
Roundtable on Bradley B. Onishi's *The Sacrality of the Secular: Postmodern Philosophy of Religion*

Veridical Claims and the Question (once more) of Philosophy of Religion

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Bradley Onishi's *Sacrality of the Secular* offers a helpful mapping of the recent history and contemporary terrain of the subfield awkwardly called "the continental philosophy of religion." Onishi anchors his work in careful readings of two of the discipline's forefathers: the over-appreciated Heidegger and the under-appreciated Bataille. In delineating the territory that these thinkers have opened, Onishi makes an operative distinction between "continental philosophy of religion" and "continental philosophical theology." This distinction allows him to take on the vexed, perennial question of philosophy of religion's place within religious studies—especially insofar as the latter tends to dismiss the former as crypto-theology.

In gratitude for Onishi having parsed this problem so diligently, I would like to take this opportunity to think along with him. I would like in particular to examine his defense of the subfield we share from the perspective of what we no less clunkily call "the academic study of religion." Like many of my colleagues, I think and teach in both of these modes, which often do operate in bizarre tension with one another. In one light, then, this brief reflection on Onishi's book stages a narcissistic conversation between two of the persons hypostatically crammed into "me" concerning the character and value of continental philosophy of

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religion (which I have begun absurdly to abbreviate as CPR [Rubenstein 2019]), whose status with respect to religious studies seems to turn on the question of the types of claims the sub-field is making when it diagnoses various formations of the secular as still-sacred.

Metadisciplinarily, Onishi's book can be read as a response to recent large-scale dismissals among religionists of philosophy of religion. Timothy Knepper, for example, accuses the subfield (in its continental branches especially) of having very little to do with "religion" at all. Rather, he charges, the content of CPR is usually reducible to "the latest critical notion of some continental philosopher": a speculative toying-about with multiplicity or rhizomes or the parallax for god-knows-what reason (Knepper 2013, 9). And when it *does* venture into the terrain of religion, says Knepper, it deploys the syntactical pyrotechnics that it picks up from its heroes in order to resurrect God in some post-metaphysical, contentless anti-form. As such, Knepper suggests, CPR is just as Western, specifically Christian, specifically Protestant (and, we might as well add, very male and almost totally white) today as were the theologians who founded our departments decades ago.

In response to such charges, Onishi makes a critical distinction between CPR and the sub-subfield he designates "continental philosophical theology." Especially as it takes shape in the work of John D. Caputo and Kevin Hart, Onishi argues, CPR's chief purpose is indeed to carve out space for a post-metaphysical Christianity or a post-Christian anti-metaphysics by means of alternatively apophatic and messianic readings of Derrida in particular. And as such, Onishi suggests, it differs substantially from the work we find in scholars like Tyler Roberts, Mark Taylor, Thomas Carlson, and Jeffrey Kosky, who think alongside many of the same *sources* as the CPTs, but who do so in service of what Onishi calls a secular, philosophical project rather than a post-secular, theological one.

What Onishi finds so compelling about this latter branch of scholarship is its refusal of a dogmatic, post-Weberian *secularism*. As Heidegger and Bataille did at the dawn of the twentieth century, Onishi's CPR unearths unexpected operations of the sacred within the so-called secular. And this, Onishi suggests, is CPR's most promising contribution to religious studies: the critical account it provides of what he calls, alongside William Connolly, a "nonsecularist secularity" (Connolly 2000).

Now, the hypothetical non- or even anti-philosophical religionist, unimpressed with the intellectual lineage in question, might counter that religious studies undertakes plenty of critical analyses of the secular without the help of Heidegger or Bataille. Religious studies, she might argue, has been undermining the distinction between religion and non-religion ever

since the Iranian Revolution dismantled the secularization hypothesis (e.g., [Jakobsen and Pellegrini 2008](#)). Onishi would likely answer such an objection by saying that Heidegger and Bataille dismantled the secularization hypothesis even before it swept through our midcentury syllabi. At this point, however, our religionist might retort that Heidegger and Bataille are not academic scholars of religion but rather theologians (however apophatic) insofar as they both seek access to an unmediated Real. And considering the disastrous political decisions of the former and the sacrificial fetish of the latter, the religionist might suggest that Heidegger and Bataille ought to be left to the quirky annals of intellectual history.

As is probably clear, I am sympathetic to both of these antithetical positions. On the one hand, I agree with the cranky religionist that, *qua* Heidegger and Bataille, these two particular thinkers may no longer be useful to religious studies. After all, to the extent that they engage *religion* directly, such engagement tends to be limited to the purportedly private thoughts, beliefs, and experiences of a (European, male) *human being* who—however dissolved, unraveled, and in inscrutable excess of oneself—is still this lineage’s primary concern. A human being redone-as-undone, whose obsessive existence “toward” the death that both constitutes and disrupts them tortuously reduplicates the twin theologemes of Man and their God. In this light, *as theorists of religion*, Heidegger and Bataille do not get us much farther than the dreaded triumvirate of Otto, Eliade, and Tillich.

On the other hand, I agree with Onishi that many scholars who write in the *wake* of Heidegger and Bataille are indeed doing interesting work insofar as they articulate the surprisingly *religious* operations of the secular. These scholars include Taylor and Tyler and Carlson and Kosky, to be sure, but also William Robert, Kathryn Lofton, Karmen MacKendrick, and Catherine Keller—whose names I add at the risk of revealing an indiscretion between one sort of philosophy and a resonant sort of theology.¹ The place to focus our disciplinary concerns, it seems to me, is not on the haplessly guarded border between philosophy and theology, but rather on the often unarticulated distinction between the analytical and the ontological, or the interpretive and the veridical. When these CPRs uncover the “sacred” operations of the secular, are they making the analytical claim that the secular retains and transforms what it disavows? Or are they making the ontological claim that the secular world *is*—whatever this term means—sacred? In other words, are CPRs diagnoses interpretive, or are they veridical?

¹Robert, unpublished manuscript; [Lofton 2011](#); [Lofton 2017](#); [MacKendrick 2018](#); [Keller 2018](#); Keller, forthcoming.

For Onishi, the dogmatic *secularism* that CPR contests is embodied in the work of Max Weber, according to whom the triumph of calculative reason has disenchanting the world, overshadowing the secular with the sacred. It is Heidegger, says Onishi, who provides a counter-vision to Weber by means of the ecstatic temporality of *Dasein* and the unmasterability of its *Welt*—structures whose persistent self-exceeding amount to a persistently sacred secular. I see the point, yet it seems important to note that Weber and Heidegger are working on different registers from one another. Weber is not saying “there is no mystery,” or that beings are inherently calculable, or that “being itself” is reducible to them. Rather, he is making a set of descriptive claims about the implicit operations of modernity. And he is saying they are awful.

As far as Heidegger goes, “The Question Concerning Technology” and “The Age of the World-Picture” demonstrate that he agrees with Weber’s descriptive and normative claims. Modernity *does* calculate, rationalize, and enframe all that is to such an extent that nothing mysterious, excessive, incalculable, or indeed foundational can be. And Heidegger agrees that the situation is awful. The difference is that Heidegger goes a step further—or higher, or lower—than Weber’s phenomenological description and ethical-aesthetic normativity by saying, in effect, that modernity has got being *wrong*. Being, for Heidegger *is*, or *bes*, or might yet *en-be*—both before and beyond its metaphysical enframing. This onto-veridical move—this assertion of what really is—is the move that Weber, in no small part because he is a sociologist, simply does not make. He is concerned (again, both descriptively and normatively) with what is happening, not with What Is.

The distinction I am proposing between veridical and interpretive orders of thinking opens out two different ways of understanding the works Onishi commends in the contemporary philosophy of religion. When Mark Taylor theorizes the variously *religious* workings of Las Vegas, the market, or complexity theory, is he making a set of ontological claims (Taylor 1998; Taylor 2003; Taylor 2004)? That is, is he saying that these sites and systems *are* in some post-postmodern sense *sacred*? Or is he making a set of analytic claims about the extent to which these systems function in ways we have traditionally encoded as religious? In this second case, CPR’s readings of Las Vegas, the market, or complexity theory (or, for that matter, contemporary biology, cosmology, or continental philosophy itself²) will open onto philosophical, aesthetic, political,

²As Onishi generously mentions, my own concerns tend to center around these sites of religious-secular entanglement. In order of appearance above, please see Rubenstein 2018; Rubenstein 2014; Rubenstein 2009.

and ethical interpretation—even judgment—but they would not be indications of any sort of transcendent or even transcendental order of things.

Turning back to the question of the use of philosophy of religion, it seems to me that if continental philosophers of religion are working ontoveridically—if our work is proclaiming, “the secular *is sacred!*”—then the cranky religionist will have very little time for CPR as a mode of religious studies in its own right, consigning it at worst to the category of German idealism and at best to the category of data. “Look at our native informants,” they will say, “trying to resurrect the ‘persistence of the sacred’ that J.Z. killed off in 1982” (Smith 2009). But if we are working descripto-analytically—if, for example, Thomas Carlson is not arguing that posthumanity *is* some sort of enchanted condition but that it can be understood and even evaluated by differential comparison to the medieval mystical non-subject—then of *course* it is useful to religious studies; it *is* religious studies (Carlson 2009). And such work is particularly interesting because it is studying not just what calls itself religion, but also, in a Taylorish spirit, what seems to have nothing to do with it—such as technology, economics, or the natural sciences (Taylor 2009).

Onishi and I share an appreciation for, and indebtedness to, this particular lineage of CPR. We may part company, however, in our varied estimations of what it is doing. In short, Onishi sees CPR as articulating “the meaning and significance of secular life, or life after the death of God” (42). I see it as redescribing what calls itself the secular, but not as telling us what the secular *is*—as giving us a way to understand what we are swimming in and what we are up against. But that is different, I think, from offering us enchantment or meaning.

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