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Critical Humanism and the Study of Religion: A Statement and Defense

Richard B. Miller | ORCID: 0009-0004-4884-3071

Laura Spelman Rockefeller Professor of Religion, Politics, and Ethics in the
Divinity School and the College, University of Chicago, Chicago, IL, USA
richardbmiller824@gmail.com

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Abstract

This essay offers a statement and defense of four core claims of my work, *Why Study Religion?* Those are: (1) the field of religious studies is preoccupied by procedural methods for studying religion to the neglect of values and purposes that can justify its intellectual practices; (2) this preoccupation operates under a “regime of truth” that is anti-normative; (3) this regime of truth buckles under the pressure of repressed values and smuggles in crypto-normative judgments and commitments; and (4) this preoccupation with method can be remedied by attending to purposes that can justify the study of religion, which I call Critical Humanism. Critical Humanism aims to expand the moral imagination and comprises four values: post-critical reasoning, social criticism, cross-cultural fluency, and environmental responsibility. After describing the book’s main claims, I take up critiques expressed by Michael Stausberg, et al. in their essay, “A Normative Turn in Religious Studies?”

Keywords

study of religion – Critical Humanism – normativity – theory – method – justification

Over the past several decades, scholars in the humanities have been criticized for carrying out intellectual work that has little obvious rationale or public importance. Humanists are thus facing a serious decline in financial

and institutional support in their colleges and universities, and in public culture more broadly. With those challenges in mind, several scholars have published recent studies that track the decline of the humanities and vindicate their value in higher education. Martha C. Nussbaum's *Cultivating Humanity: A Classical Defense of Reform in Liberal Education* (1988), Christopher Newfield's *Unmaking the Public University: The Forty-Year Assault on the Middle Class* (2011), Geoffrey Galt Harpham's *The Humanities and the Dream of America* (2011), Helen Small's *The Value of the Humanities* (2016), Mark Edmundson's *The Heart of the Humanities: Reading, Writing, Teaching* (2018), Willem B. Drees's *What are the Humanities For?* (2021) and a special edition of *Daedalus* (2022) each take stock of the humanities, make sense of what humanists do, and describe the many ways in which our work is important. They all address a crisis of rationale in humanistic inquiry. Nothing of the sort exists in the study of religion. *Why Study Religion?* aims to fill this lacuna by showing why scholars of religion have been silent about the merits of our work and how we can offer a full-throated defense of our intellectual practices. In addition, it aims to give voice—to render explicit—values that remain undertheorized or poorly articulated by scholars in the profession.

Professors Stausberg, Sælid Gilhus, Hervik Bull, and Alexander van der Haven join this conversation by asking whether and to what extent I succeed in diagnosing the field and making a justificatory case for the study of religion. I want to thank them for their probing and insightful critiques of my book. They raise several important questions to which I will direct my comments here. Before I do so, however, I want to identify the book's four main claims as a step toward responding to their critiques.

First: *Why Study Religion?* is organized around a basic question: What justifies the study of religion? What reasons provide the *raison d'être* of our work? In this respect the book is a meta-disciplinary, and not only meta-theoretical, intervention. I ask my question on the premise that too much work is preoccupied with defending one or another methodology without proper consideration of the ends and values that can vindicate the study of religion, whether by historians, philosophers, social scientists, comparativists, ethicists, aestheticians, and the like.

This preoccupation with theory and method has us focus on matters of *how* to study religion without explicit reference to *why* we should do so. I should note in passing that I believe that my critics and I share a fundamental disagreement about these basic matters. Van der Haven, and perhaps his colleagues, states that there is an “inherent interest” in the subject matter of religion that can stand apart from considerations of the “goodness of its study” (15). In my view, following Jonathan Z. Smith, there is nothing inherently interesting about anything. There is nothing “out there” in history, culture, nature,

politics, thought, etc., that ought to command our scholarly attention. Rather, one or another object of inquiry is interesting because we carry out everyday practices that lead to questions or concerns as a prior condition for exploring the world. That being the case, we then ask how one or another object of interest is to be studied. At that juncture, if not before, we must face the question (again following Smith): So what? Without attending to this latter question, efforts to develop proper scholarly procedures are only question-begging. I see nothing in the responses to my book that enable us to get beyond the status quo of indeterminacy and inarticulacy in the field.

Why Study Religion? aims to move the study of religion beyond this indeterminate and question-begging state by articulating and defending justificatory goals. I do so by exploring how it can contribute to wider studies of the humanities, which I cluster under the rubric, “Critical Humanism” (more on which below). As I note in the book, there has been an ongoing anxiety about the intellectual status of the field of religious studies, about its place and standing in the academy. If we have a clear set of theories and methods, it is hoped, we can establish our field as a viable academic discipline. I cannot overlook the irony that these essays are being published in the journal, *Method & Theory in the Study of Religion*, devoted to that very task. *Why Study Religion?* obviously troubles this journal’s mission.¹

Second: The efforts at establishing the proper protocols for studying religion operate under what I call a “regime of truth” that is anti-normative. This regime is anchored to the fact-value distinction. It has an understandable rationale—well noted by my critics—to prevent a scholar’s biases or commitments from distorting how she studies her data. Max Weber’s lecture, “Science as a Vocation,” is a classic defense of the method of detached inquiry that I use as one of the book’s foils. I also reference the work of Claude Welch, who oversaw a comprehensive survey of the graduate study of religion in 1971. Welch offers a practical rather than a theoretical justification for our work. Welch’s failure to offer a theoretical justification, I argue, reflects a Protestant anxiety

1 “*Method & Theory in the Study of Religion* publishes articles, notes, book reviews and letters which explicitly address the problems of methodology and theory in the academic study of religion. This includes such traditional points of departure as history, philosophy, anthropology, psychology, and sociology, but also the natural sciences, and such other approaches as feminist theory, discourse analysis, and ideology critique. *Method & Theory in the Study of Religion* also concentrates on the critical analysis of the history of the study of religion itself. As the journal of the North American Association for the Study of Religion, *Method & Theory in the Study of Religion* is dedicated to historical, critical, and social scientific approaches to the study of religion, as well as a relentlessly reflexive critique of the theories, methods, and categories used in such study.”

about offering a justification for human endeavors—about being our own judge and jury. I do not propose a clear line of influence between Weber's and Welch's views and the regime of truth that I describe. I rather say that their ideas erect a firewall between the study of religion and the reasons for studying it. The guild's preoccupation with method seeks a value-neutral vantage point according to which religion should be conceived and examined. That aspiration repeats and reinforces the firewall I must mention. In broad strokes, we can label this aim "scientific." It seeks to be impartial and disinterested. This ideal of disinterestedness, or what I call a "hermeneutics of abstinence," leaves us tongue-tied when we are asked to justify what we do.² We possess an impoverished language of value and thus have few resources for making a public case for our intellectual practices. Using the nomenclature familiar to scholars of ethics, I describe this preoccupation as "deontic," focusing on the means of research, rather than teleological, where we would instead focus on the ends or goals of research to justify it.

As I said, I describe this program of separating fact from value as a regime of truth, to borrow a concept from Michel Foucault. This regime is a form of power/knowledge, and it expresses what I call (following Nietzsche) an "ascetic ideal." That ideal has us think in ways that strip us of our feelings and values, which are derogated as "subjective" rather than as "objective." I hasten to add that this quest for disinterestedness is not a single principle that is applied in a top-down matter to evaluate work in the study of religion, nor it is the work of any single agency or person. It is rather an intellectual force field—(quoting Foucault), a set of "ordered procedures for the production, regulation, distribution, circulation, and operation of statements," in which "the true and the false are separated, and the effects of power are attached to the true" (Foucault 1980, 133). That is to say, the ascetic ideal ramifies across a range of theoretical models and often within specific studies in the history of religions, philosophy of religion, sociology of religion, and even theological approaches to the study of religion.

I trace the workings of this ascetic ideal in dialogue with six models of research that prevail in the field, focusing on those who have made signature efforts to advocate for one or another of them. They are: (1) the Interpretive-Comparative Method and the work of historian, Jonathan Z. Smith; (2) the Scientific-Explanatory Method and the naturalism of Donald Wiebe; (3) the

2 I say this in part having served as chair of the Department of Religious Studies at Indiana University, and in part having participated in numerous job interviews in which candidates have clearly never paused to ask themselves why anyone should care about what they're doing, relying as they do on the "inherently interesting" premise.

Theological-Anthropological Method and the work of Paul Tillich; (4) the Materialist-Phenomenological Method and the work of the sociologist Manuel Vásquez; (5) the Critical-Genealogical Method and the work of Russell McCutcheon, Timothy Fitzgerald, and Saba Mahmood; and (6) the Philosophical-Evaluative Method and the work of the philosophers of religion, Stephen Bush and Kevin Schilbrack. I provide a considerable amount of exposition to describe these models, in part to educate readers about the intellectual culture of the field and to document my main claims. Moreover, I recruit the ideas of Critical Humanism to comment on the merits and weaknesses of these models and seek to ease the overly demanding conscience under which the guild has labored for the past several decades. Among other things, I show that, actually and in the final analysis, these models of research are anything but value-neutral. That leads to the book's next core idea.

Third: I argue that this anti-normative, value-neutral stance unsuccessfully represses values and commitments in the study of religion—that it is impossible to eradicate one's values and adopt a fully disembodied, neutral stance. I describe the guild's regime of truth as imposing an overbearing conscience, one that has us reach for an ideal that strains beyond what is valuable. The aspiration for value-neutrality, I show across the arc of the book, invariably fails. Efforts to avow a value-neutral procedure buckle under the weight of repressed values of one or another sort. As a result, in the study of religion today, we see often values expressed in haphazard, quixotic, and incoherent ways—a return of the repressed. I label this feature of our regime of truth, “cryto-normativity.” The concept names how scholars who putatively avow value-neutrality nonetheless assert, or smuggle in, various ethical and political commitments in the course of their work. If scholars would be more explicit about their values, I insist, we wouldn't see such haphazard expressions of normative judgment. As things stand, we're encumbered by a self-defeating superego.³

Fourth: As a corrective to the guild's preoccupation with matters of method, I offer an understanding of the purposes toward which the study of religion can aim. I call those purposes “Critical Humanism.” It is organized around four values: post-critical reasoning, social criticism, cross-cultural fluency, and environmental responsibility. These ideas enable us to understand “the ethics of religious studies.” By that I mean to name a way of justifying the practice of studying religion, one that has us expand the moral imagination. That goal has us understand the study of religion (and the humanities more generally) as exploring possibilities and limits of human existence, with its

3 If there is a theorist shadowing these ideas, it is of course Freud in his *Civilization and Its Discontents*.

various challenges in our personal lives, politics, culture, and the environment. Aristotle said the end of medicine is health; I am arguing that the end of the humanities is expanding the moral imagination as an intellectual excellence.

Briefly stated, Critical Humanism aims to make available information about, as well as tools for, critically examining human subject formation and the expression of human agency. It presumes that human beings are persons with depth, dependent upon and capable of critically exploring their received notions of the good as the basis for human decision making and action. My account of (both) subject-formation and human agency is hermeneutical. By that I mean to emphasize how our agency reposes against a set of prior values, practices, ideals, and cultural norms that we draw upon to interpret and order our lives. All that cultural material has a history, on which people depend when sorting out their respective accounts of what is true, good, and a worthy reason for action. Along with that idea is the notion that are brought to self-consciousness through the awareness of an other—that knowledge, self-knowledge, and recognition are coeval and interdependent.

Briefly stated, the four values of Critical Humanism that I identify are as follows: *Post-critical reasoning* has us attend meticulously to our primary and secondary source material on the way toward fashioning our ideas and assessments; it has us toggle between what I call vernacular-near and vernacular-distant modes of inquiry in what amounts to a hermeneutical circle in our practices of interpretation. The prefix “post-” aims to capture the affective dynamics and our experiences of self-discovery in our various forms of cultural interpretation. *Social criticism* has us assess the customs, practices, and policies that shape the institutions and aspirations of public culture. Properly theorized, it has us consider matters of freedom and equality along with their opposite, domination. *Cross-cultural fluency* mandates that we study a diverse range of cultural traditions, historical periods, and social contexts around the globe. It works to correct for habits of chauvinism and ethnocentrism. *Environmental responsibility* mandates that we reflect upon the ramifications of our practices in relation to ecological needs and demands. Understood as a humanistic enterprise, that mandate can draw insight not only from environmental ethics, but also from environmental history and literary ecocriticism. The study of religion can conceive of itself as contributing to this wider project of research and teaching in the humanities. The overall aim is to identify intellectual excellences that can animate the practice of studying religion.

I hasten to add an important point overlooked by each of my critics. The account of Critical Humanism I provide is not a patchwork of familiar ideas. The ideas that seem commonplace are concepts to which the book aims to give voice and precision. What I want to emphasize here is that these values

reference widening circles of intellectual and affective engagement, all of which are anchored to the idea that human thought is advanced through its encounter with difference. Human consciousness relies on an experience of difference, and that fact moves our conscious activity across a range of contexts regarding our personal lives, societal arrangements, cultural encounters, and enviroing world. Reckoning with these features of human thought necessarily pushes the study of religion into distinct but overlapping spheres.

With these preliminary ideas in place, let me turn to the specific questions posed by my critics in the order in which they appear.

1. My critics ask, **Is my diagnosis correct?**, and it is unclear that they answer their own question. They write that, given the contested and ubiquitous nature of religion, a detached vantage point provides “a scholarly perspective on religious matters that is detached from conflicting religious truth claims and that is disinterested in apologetics and polemics, in order to assume and occupy a neutral ground in a disputed territory, to ‘normalize’ the seemingly ‘anomalous’ field [of] religion by studying it in similar ways as others study history, art, or other such topics” (4). For these reasons, there is a “pragmatic need” for the work of historians of religion that operate according to the demands of disinterestedness. My critics grant that seeking a deeper justification maybe the legitimate work of philosophers of science, but it is “not expected to be part of most scholarship in actual practice” (15).

WSR? addresses these concerns straightforwardly, and it does so in three ways. First, I draw a distinction between what I call *Routine Work* and *Metadisciplinary Work* in the study of religion (2021, 30–33). By *Routine Work* I mean the ongoing, day-to-day practices of scholars who identify and solve questions in their different areas of specialization. Such work adopts a concept, question, theme, hypothesis, etc., as a way of interrogating data about religious belief and practice. I presume that this description fits the work of historians of religion in North America, Europe, and elsewhere. *WSR?*'s focus is rather on *Metadisciplinary Work*—theoretical efforts to make sense and guide the intellectual practices carried out at the level of *Routine Work*. It is abstract and conceptual, putting the practices of *Routine Work* to historical, genealogical, or philosophical scrutiny. *Metadisciplinary Work* turns the study of religion into an object of study. The fact that *Routine Work* is not normally expected to offer justificatory reasons is not something I say much about.

That is not to suggest that we should accept the status quo about *Routine Work*, as my critics seem to do. In my discussions of Smith and Mahmood, I demonstrate how their *Metadisciplinary* commitments condition how they carry out their *Routine Work*. Those commitments blind them from grasping how the religious adherents under their review are human agents, acting on

reasons that we can submit to robust critical assessment. Rather than accept the “mission-creep” of the ascetic ideal or rely on the idea that their work is of inherent interest, scholars should explicitly offer us ways to size up their accounts of human agency and reason-giving at the level of Routine Work. Failing to do so is not value-neutral, it is a form of apologetic approval by other means.

To see this, and second, note a line of argument in *WSR?* that speaks to the downsides of seeking a value-neutral vantage point. It leans on Kevin Schilbrack’s critique of the ideal of value-neutrality. Schilbrack’s point is that normative approaches to religious belief and practice are ineliminable, even if unintended. That is because religious adherents not only live according to their values and beliefs; they also claim in practice if not in theory that it is right and good to do so (Schilbrack 2014, 187). Leaving such value-laden matters shielded from scholarly critique is not “value-neutral.” It rather offers a silent endorsement of them.

Third, there is also the fact the aspiration to neutrality fails to grasp how it is shot through with normative assumptions and perspectives. If my critics wish to maintain a commitment to that ideal, they need to wrestle with my discussion of naturalism (Miller 2021, 85–93). Following Charles Taylor (and Nietzsche), there I show how the aspiration to the ascetic ideal is one of modernity’s spiritual aims. It is a historically contingent development driven by the desire to be free from contingency. For that reason, we moderns find ourselves paradoxically attached to the ideal of detachment. And here we encounter another irony: Value-neutrality blinds us from seeing the spiritual values that motivate us to adopt a disembodied point of view.

2. On my principle of selecting the six methodologies in *WSR?* As Michael Stausberg notes, my principle for selecting the six methodologies under review is threefold: Each (1) articulates a free-standing and comprehensive theory; (2) aims to guide the study of religion across a wide range of practices, beliefs, and contexts; and (3) has visibility and influence in the field (10). I add that I do not mean for this selection to be carved in stone; one aim of *WSR?* is to produce a clearing in which current and future scholars pursue questions I pose in the book (2021, 39). I do not see the list of new methods that he identifies as satisfying my criteria at the moment (queer, feminist, queer, intersectional, postcolonial), but there is nothing in my argument to suggest that they cannot or will not in the future.

Stausberg also faults me for including a chapter on the Protestant theologian, Paul Tillich and (I presume) devoting a chapter to studying religion under the rubric of “Theological Anthropology.” For Stausberg, Tillich is a theorist of religion whose time of influence in the history of religions has passed, thereby

failing to satisfy one of my criteria of selection. In a similar vein, Stausberg notes, the work of Stephen Bush has not had much influence on the history of religions. Here I want to underscore that the book is not solely addressed to historians of religion, but to a broader audience that includes theologians, philosophers, ethicists, comparativists, literary critics, and the like.

My chapter on Tillich takes as its point of departure Jonathan Z. Smith's comment, "Tillich remains the unacknowledged theoretician of our entire enterprise—whether in the AAR or in the North American studies of religion more generally," as noted in the chapter's epitaph. To be sure, Smith penned that remark in 2010, a decade before the publication of my book. Apart from Smith's claim, I found it useful to include Tillich for three reasons: First, Tillich was an important intellectual influence as the study of religion took off in North America in the 1960s and 70s, and I want to note that fact and how that was the case (2021, 96–99). Those who study religion without knowing about that phase of our enterprise are missing something important in the history of the field. Second, I show that, despite the fact that Tillich's time of influence might seem to have passed, his signature ideas find expression across a range of works (either implicitly or explicitly) by a number of very different scholars, even today. I document that fact with reference to the works of Robert Bellah (sociologist), William F. May (Christian bioethicist), Wendy Doniger (historian of religions), M. Cooper Harriss (scholar of religion and literature), and John E. Smith (political sociology).⁴ Third, I engage Tillich because I believe those who use or who have admired his work in the past overlook a feature of his thought that would pose problems for those interested in using him to help organize their study, namely, what Tillich calls the "Protestant Principle." That Principle would have us critique religions that absolutize the relative in their use of finite, cultural artifacts and symbols to represent what he calls "the unconditioned." My treatment of this feature of Tillich's thought documents one of the book's larger points, namely, that what seems innocent and value-neutral for studying religion actually represses commitments that have considerable normative implications. In Tillich's case, those commitments effectively diminish the importance of studying religions that fail to abide by a version of the Protestant Principle. They absolutize the relative and thus express one or another form of idolatry.

3. On Jonathan Z. Smith and Jonestown: Hervik Bull faults my reading of Jonathan Z. Smith on the White Night (the mass suicide at Jonestown) as being, at the end of the day, rather pedestrian because the horror of the event—my

4 Also note a recent funding initiative, "Being Human: Public Scholarship as Theological Anthropology" at Indiana University (see Miller 2021, 318, n.2).

focus—is obvious (see 2021, 65). But the important question is, Why did this obvious dimension of the White Night escape Smith? I argue that it does so not simply because he uses question-begging examples to carry out a comparative analysis (*Bacchae*, cargo cults) to render Jonestown comprehensible. It is rather that his argument is anchored to the premise of a “spatial logic.” That premise crowds out what ought to be our principal focus, namely, Jim Jones’s use of power to dominate and manipulate vulnerable people to commit mass suicide. Assigning proximate responsibility to Rep. Leo Ryan for violating this spatial logic is but another form of crypto-normativity. On what basis is Rep. Ryan to be blamed instead of Jones? If the idea is that Ryan *should have known better* than to intrude as he and others did, then Smith needs to make that case. That is a standard approach to assigning blame that Smith entirely eschews. More important, moving one’s analysis in the direction of determining someone’s accountability gets us beyond concerns about the event’s potential *incomprehensibility* (Smith’s concern) to a concern about its injustice—the source of moral *indignation* that drives my critical humanistic critique. Pressing Smith in that direction, in other words, moves the discussion beyond his organizing question to mine.⁵

4. Is my proposed solution engaging and persuasive? Sælid Gilhus argues that my representation of Critical Humanism as tying together goals and values rests on a mistake—that one may fail to achieve a goal while nonetheless abiding by a set of related values. Surely that is correct. But it hardly undermines my claim that the goal of Critical Humanism is guided by four values. Like Helen Small, I offer a pluralistic account of the values that can animate the goal of humanistic inquiry.

Sælid Gilhus’s more pressing claim is that my pluralistic account “will make research rather muddled, if they are all employed at the same time” (10). This is indeed a fair concern. I describe the approach to studying religion as requiring a “thick theory of interpretation,” by which I mean to conceptualize the intersectional nature of these values in relation to each other. The four exemplary works that I describe to illustrate my vision—by Wallace Best, Atalia Omer, Aaron Stalnaker, and Sugata Ray—do not each speak to all four values; at most they employ two in the course of developing their respective projects. Doubtless some selectivity is necessary in order to render research realistic

5 Note as well that van der Haven references the work of Shiva Naipaul on the White Night, *Journey to Nowhere*, asking whether it was Naipaul’s “deep disturbance” about the event or the ability to overcome such sentiments that enabled him to offer a critical account of what happened. But given that *Journey to Nowhere* is a journalistic, unfootnoted, largely novelistic about Jonestown, based in no small part on first-hand impressions and conversations in Guyana, I find it difficult to see how it offers us an example of academic scholarship.

and manageable. Scholarship on any description is an act of practical reasoning in the classical sense of the term. In part my vision of Critical Humanism and its animating values is aspirational. My hope that current and future scholars become more mindful of the expanding circles of knowledge and acknowledgment as they develop their specific projects.

One of my critics' concerns is that seeking to address certain values may be heavy-handed, that "too much moral outrage can ... stand in the way of attempts to really understand why religious regimes, stories, and practices developed as they did" (10). Regimes practicing domination and patriarchy are widespread in ancient culture, and they need to be understood in terms that are not obvious and banalizing. On the face of it, this challenge seems quite reasonable. Yet identifying regimes that practice domination already wade into normative waters. "Domination," like patriarchy and other such terms that are deployed by historians of religion (among others), is a "thick word," to borrow a concept made famous by Bernard Williams (1986). Thick terms like domination, patriarchy, colonization—to take some familiar examples—combine both descriptive and normative meanings. They are not "value-neutral" ways of seeking to understand (say) ancient regimes and their corresponding practices. One lesson from Taylor, noted above, is that the aspiration to value-neutrality blinds us from the many ways in which our language is often value-laden.

5. Van der Haven asks, "Do we need a telos?", and *Why Study Religion?* offers a resounding yes to that question. I do so in this way. I press readers to ask, What explains the guild's ongoing preoccupation with theory and method, one that has been with us for a good half-century, with no real resolution in sight? What explains this ceaseless concern? I answer that scholars are preoccupied by questions of theory and method *precisely because* we lack an account of the proper purposes for studying religion. I draw on Stephen Toulmin's *Human Understanding: The Collective Use and Evolution of Concepts* for help here. That work is a history and philosophy of natural scientific concepts with some passing interest in the humanities and social sciences. Toulmin's basic claim is that, in the natural sciences, debates about theory and method experience an upsurge when there is no clear goal for scientific research. Science is "mature" on his rendering when consensus emerges about what the proper aims of scientific research should be.

I take this insight from Toulmin and extend it to the study of religion. The key point is that the study of religion will likewise be caught up in an ongoing discussion of theory and method until we can settle on some basic purposes toward which we can aim our work. My critics suggest that a plurality of methods exhibits a vibrancy in the field, and perhaps that is true. But, again, referencing that variety fails to address the "so what" question and presumes *that*

vibrancy is a good thing. One core challenge to the readers of *WSR?* is to think more deeply about that normative claim. It, too, is value-laden.

6. On conceiving religion, and its autonomy. Van der Haven states that the question, “What is religion?,” is of no apparent interest to me (14). One wonders what evidence he can marshal from *WSR?* to support such a generalization.⁶ He focuses to what appears to be an equivocation on my part regarding the autonomy of religion. I seem both to critique the idea and yet presuppose the notion in my discussion of religion as having a distinct domain, agency, and the like. But van der Haven misunderstands how I am critiquing the “autonomy of religion.” As I state on two occasions, my target is *not* the idea that religion is conceived as occupying a separate domain, as *sui generis*. My critique rather targets the assumption that religious beliefs and practices are self-justifying. That assumption is a protective measure, rendering religious belief and practice immune from critique. The “autonomy” that I identify places religious beliefs and practices on a pedestal, shielded from critique from non-religious sources and values (2021, 69–70, 188–89).

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Why Study Religion? argues for a course correction in the field. It aims to prompt scholars of religion across a range of specializations to ask themselves basic motivating questions, and to do so at two levels. First, as my account of Critical Humanism makes plain, I urge them to do so on the premise that human beings are agents who act according to reasons, including religious reasons that are subject to critical scrutiny. For that reason, attending critically to religious adherents’ motivating reasons for action is necessary, lest we offer a backhanded apology for them. Second, scholars are to ask themselves the motivating question expressed in the book’s title. With that, they should re-consider the value and power/knowledge assigned to matters of theory and method in the study of religion. If readers of this exchange are prompted to think more carefully about these two questions, then *WSR?* has accomplished what it set out to do.

⁶ See <https://voices.uchicago.edu/richardbmiller/>. In a previous work, I proffer a working definition of religion on a family resemblance model informed by Wittgenstein. I would amend that definition by increasing the number of relevant sentiments associated with the sacred—understood as a social fact—to include horror and dread. See Miller 2018, 19–24.

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