On Peace and „Religious" Literacy:
A Response to Ulrich Rosenhagen

Not surprisingly, the popular response to religious violence is a call to peaceful understanding of the "other." Given the pressing need in our climate of violence to foster the understanding of religion, Ulrich Rosenhagen at the University of Wisconsin in his commentary piece in the *Chronicle of Higher Education* of December 2, 2015, entitled "The Value of Teaching Religious Literacy" calls for an "immersion" approach that would establish student "learning communities" of various religious confessions sharing the same living and study space. The goal is "to learn from one another" not "about" one another. The principle driving this "immersion" model of religious studies is that direct experience of religious differences fosters the cultivation of our common humanity.

This immersion model of religious studies is an example of approaching the study of religion as if religions were established traditions that can be understood through empirical observation and appreciation of the profound meaning found in them by their practitioners. There will be peace among religious traditions, it suggests, when they can acknowledge one another's validity through understanding.

What follows by no means champions *mis*-understanding. There is no better discipline than religion to investigate not only for the rich experience of the "other" generally (and not simply for understanding the *violence* perpetrated in the name of religion) but also for the understanding of understanding itself.   However, in order to understand understanding, we are best served by examining the un-examined assumptions that shape what we call "understanding" with the aim of arriving at a place where learning commences, that is, where learning occvrs much deeper than the perception of "differences" (e.g., different religious traditions) – as important as the perception of difference is for understanding. Rather than the study of religion being limited to understanding "differences," it can lead to an understanding of the place of humanity in the "order of things" as an open-ended moral project that is, obviously, ever in need of renewed commitment because of its limits.   In short, where there is virtue, there one finds personal and communal peace – remarkably, a claim already made by Caphalis in Book I of Plato's *Republic*.

Beyond Naïve "Let a Million Flowers Bloom"

One of many reasons to approach the study of religion as a study of understanding per se is that it allows the profiling of a naïve view of the world.   "Peace" involves more than being nice to one another, and "understanding" can and must go beyond empirical description to include informed critique.

Those who call for peace are, usually, those who are benefiting from the status quo. Yet the status quo is the source of deep injustices that cry out for a profound re-structuring of self-understanding and life-styles by everyone if our political rhetoric of peace is not to ring hollow for so

many in the world. These political and economic injustices frequently serve as the motivating ground for engaging in violence in the name of "truth." The study of religion as a study of understanding per se can provide insights into the motivations that lead people to employ violence to correct injustices as well as a set of criteria for rejecting the use of violence for the sake of merely personal, national, or religious interests.

Further, however valuable, defining the study of religion as merely the unquestioning acceptance of one's own tradition, not to speak of the other's, as a "truth system" is to abnegate a venerable and necessary responsibility of scholarship. Every tradition is changing. There is no status quo that is perfect, and it is possible that a tradition is the victim of systematic distortion that can be erroneously embraced across generations.[1] In short, peace and justice require negative as well as positive critique or else our scholarship becomes complicit in the injustices that are present in the religious traditions that we are trying to understand.

Succinctly, the study of religion is not simply an empirical study of *what is* but a study of *what ought to be*. However, the question of *what ought to be* is improperly understood when taken to be concerned with a *heteronomous*, finger-wagging in the individual's face or over against any tradition, even one' own. The moral question of practical religion has to do with humanity's highest capacity of *autonomous* freedom "above" nature.   Note: autonomous freedom does not mean in this context individual self-determination independent of social institutions. Rather, it is concerned with what individuals and the human species is able to accomplish consciously, not just by instincts, that nature cannot accomplish on its own. Humanity appears to be the only species that is capable of raising the questions of *what is* and *what ought to be* to the degree that we can exactly bcause we possess this *autonomous freedom* "above" but never independent of nature. We fail not only ourselves as individuals but our species when we are satisfied with anything less than our best effort at answering both questions: *What is? and What ought to be?*

<div align="center">What is "Understanding?"</div>

This sounds like a ridiculous question. Understanding, clearly, is the grasping of the way the things and persons we encounter "truly" are. We understand when we make sense of what is "real." What is "real" is the world that is the same for everyone and accessible by carefully and analytically "opening our eyes" to examine it carefully.

"Understanding" in this sense has a simple structure: there is a single world of phenomena, and we understand it when we intellectually grasp it in the "proper" way. The model today for such understanding is the scientific method, which commences with phenomena, depends upon hypotheses of the researcher, to be sure, but those hypotheses can and must be confirmed by the phenomena before one can claim to understand properly. Every other kind of understanding substitutes merely subjective (hence, relative) claims for "reality." Obviously, then, religion is taken by some to be faux-science because religion is concerned with the understanding of invisible things. By the popular definition of science, religion is really concerned with relativistic and subjective understanding.

---

[1] In the Western tradition, we have examples of such systematic distortion over millennia with attempts to ground knowledge in what is taken to be "the" foundation of absolute knowledge, either Rationalism or Empiricism, by their alternative advocates.

This popular view of science needs correction. The scientific method is among the most successful strategies that humanity has developed for understanding the world, but it is far more complex than a process of "opening one's eyes," and the confirmation (or contradicting) of hypotheses is by no means straight-forward, especially in light of the fact that most of what even (!) science is claiming about phenomena is imperceptible to the senses. There is enough ambiguity to this process in and of itself that one need not underscore the role of self-interest in the outcome of one's research given that it depends upon institutional support and the clever hypotheses of the researcher. Nonetheless, self-interest is the bane of scientific "neutrality." Not just personal reputations of "geniuses" but also entire educational and economic institutions are at stake when it comes to scientific "discoveries." While challenging a certain set of self-serving blinders, though, the acknowledgment of the role of self-interest in and of itself is no serious criticism of the scientific method. Self-interest is ubiquitously present in all understanding. Understanding is not achieved by eliminating self-interest but by vigilant self-awareness that, whatever our "reality" claims, they are subject to distortion by the (silent) dynamics of our self-interest.

Yet, understanding involves much more than opening our eyes to phenomena and coming up with clever hypotheses in a quest for "neutral" grasp of reality independent of self-interest. Understanding itself is indebted to the sciences for illuminating the role in our understanding that is played by the pre-conscious physical world, especially the biological. As far as we are capable of experiencing, there is no understanding without a physical world as well as the micro- and macro-biological processes that serve as the material condition for all understanding. These material and biological processes, obviously, include the brain, but Adam Hadhazy's "Think Twice: How the Guts 'Second Brain' Influences Mood and Well-Being" in *The Scientific American* of February 12, 2012, suggests that in addition to the brain's neurological system in the cranium there is a "second brain," the "enteric nervous system" of the intestines that is by no means limited to food concerns. Most of these processes that are necessary for understanding are inaccessible to the senses. Important for the purposes of understanding understanding, then, is the recognition that there is no other species than humanity able to come close to grasping the significance of these imperceptible, material processes for understanding, as far as we know.[2]

Nonetheless, we are no closer to grasping the achievement of understanding by simply invoking Michael Polanyi's notion of "tacit" knowledge that challenges the centrality of conscious, mental representation when it comes to understanding understanding than we are by underscoring the unequivocal importance of physical and biological processes as the foundation of any and all understanding of which we are aware. What "tacit" knowledge as well as physical and neurobiological processes establish is that understanding by no means is limited to merely "opening one's eyes" to "properly" investigate phenomena. Without beginning to invoke the pre-conscious aspects of

---

[2] When we acknowledge the limits of the conditions of possibility necessary for human beings to understand as we do, we must acknowledge that it is possible that some other species elsewhere might possess the same necessary conditions for understanding. It is these conditions that make us "rational" beings and members of any group of "rational" species capable of approaching phenomena in the same fashion. In short, we are a "rational" species not because we are an exception to nature or because we are intellectually clever at accomplishing goals. We are a "rational" species because we are capable of *both theoretical and practical reason* – see below.

experience that is the territory of psychology,[3] we already can "see" that understanding only occurs as a process anchored in imperceptible, physical conditions and processes whose complexity in and of itself challenges the naïve notion of "reality" as something readily accessible by means of sense perception.

What we mean by "understanding," however, is even far more than a set of imperceptible, material processes! The experience of other species is similar to ours when it comes to these imperceptible, material processes. Yet, we are not mistaken when we take their experience to be governed, primarily, by instinct. In other words, we are not being blindly anthropomorphic when we suggest that our understanding involves a set of processes that, in degree, is far more sophisticated (and dangerous!) than the instinct-driven understanding of other species.

Understanding and Symbols

What distinguishes humanity's capacity of understanding from other species is the degree of its indebtedness to symbol systems. Ernst Cassirer reminds us in chapter three of his *Essay on Man* that we are the species that inserts symbols into the, otherwise, closed-physical systems of stimulus/response that we share with other sentient beings. It is precisely our dependence upon symbol systems in order to understand and to act properly in the world that makes education *necessary* and not simply desirable for our species – given the inadequacies of our instincts.

In short, our understanding requires the acquisition of symbol systems that we don't get simply by "opening our eyes." To be sure, the educational process employs sense data (e.g., textbooks and other media) to facilitate the individual's more rapid acquisition of symbol systems, but we deceive ourselves when we think that symbol systems are acquired simply by engaging the proper, physical phenomena. The physical phenomena that facilitate the acquisition of symbol systems are only humanity's acquired "short-cuts" for acquiring symbol systems, not the source of the symbol systems themselves that one seeks to learn.

For example, languages as well as mathematics are not "natural." They are not something present in physical phenomena of perception. We are reminded by the work of Norm Chomsky that the very multiplicity of languages indicates a common set of capacities for the acquisition of a linguistic system, but linguistic-system differences confirm that there is nothing inevitable about the outcome to the application of humanity's linguistic capacities. If there was, then we all would speak the same language.[4]

---

[3] As an "empirical" science, psychology is descriptive of *what is*, but impotent when it comes to aiding the individual in determining *what ought to be*. The latter requires *categorical* and not merely *hypothetical* imperatives – see below.

[4] Perhaps, it is this fantasy of a universal, natural language that motivates critics of Chomsky. At any event, there are reasons to be extremely concerned that "English" has become the lingua franca of Globalization.   English is no more natural than Xhosa.   Given that languages are symbol systems, they are figurative systems. In his *Vorschule der Aesthetik* in *Sämmtliche Werke* (1804), vols. 41-42. (Berlin: S. Reimer, 1827): 25. Jean Paul pointed out that the dictionary is full of dead metaphors. Of course the metaphors are not literally dead, and that is the key to the unique fecundity of insight found in every language. Each language enables in its own way the "seeing" of things that are not there in the phenomena. Hence, the value of every language for fostering understanding. The claim

Although mathematics is frequently referred to as "the" universal language, there is nothing "natural" about mathematics. We don't get mathematics merely by opening our eyes. To be sure, Aristotle already pointed out in Book VI of the *Nicomachean Ethics* that, unlike other learned skills, mathematics is a matter of logic, not empirical experience, which is why young people can be so skilled at mathematics even when they lack the life-experience required for the development of character – what Aristotle calls "moral virtue." However, the logical system of mathematics is not learned from natural phenomena. The particulars that are natural phenomena cannot generate the universals of logic (and mathematics). That step beyond particulars is a step that requires a consciousness of an incredibly sophisticated kind. The claim that we "read out" universals from our experience of particulars by no means "explains" our species' skill at mathematics. It only pushes the question off to a different level: where does the "universal" system of mathematics come from to which the "particulars" of phenomena conform that, in turn, allows us to "read out" universals from the stream of particulars that is phenomena?

Although we are unable to establish unequivocally whether or not we (somehow unknown to us) derive symbols systems from phenomena themselves (empiricism) or arrive at them by merely closing our eyes (Platonic rationalism), we can say that they are elements that we must *necessarily add to* phenomena in order to "understand" phenomena. It is this creative activity that is so important for us to grasp about "understanding." Adding symbol systems to the appearances, which make up our world, is a creative process engaged in by all persons regardless of their physical and mental limitations. When it comes to understanding understanding, then, these symbol systems are not natural, but acquired, even as they are *necessary* for understanding.

<div align="center">

Humanity: A Creative, Symbol-Using Species
Capable of Morality

</div>

Understanding is a creative activity that must be accomplished by each individual. No one can understand for someone else because each individual must acquire and apply for her-/himself the symbol systems that make understanding possible. As a consequence, we are responsible for our own understanding, not the understanding of others.

Understanding beyond blind, physical and biological processes is the quintessential indicator of but does not in itself account for humanity's place in the "order of things." Because of our use of symbols, we are able "to see things that are not there" in the phenomena themselves, and, as a consequence, we are able *to initiate sequences of events in the world that nature on its own could never accomplish*. These two kinds of creative processes are what distinguish theoretical and practical reason: 1) the adding of symbol systems to phenomena to understand them is theoretical reason whereas 2) the initiating of intentional (and not merely instinct driven) sequences of events that physical nature on its own is what is meant by practical reason. Both involve a creative contribution by a "rational" subject. To be sure, "reason" here is not simply discursive and instrumental as if reason were some kind of tool box for calculating, predicting, and controlling circumstances and events. Discursive and instrumental reason are manifestations of theoretical reason, but the latter depends upon "reason" as a set of imperceptible capacities, which add the things that makes possible in the first place. Understanding,

---

for and debate over Chomsky's notion of"deep grammar" is confirmation that the central component of understanding is its necessary condition of possibility and not merely its empirical content.

then, is no merely passive process although it always commences with the passive stimulus of phenomena. Nonetheless, the mere passive givenness of phenomena by no means guarantees that we have understanding. Theoretical reason adds the acquired symbols that are necessary for us to "make sense" of the phenomena.

However, reason consists in more than the adding of symbols to phenomena. Reason is the application of laws to phenomena. To be sure, the articulation requires the use of symbols, but not all symbols systems are lawful. We can identify two lawful domains in experience: nature and humanity's autonomous freedom. We have rational understanding when we can identify the lawful order that governs the set of phenomena under our consideration. When the lawfulness of the particular set of phenomena fits together with an ever-expanding grasp of a coherent, lawful order imperceptible in the phenomena themselves, then and only then do we have the understanding of theoretical reason. We do not perceive this lawfulness directly in the phenomena. As a consequence, we cannot prove or disprove that what we take to be a law governing physical phenomena is, in fact, a universal law. All physical laws must be held to tenaciously but tentatively because of their possible need for revision at some point in the future.

This lawful order of theoretical reason is entirely different, however, from the lawful order that governs autonomous freedom or the ability to initiate a sequence of events that nature on its own cannot accomplish. Here, we are concerned with a different dimension of reason that is entirely complementary with the lawful order of theoretical reason but by no means reducible to the phenomena or lawfulness of theoretical reason. The lawfulness of practical reason (or *praxis*, not merely correctly understanding a set of given phenomena) is a lawfulness that the individual and only the individual can place upon her-/himself. This lawfulness consists of moral principles that make it possible for us to understand and, on occasion, to act even *contrary to our self-interest*. In fact, we reserve the highest respect not for the "geniuses" of theoretical reason but for the "lionesses" and "lions" of practical reason, who sacrifice their self-interest for the good of the world and others.

Practical reason's concern for the physical world is not simply to maintain it simply as it is "given." Rather, it is anchored in autonomous freedom that the individual cannot not apply because rational beings cannot not act. Furthermore, the sacrifice of self-interest by practical reason never justifies one's being a door mat for the interests of others. The very autonomous freedom that makes it impossible for rational beings no to tact also is the ground to dignity that rejects every form of its denial in others or in ourselves.

In other words, practical reason has priority over theoretical reason because it is the *supersensible* capacity, that is, a capacity not accessible to the senses (not to be confused for supernatural capacities that are outside of the natural order) that makes even the supersensible capacity of theoretical reason, as human beings experience it, possible. Autonomous freedom does not just understand. It acts, and it acts consciously and intentionally, unlike the actions of other species that are governed by instinct, in ways that physical nature on its own cannot with the consequence that autonomous freedom is the basis for our assumption of responsibility for our actions.

For example, there is nothing about the individual parts of a computer that is not "natural." Nonetheless, the presence of all of the pieces of the computer on the table will never by themselves bring about a computer. More than mere physical, *efficient* causality of physical replication, things like computers that are not found in nature require what Descartes called *eminent* causality, a causality that

is "greater than the sum of the parts." The making of a computer occurred not because a computer was already encountered somewhere and now simply duplicated. A computerized machine can do that. What a computerized machine will never be able to do is to create the *first* computer.

This capacity to intentionally, teleologically achieve things that nature on its own cannot achieve is possible only because of humanity's ability to understand the complementary lawful orders of nature and freedom, and it is this same understanding that makes it possible for us to hold ourselves responsible for what we understand and accomplish. We neither expect other species to hold themselves responsible for their actions nor do we hold themselves responsible because almost all that they do is by "natural" instinct. In contrast, at the earliest level of the development of understanding in children, we expect them to hold themselves responsible and we, in turn, hold them responsible for their actions.

This capacity of the *ought* that is above and beyond the determination of *what is* constitutes the unusual position of humanity in the "order of things." This capacity is what makes us capable of being a *moral species*. To be sure, our place in the "order of things" is no guarantee that we will act morally for that, like understanding, is something that the individual can do for her-/himself. We possess this capacity because we are capable of consciously initiating sequences of events that nature cannot accomplish on its own as a consequence of our capacity to understand and our capacity to hold ourselves responsible for those sequences.

Humanity: The "Religious" Species

An understanding of understanding as a creative, symbolic activity concerned with the two lawful domains of nature and freedom provides a segue to grasping just what it is about humanity that makes it the only species, as far as we can determine, that is religious. The short account is that the rituals, doctrines, and creeds that make up institutional religions are a product of humanity's creative employment of symbols. Religions in the form of rituals, doctrines, and creeds (i.e., historical religions) are not "natural." They are historical, cultural products of our species' ability to "see things that aren't there" in the phenomena.

Defenders of reductionist natural sciences, of course, view the very *problem of religion* to consist of individuals and communities "seeing things that aren't there" in phenomena. Religion is dismissed precisely because it is subjective and relative, not objective and factual. Yet, reductionist science overlooks that it, too, is engaged in "seeing things that aren't there" in phenomena. There is no position that we can assume that allows us to see the sun as standing still and to perceive ourselves as moving at some 1,000 miles per hour spinning on the surface of the earth. We can generate models (a form of symbol construction) of subatomic processes, but they are imperceptible. At stake between religion and science is neither that one does and the other does not "see things that aren't there" nor that one is concerned with lawful order and the other is not. Rather, they are both products of reason and the necessity that humanity has to add symbol systems that include our understanding of lawfulness in experience to phenomena in order to make sense of and to act responsibly in the world.

When religion and science part ways, they each insist that their individual systems constitute the exhaustive account of the "reality" of the other. Such insistence is a quintessential example of the failure to understand understanding.

Religion is concerned with autonomous freedom and one's assumption of personal responsibility for one's decisions. As such, at the heart of religion is the ineradicable "call" to ever new moral effort in light of the *necessity* that the very conditions are profoundly limited that make it possible for humanity to assume its status as a *moral species*.

Religion is incorrectly understood when its moral principles are reduced to a list of *heteronomous* moral principles that can be externally imposed on one another. Heteronomous principles are external rules, and they are concerned with regulating our interactions in a physical and social circumstance. However, religion (morality) involves more than merely the successful negotiation within a social world. Were morality (religion) merely to consist in a successful negotiation of a social circumstance, then every drug cartel and Mofia clan would be moral. Morality is higher than technical and social rules. *Autonomous* religion and morality involve the individual's embracing of personal understanding as well as the individual's legislating of the moral principles that are to govern her/his understanding and action. In short, religion is governed by imperatives, but not all imperatives are religious.

Heteronomous and Categorical Imperatives

Morality is not doing things correctly. Morality is doing things for the right reason. Other species clearly do things correctly, but they cannot act morally because their "correct" actions are governed almost, if not entirely, by instinct, NOT understanding.

Furthermore, much, if not most (?), of what humanity does correctly has nothing to do with morality. To be sure, the accomplishing of a task correctly requires adherence to imperatives, but there are two kinds of imperatives: *hypothetical* and *categorical*. Only *categorical imperatives* govern morality, and the difference between hypothetical and categorical imperatives is another indicator of humanity's extra-*ordinary* location in the "order of things."

Building a fire properly is not a moral but a technical skill. A technical skill is governed by imperatives (i.e., if you want to successfully build a fire, you *must* begin with a flammable starter under kindling followed by progressively larger pieces of wood. However, the lack of success in building a fire is not immoral. It is a failure to grasp the laws that govern the physical task.

Life is full of such technical imperatives. They consist of the rules/physical laws to which one must conform if one wishes to accomplish something in the world. Such technical imperatives are *hypothetical*. They accompany the "if" of any given task: "If" I want to build a fire, then I must observe and conform to the imperatives that make a fire possible. Such "ifs" are ubiquitous. Another way of articulating what distinguishes humanity in the order of things is the degree to which its actions are governed by *imperceptible*, technical imperatives. The more sophisticated the grasp of technical imperatives, the more we are dependent upon symbol systems.

Hypothetical imperatives are not limited to technical imperatives, however. As we have said, the symbol systems that humanity employs to understand and achieve technical aims require education because they are not natural. Success with the symbol system of a profession, for example, requires acquisition of the appropriate certification that one has sovereignty over the profession's symbol systems and rules. We can define *pragmatic imperatives* as those *necessary* symbol systems and rules that the individual must acquire to achieve financial and social success. However, pragmatic imperatives

are far broader than merely those imperatives that apply to entrance into a profession. They involve all of those "restrictions" to which one must submit in order to exercise what Isaiah Berlin in "Two Concepts of Liberty" in *Four Essays on Liberty* (London: Oxford University Press, 1969) calls "positive" freedom. They involve all of the self-imposed restrictions that one accepts in order to achieve a "greater" or "higher" end (e.g., general education, submission to the rules of a social organization/profession, apprenticeships, etc.). Whether or not an individual exercises such "positive" freedom is a matter of personal welfare, not morality. One is not immoral if one chooses not to pursue a certain profession or not to join a social organization).

The most pervasive manifestation of hypothetical imperatives is the civic law that governs most interactions in a social world. These laws are the rules established by a community to govern public interactions and transactions. Precisely because they are situation based, they are neither universal nor moral. Each society generates its own civic laws, which makes them always to a degree very particular to a social world. However, one can do everything properly according to the civic law and still be immoral. The civic law is not a moral law. Achievement of justice according to the civic law, for example, requires a citizenry that is committed to the moral principle of justice *above* the civic law.

This reference to a moral law "above" all the heteronomous and hypothetical laws leads to a set of imperatives of an entirely different order from technical, pragmatic, and civic law, *hypothetical* imperatives. These imperatives are *categorical*, not because they are clear and distinct for the purpose of achieving technical, pragmatic, and civic ends. On the contrary, they are *categorical* because they are precisely not derived from one's physical or social circumstance. They are categorical because they apply to *autonomous* freedom – our ability to consciously initiate a sequence of events that nothing of our external circumstance is able to accomplish without our creative effort. What makes them *categorical*, then, is that they are derived exclusively from *within*. The moral law is an *autonomous* set of categorical imperatives that only the individual can Impose upon her-/himself. They are what makes it possible, in fact, for the individual to act contrary to her/his self-interest in as social circumstance. No one else can know the categorical principle that one chose (or did not choose) to govern one's decision. Because they are applied by means of a causal agency that is entirely internal, they are not answerable to any external circumstance, which makes them *categorical*.

On the Origin of Hypothetical and Categorical Imperatives

Till now in our discussion, one might wonder what role religion plays when it comes to the understanding of understanding, the significance of autonomous freedom, and the role of hypothetical and categorical imperatives. We have reached the point where an adequate understanding of understanding must place religion the key actor at center stage and not some marginal supporting actor in the wings. Yet, the central role of religion is not to be confused with or replaced by the rich, historical manifestations that are the multiple, empirical religious traditions found in the world. We have reached the point where we can identify the human species as "religious" not because our species is alone in generating identifiably "religious" rituals, creeds, doctrines, and institutions. Such a conclusion would be substituting the effect of religion for its reality.

As we claimed above, "religious" rituals, creeds, doctrines, and institutions are the "product" of autonomous freedom not simply because human beings create them in the *external* world. Rather, they are the product of humanity's effort at *internal* understanding. This is the case whether we're talking

about magic, myth, animism. Logocentrism, spirituality, revelation, or whatever one might call the social phenomenon of religion in addition to rituals, creeds, doctrines, and institutions.[5]

Most succinctly, the historical manifestations that is commonly called religion are all attempts at causal explanation of experience. As causal explanations, historical religions can and usually are viewed as *alternative causal explanations* to the natural sciences so that science and religion are viewed as oil and water with oil (science) always floating to the top. The historical manifestations that are called religion are incapable of proof (or disproof, for that matter) precisely to the degree that they offer causal explanations. Causal explanations are additions supplied by human beings to the actual phenomena they are meant to explain. Phenomena are the effects of causes, whereas the causes themselves never appear directly in the senses.

For example, we don't see gravity; we see objects falling. This is why Newton was extremely cautious with his conclusions about this *invisible force.* Newton frequently invoked "*quam proxime*" ("most nearly as possible") to acknowledge the lack of absolute certainty when it comes to empirical, causal explanations.[6] Many of his contemporaries and no less than Leibniz accused him of substituting imperceptible, speculative forces for physical explanations.

This is both "good" and "bad" news for religious dogmatists. The "good" news is that no one can empirically prove them wrong! However, the "bad" news is that no one can empirically prove them right! One might employ this circumstance to take refuge in Blaise Pascal's famous "wager" that claims: "it is in one's own best interest to behave as if God exists, since [*sic.*] the possibility of eternal punishment in hell outweighs any advantage in believing otherwise." Yet, one has reason to hesitate with respect to this wager not only in light of what we have underscored about the necessity of acting on the basis of *categorical* imperatives, which are, precisely, not driven by mere self-interest when it comes to humanity's highest, *moral* capacity, but also because the "good" and "bad" news for religious dogmatists does not apply only to Christians but to all dogmatists. Given that the dogmatic alternatives are so great and many, how does one go about choosing which one to wager?

If we shift our focus from empirical and/or absolute metaphysical *content claims* (for example, about the existence of supernatural beings) to concentrate on the *necessary conditions of possibility* for us to experience the phenomena that are the content claims, we not only have a *necessary foundation* for our understanding, but we also have a set of criteria for adjudicating among empirical and absolute metaphysical content as well as truth claims of all kinds.

First, recall the *necessary foundation* for understanding: Understanding starts with *appearances*/phenomena, but it quickly invokes imperceptible *symbol systems* that are not themselves derived from the appearances in order to identify the two kinds of law (physical and moral) that govern the creative activity and decision taking that is understanding.

Second, the criteria for adjudicating among truth claims: To the extent that a truth claim can be seen to undermine or destroys the *necessary foundation* for understanding, it must be at least

---

[5] For a more detailed overview of the rich discipline that is the study of religion, see at http:www.criticalidealism.org "Studying Religion: More and Less than Mapping Territories," which was presented at the Pacific Coast Society Meeting at the Graduate Theological Union in Berkeley on April 17, 2015.
[6] See Zvi Biener and Eric Schliesser (eds.), *Newton and Empiricism*, Oxford University Press, 2014.

bracketed if not outright rejected because it undermines the very conditions that are necessary for there to be any claim to understanding and truth in the first place.

If religion's profile hasn't been clear throughout our entire discussion, here religion finally steps forward out of the shadow of even the natural sciences. Make no mistake, though: the claim is not that the natural sciences are wrong. The claim, rather, is that a) they apply to one domain of experience, the lawful domain of theoretical reason to the point, most frequently, of excluding the lawful domain of practical reason; and 2) they don't understand themselves radically (= foundationally) enough because they take understanding and the need for humanity to "see things that aren't there in the phenomena themselves" for granted. There is no understanding without phenomena as well as the addition to them of imperceptible symbol systems that together make it possible to grasp of the appropriate laws that govern phenomena. In short, there is no capacity of autonomous freedom and moral responsibility without the material basis, which is the concern of the natural sciences. Nonetheless, a comprehensive grasp of understanding itself takes us well beyond the empirical limits of reductionistic "scientism," that is, the notion that knowledge is exclusively empirical.

Once we glimpse the horizon of understanding that understands itself, we allow and *necessarily require* the religious dimension of experience to step forward into the light of rigorous reflection. Although we acknowledge its empirical richness, we must look beyond the phenomena of religion as it is historically manifest in established traditions to "see" that understanding is not grounded in empirically verifiable certitudes but in faith. To be sure, faith here does not mean merely "epistemic" faith, that is, believing in the reality of any and all unseen things. Faith here means, precisely, "non-epistemic" faith, that is, specifically, not knowing, but necessary for us to experience and to act in the world of phenomena as we do.

Furthermore, religion is no merely empirical, descriptive territory, in which we aim to choose among options and/or outright accept or reject religion "as a life-option." Religion is practical reason itself, that is, it is the responsible exercising of autonomous freedom, which, to the extent that it acknowledges its limits, is fully aware that it does not create the conditions that make it possible. In short, religion is that lawful domain of experience that is concerned with the individual's and the species moral effort.

Humanity is the only species of which we are aware that is "religious" precisely because humanity is the only *rational* species of which we are aware. We are a religious species not because we are moral but because we are capable of morality. With this capacity we rise above nature and other species not in self-interested sovereignty over them but in moral responsibility for our actions and for the preservation of the conditions of possibility both physical and supersensible that make it possible for us to possess this moral capacity. We are a religious species because we can be more than "mere" animals driven by instinct and self-interest alone.

The "gift" of the *necessary conditions of possibility* for us to be(come) the species that we are capable of be(com)ing, forces a theological judgment upon us. For us to experience and to responsibly exercise the religious capacity that we are capable of be(com)ing, there are three "ideas of reason" that we must assume because they are incapable of appearing in the senses for proof/disproof. 1) First, we must assume that the universe has an origin, and, whatever that origin was, it justifies the label "God" – without pumping any anthropological predicates into it. This is no "Big Daddy in the Sky" with white hair and a long, white beard, who is wearing a white robe and sitting on a throne enjoying the primitive air-

conditioning of angels waving palm branches all the while listening to an eternal, heavenly choir who sings "His" praises and watching over a never-ending banquet of abundance having created the universe analogously to the way a human being creates: think first, act second (Philo of Alexandria's accounting for the two stories of creation in Genesis). 2) Second, the "created," lawful order that is the universe must be a single totality that accommodates both physical laws and moral laws. In other words, the conditions of possibility for moral laws is no "god-causality" that can capriciously ignore and/or violate physical laws for then there could be no understanding. 3) Finally, we must assume that we have an enduring identity as an individual because there is no identifiable substance that unites our past, present, and future. These three "ideas of reason" (God, freedom/cosmology, and the soul) are quintessentially "religious" claims. However, they are not capricious and dogmatic. Rather, they are *necessary* in order for us to experience and to responsibly act in the world the way that we are capable of doing.

In addition, our practical reason *necessarily* requires that we be capable of moral transformation no matter how morally corrupt our character. This capacity for moral transformation is the very autonomous freedom that makes moral effort possible in the first place. The individual's dignity is grounded in the ineradicable and indelible capacity to consciously initiate sequences of events that nature cannot accomplish on its own. No one can exercise this capacity for someone else, just as no one can understand for someone else. It is precisely the fact that this form of causality must be ineradicable and indelible that makes it the ground for the moral transformation of our character. No matter how encrusted by blind patterns of behavior our character might have become by our own unjust and evil actions, there is always hope – perhaps the very purpose of our feelings of gujilt – that we are capable of character transformation because we can never lose our autonomous freedom so long as we live. This ineradicable and indelible, autonomous freedom constitutes *an amoral goodness* that makes it always possible for us to reform our character. Autonomous freedom is an amoral goodness not because it always makes good decisions and does good things, but it is good that it is. Without it, we would be incapable of existing as well as of be(com)ing the species of which we are capable.[7]

<div align="center">Not Empirical "Immersion" into but "Critical Understanding" of Religion</div>

As the human project of practical reason, religion is at the very core of what it means to be(come) human. Religion is not a "reality" claim in front of which one must decide whether or not one is "religious." Rather, religion is what makes understanding, autonomous freedom, and moral responsibility possible in the first place. One can go so far as to say that without religion there are no natural sciences and that the natural scientists who reject religion have not understood adequately their own project.

Religious literacy and the achievement of peace are not going to be accomplished merely by an empirical encounter with religious phenomena through an "immersion" in one another's life-worlds. This is because, religion is not defined by a life-world or a perspective on life but by what it means to have the very opportunity to be(come) human.

Religious studies, then, is not just a descriptive but a *critical* discipline. Here, critical does not mean negatively and destructively analytical. Critical is used here in the sense of Critical Idealism that

---

[7] A more extensive discussion of the "one" religion of practical reason at the core of the "many" faiths of historical religion is to be found in "One World, One Reason, One Religion, Many Faiths" at http://www.criticalidealism.org.

views critique as the investigation and identification of the significance of the universal conditions of possibility that make rational human experience possible. For example, when Immanuel Kant writes about the "critique" of pure reason, he is investigating what are the necessary, universal assumptions for there to be anything like a supersensible realm of mental capacities? "Pure" in this context does not mean "perfect." Pure refers to all of those supersensible elements that cannot be experienced in the senses but that make possible sense experience and responsible action, whatsoever.

Religious studies can and *ought to be*, first and foremost, the study of *pure reason* because the elements of pure reason at the theological elements of God, Autonomous Freedom/Cosmology, and the Soul that make possible *practical reason*, that set of capacities that establish humanity's moral place in the "order of things." Only then can religious studies adequately begin to appreciate the rich multiplicity that are historical religions traditions. We reach our "common humanity," though, not be focusing on empirical *differences* between and among traditions but by critically focusing on the *universal conditions of possibility* that make any and all historical traditions possible.