religion that attempts to grasp the essence and structure of religious experience. Eliade refers to the beginning of the phenomenology of religion with Gerardus van der Leeuw.⁵ "In his descriptions he respected the religious data and their peculiar intentionality. He pointed out the irreducibility of religious to social, psychological, or rational functions, and he rejected those naturalistic prejudices which seek to explain religion by something other than itself."⁶ Perhaps one of the best descriptions of the phenomenological approach to religious studies which takes the phenomena of religion as something in itself is given by Eliade in his book, *The Sacred & The Profane*.

Yet the contents and structures of the unconscious are the result of immemorial existential situations, especially of critical situations, and this is why the unconscious has a religious aura. For every existential crisis once again puts in question both the reality of the world and man's presence in the world. This means that the existential crisis is, finally, "religious," since on the archaic levels of culture *being* and the *sacred* are one. As we saw, it is the experience of the

⁴ Ideas, 1962, Part Two: The Fundamental Phenomenological Outlook, Chapter 3, para. 31.

⁵ See Gerardus Van der Leeuw, *Religion in Essence and Manifestation*, vol. 1. New York: Harper & Row, 1963.

⁶ The Quest: History and Meaning in Religion (Google eBook), Mircea Eliade, University of Chicago press, 2013, p. 35.

sacred that founds the world, and even the most elementary religion is, above all, an ontology. In other words, insofar as the unconscious is the result of countless existential experiences, it cannot but resemble the various religious universes. For religion is the paradigmatic solution for every existential crisis. It is the paradigmatic solution not only because it can be indefinitely repeated, but also because it is believed to have a transcendental origin and hence is valorized as a revelation received from an *other*, transhuman world. The religious solution not only resolves the crisis but at the same time it makes existence "open" to values that are no longer contingent or particular, this enabling man to transcend personal situations and, finally, gain access to the world of spirit.⁷

Positive Metaphysical Agnosticism (PMA) is positive, as it is open to all descriptions of religious experience and phenomena, while being agnostic regarding the metaphysical claims and interpretations of these experiences and phenomena. These are "bracketed" during the course of academic study. Of course, it is up to the instructor to set the agenda and to create an atmosphere where the students understand the academic approach to religious studies and feel free to participate fully. This can include introductory material and interventions in discussion for undergraduate courses, as well as explicit discussion of positive metaphysical agnosticism as a method (usually occurring in my graduate courses). See below for two different generic examples for how I have introduced PMA into the classroom.⁸

Douglas Allen has written a good chapter describing the history and basic approach of the phenomenology of religion and a method for introducing this to the "live" religious studies

⁷ Eliade, *The Sacred & The Profane: The Nature of Religion*, trans. by Willard Trask, Harcourt Brace & Company, 1987, page 210.

⁸ A) I would like to open with a few words about the academic approach to religious studies, which is different than learning about a religion as a believer and follower of that religion. In the academic approach to religious studies, we have to maintain a rational objectivity in regard to the different religions and beliefs and practices that we are talking about and studying. Many of us have our own personal religious beliefs and practices but we have to put those into brackets and keep those separate from our academic studies. That does not mean that we cannot express our own personal beliefs, but the discussion here is ordered by rationality and philosophical justification. As an example, suppose that we were studying Buddhism and in particular the concept of reincarnation. It would not help us to simply say "I don't believe in reincarnation..." or to quote some biblical verse that we think "disproves" it. In our academic study, we would be discussing what reincarnation means to Buddhists and to consider "what would it mean if reincarnation were true?" Of course, we would not be making any metaphysical judgment whether it is really true or not.

B) I have an academic approach to religious studies that I call "positive metaphysical agnosticism." Let me explain this term. I call it "positive" because it means that I am open to the study of all kinds of religious experiences, and to the people that are expressing them and their religious beliefs and practices. "Metaphysical" means the kinds of ideas and claims that cannot be proven or disproven in a scientific laboratory or by science even in its largest scope. This includes supernatural experiences and beings and claims that go beyond the five senses. For instance, if I were to say "I saw my guardian angel save me from the car crash," that is a metaphysical statement, or a statement with a metaphysical claim and implication. The term "agnosticism" is based upon a Greek word and it literally means: to not know. So, putting that all together, in the academic arena as a professor or student, I would have to say, "I do not know if that is true or not and there is no way that I can tell one way or the other, but we can talk about the concept of angels and supernatural intervention from a philosophical and academic perspective.

classroom.⁹ What I have done here is briefly describe an exercise for the asynchronous, 24/7 online classroom. This would probably work best as a graded exercise or forum discussion in the first week of the class and may be modified depending upon the circumstances. The idea is to have students anonymously post a description of a religious experience, from any religion. This can be one of their own, or a friend or family member's experience, or they can find one online they would like to use. It may be helpful to have a stock set that they may choose from if they wish, at the instructor's discretion.¹⁰ The idea is that these would be posted anonymously and then the students would be instructed to survey these "testimonies" and describe if they see any patterns or similarities (as well as differences) among these, without making any metaphysical judgement regarding the truth of any or all of these descriptions of religious experience, *and attempting to avoid, if possible, metaphysical language in the description of the experiences*. At the end of this exercise, the instructor should summarize the results and explain the reason for the exercise, with a view to the academic approach to religious studies and the phenomenological approach to religious phenomena.

I was fortunate to be able to be able to attend ACERP this year and deliver a live, oral presentation on my paper. There were some excellent questions and feedback for which I am appreciative. There are some religious studies classrooms where personal religious beliefs and practices of students are dismissed or even ridiculed, and this kind of discussion is not allowed. The phenomenological method here allows this kind discussion, albeit within the bracketed format of the Husserlian epoche. Sometimes students can feel that their faith is being challenged by the academic study of religion, and the intellectual distinction achieved here can ameliorate the projected danger of such a challenge. Such challenges can also inspire moments of clarity and faith development. An often repeated theme in exit posts of students in my classes is that the study of other religions has helped them understand their own religion better. In the end, if a student should think they have "lost their faith" because of taking a course with this professor or reading a book by Karen Armstrong or Ninian Smart (as examples) or understanding that virgin birth stories are not unique to Christianity or learning the history of the development of the Apostle's Creed (for instance), it could be that this brings into question the validity of their faith, and this too, is a teachable moment, which can be approached with a great deal of sensitivity and compassion, while maintaining an academic comportment.

One student of Alasdair MacIntyre shared how the professor would teach him in the study of moral philosophy to "*imagine* that you are a Kantian deontological ethicist, find the issues that arise from *within* the framework of the categorical imperative." In order to do so, the student must bracket their own moral philosophy for the academic enterprise, and we can imagine them doing so if they are a divine command or virtue theorist or believe in utilitarianism or some other moral philosophy. In doing so, they do not give up their own moral worldview, but it is bracketed for the purposes of the academic exercise.

⁹ The Routledge Companion to the Study of Religion, ed. John R. Hinnels, Psychology Press, 2005. Chapter 10: Douglas Allen, Phenomenology of Religion, p. 182 ff.

¹⁰ This set could include a variety of testimonies or experiences from the various world religions. One could imagine Augustine's "pick up and read" or John Wesley's warm heart at Aldersgate or Rudolph Otto's encounter with the numinous. Some examples from William James' *Varieties of Religious Experiences* and Eastern religions could be helpful.

Positive metaphysical agnosticism can be a catalyst for the synergistic relationship between the individual and the community in the world of the religious studies classroom, especially in the midst of an increasing diversity of religious beliefs and practices. It is the author's hope that this is a substantive contribution to the dialogue regarding teaching religious studies online and the methods and theories of religious studies in general.

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