

God, the Absolute Wise Man, and the Study of Religion

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The Absolute Wise Man

In the beginning of the *Summa contra gentiles* [SCG], Thomas Aquinas remarks that, according to the Philosopher (that is, Aristotle), the wise man orders “things rightly and governs them well.”¹ To do this, the wise man needs to pay attention to the proper goal of his activity, that is, the good toward which he is to order things. This means that there can be wise politicians, carpenters, and philologists; but Aquinas has primarily in mind “the absolute wise man” (*simpliciter sapiens*), who queries both the origin of the universe and its end: God.

Moreover, not only does the absolute wise man contemplate the nature of God, the ultimate source and truth of the universe, but as even the highest theoretical wisdom (in the Aristotelean sense of *sophia*) has a practical, ordering dimension, it is also proper for such a person to teach truth and oppose falsehood—in other words, to be a teacher.²

Toward the end of the first chapter of SCG, “The Office of the Wise

¹ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa contra gentiles* [SCG] I, ch. 1 (*Summa Contra Gentiles: Book One: God*, trans. Anton C. Pegis [London: University of Notre Dame Press, 2014]). See also *Summa Theologiae* [ST] II–II, q. 45, a. 3, on the gift of wisdom, and I, q. 1, a. 6, on whether sacred doctrine is the same as wisdom.

² See Aristotle, *Metaphysics* 1.2.982a: “For the wise man should not be instructed but should instruct, and it is not he who should obey another, but rather the less wise should obey him” (trans. Hugh Lawson-Tancred [London: Penguin, 2004]). The tension is between *sophia* and *phronesis*, theoretical and practical wisdom, which are distinct from each other and yet integrated. See, for example, Jason Baehr, “Two Types of Wisdom,” *Acta Analytica* 27, no. 2 (2012): 81–97.

Man,” Aquinas returns to his introductory quote from Proverbs 8:7: “My mouth shall meditate truth, and my lips shall hate impiety.” Aquinas interprets impiety (*impietas*) as “falsehood against the divine truth,” and its opposite, piety (*pietas*), he writes, is another word for religion.³ The absolute wise person is, therefore, in the business of ordering religion toward its proper goal, God as the origin and end of the universe. As a result, besides the mistaken views of heretics, the Christian wise man, according to Aquinas, has to oppose the errors of Jews, gentiles, and Muslims, that is, all non-Christian religions. In refuting the latter two, he has to use natural reason, as they accept neither the Old nor the New Testament.⁴ And this philosophical task is the fundamental errand of *SCG*.

Moreover, the quest for and ordering of knowledge in relation to ultimate wisdom brings with it a joyous union of “man to God in friendship,” as God, the creator, made everything in wisdom, as ordered to himself, the Supreme Being and Truth.⁵ To pursue wisdom thus divinizes man.

However, my goal in this article is not primarily to deepen our understanding of the Thomist spirituality of higher wisdom, but to probe the possibility of a Catholic “religious studies” endeavor inspired by Aquinas’s approach in *SCG* I. My main question is, therefore, whether the office of the wise man is compatible with (or at least complementary to) the idea and practice of religious studies. Or if a Catholic approach to religious studies must do without absolute wisdom and settle for a lower-level goal such as ordering the relations between the diverse religious traditions of global society with the goal of harmonious coexistence? In that case, the spirituality of the scholar turns from divinization to humanization, but in what way would such studies be Catholic?

A Catholic “religious studies” is here understood as different from theology of religions, and more generally from dogmatic theology.⁶ Theology of religions is concerned with questions such as the possible salvific role of non-Christian religions, with how to understand the principle of *extra ecclesiam nulla salus* (“no salvation outside the Church”) and

³ *SCG* I, ch. 1, no. 4.

⁴ *SCG* I, ch. 2, no. 3: “We must, therefore, have recourse to the natural reason, to which all men are forced to give their assent. However, it is true, in divine matters the natural reason has its failings.”

⁵ *SCG* I, ch. 2, no. 1.

⁶ For a helpful Catholic theological overview, which, however, does not address the place of religious studies, see *Catholic Engagement with World Religions: A Comprehensive Study*, ed. Karl J. Becker and Ilaria Morali (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2010).

the trichotomy of exclusivism, inclusivism, and pluralism.⁷ The main concern of religious studies is not such evaluations, but rather the details of the history of religions and the contemporary diversity and changes of religion and spirituality. The theoretical thrust of religious studies aims at understanding the natural inclination for religion and its manifold manifestations (beliefs, rituals, and myths). It is also distinct from natural theology (for example as found in *SCG*), as the latter deals with the possibility and scope of rational knowledge of the divine.

Moreover, religious studies as a field differs from that of Catholic studies, which has Catholicism itself as the object of study and which combines perspectives from religious studies and theology, often with the aim of cultivating the Catholic identity of a college or university.⁸

Moreover, the interreligious-dialogue active component of interreligious studies is more limited in scope, concentrating on the goal of peaceful coexistence.⁹ And, in a similar way, the hermeneutical reflections of comparative theology are more specialized (theological texts) and dialogue-oriented.¹⁰ For religious studies, the nature of religion and all of its manifestations, both good and bad, are important; understanding and critique carry equal weight. It is not primarily an arena for communication between religious organizations and traditions; it pays attention also to spiritualities and religious mentalities that flourishes outside, between, and within institutions.

I am aware that restricting the nature of Catholic religious studies in the manner above (chipping away most knowledge interests important to Catholic centers of higher education) might actually end up in an ideal with no real-life counterpart. The common situation is a decisive split, on the one hand, between religious studies pursued as if all religions are

⁷ In the Catholic Church, the watershed moment was the Second Vatican Council and foremost the declaration *Nostra Aetate*; see Loe-Joo Tan, "The Catholic Theology of Religions: A Survey of pre-Vatican II and Conciliar Attitudes Towards Other Religions," *Scottish Journal of Theology* 67, no. 3 (2014): 285–303.

⁸ James L. Heft, "Almost No Generalizations: Reflections on Catholic Studies," *Catholic Education* 12, no. 3 (2009): 368–83.

⁹ For a definition of interreligious studies, see Paul Hedges, "Editorial Introduction: Interreligious Studies," *Journal of the Academic Study of Religion* 27, no. 2 (2014): 127–31, at 128, who remarks that, "while not necessarily engaged in activism, it often is, and does not see a clear boundary between the scholar and the practitioner."

¹⁰ For a characterization of comparative theology, see the text "What is Comparative Theology?" on the theology department's webpage at Boston College, bc.edu/bc-web/schools/mcas/departments/theology/areas-of-study/comparative-theology/what-is-comparative-theology.html.

equally valid human attempts relating to the ultimate, the transcendent, or the holy, and on the other hand, disciplines of Catholic theology taking the revealed nature of Scripture and the divine mission of the Church as premises.¹¹ Even if this would be the case, I think religious studies as an approach contributes a perspective on the modern world which is of great value also for colleges and universities with a strong Catholic identity. Merely adding a consideration of world religions and of interreligious dialogue to the theological disciplines and the liberal arts is not enough for understanding and being able to navigate the contemporary world of religion and spirituality. A more ambitious venture is needed that also considers, for example, the spiritual aspects of modernity, religious terrorism, esotericism, modern yoga, and New Age spirituality. Still, to incorporate contemporary religious studies into the larger Catholic intellectual project without attention to fundamental Catholic principles runs the risk of secularizing also theology.¹² Wisdom, both theoretical and practical, is therefore of the essence.

Naturalism and the Study of Religion

One defining feature of most contemporary religious studies is the disregard of absolute wisdom, in the sense of stretching toward an ultimate

¹¹ This means that religious studies (historian of religions) professors employed at Catholic universities mostly adopt theoretical stances in conflict with or neglecting Catholic doctrine as a matter of principle. See, for example, Charles B. Jones, associate professor of religion and culture at Catholic University of America, who, in an article on religious diversity, adopts a phenomenological perspective and writes: "Therefore, humankind will never arrive at one Truth about Reality or one universally agreed-upon construal of Reality" ("The Necessity of Religious Diversity," *Studies in Religion* 28, no. 4 [1999]: 403–17).

¹² Ann Taves, for example, makes a distinction between teaching Catholic studies at a Catholic university and Catholic studies within religious studies, but she puts forward the possibility of switching between the roles and positions of theology and religious studies, between a confessional insider perspective and that of a non-confessional outsider perspective: "Taking a non-essentialist stance relative to tradition_L [lineage] and tradition_T [things handed down] means understanding tradition and tradition as historically constructed products of contestation rather than as guarantors of truth revealed at the beginning and handed down over time" ("Catholic Studies and Religious Studies: Reflections on the Concept of Tradition," in *The Catholic Studies Reader*, ed. James T. Fisher and Margaret M. McGuiness [New York: Fordham University Press, 2011], 117). Instead of switching between roles and an a priori negation of the Catholic tradition as handing down truth, what I am investigating in this article is a form of religious studies that is well integrated into the Catholic intellectual project, while upholding its particular focus and methods.

spiritual origin and goal of human life. Instead, scholars of religious studies investigate in detail particular myths, rituals, and social functions of religious organizations; that is, religious studies as a discipline wants to settle more mundane questions than those dominant in natural and dogmatic theology. The popularity of interdisciplinary approaches such as “material religion,” “lived religion,” and “everyday religion” illustrates well this tendency of directing the analytical gaze toward the earth and not the Empyrean heaven.¹³ This is quite different from the earlier openness toward epiphanies of transcendence (the holy or the sacred) and is connected with (or at least parallel to) the waning since the 1990s of the phenomenology of religion, especially as it was practiced by the influential Rumanian historian of religions Mircea Eliade (1907–1986).

Moreover, not only is the focus currently on human religiosity understood as culture, but the main research paradigms of religious studies reject, as a matter of principle, explanations transcending the material world. In other words, their foundation is naturalism. Of course, the understanding of naturalism and what role it should play varies.¹⁴ Still, naturalism currently dominates in religious studies, owing to the present strength of a strict understanding of naturalism modeled on natural science promoted by the cognitive study of religion and the antagonistic, but similarly “mundane,” concerns of power and equality in critical culture studies, linked to emancipatory agendas.

Sometimes, the naturalism operative in religious studies is explicitly ontological; sometimes, it is more modestly formulated as a methodological principle. In the first case, it rests on the belief that only material substances exist. A transcendent God is only a human construction with no spiritual referent, as are major and minor deities, ancestors, souls, and demons.¹⁵ In the case of methodological naturalism (atheism or agnosticism),¹⁶ the

¹³ See, e.g.: David Chidester, *Religion: Material Dynamics* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2018); Nancy T. Ammerman, *Everyday Religion: Observing Modern Religious Lives* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007); Ammerman, “Lived Religion as an Emerging Field: An Assessment of its Contours and Frontiers” *Nordic Journal of Religion and Society* 29, no. 2 (2016): 83–99.

¹⁴ As shown by the articles in the anthology edited by Jason Blum, *The Question of Methodological Naturalism* (Leiden: Brill, 2018).

¹⁵ See, e.g., Stewart Guthrie’s theory of religion as a form of anthropomorphism, which he describes as similar to saying: “The clothes have no emperor. It is commonsensical yet discomfiting” (*Faces in the Clouds: A New Theory of Religion* [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993], 5). See also Guthrie, “Religion: What Is It?” *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 35, no. 4 (1996): 412–19.

¹⁶ Stephen Bullivant and Lois Lee define methodological atheism as suspending

method of religious studies does not explicitly negate the actual existence of spiritual beings, but the fundamental assumption is that we at least cannot have any clear knowledge of the gods or their actions. And, if the they *do* exist, they probably do not interfere in the human world in any significant way. The result is, therefore, the same: one studies religions as wholly manmade and as operating solely within a material universe. Even a metaphysically agnostic position must, as Craig Martin argues, operate according to some ontology, or stay at the level of mere description and paraphrase.¹⁷ Maybe, there is a supernatural surplus remaining after all scholarly work, but about that, the methodological naturalist insists, we cannot know; we can only believe.

For Aquinas's project in *SCG*, such a rejection of metaphysics is devastating, which he acknowledges: "For, if we do not demonstrate that God exists, all consideration of divine things is necessarily suppressed."¹⁸ What then remains is fideism, an irrational leap of faith, and the logical arguments of the *summa* cannot be more than a play with words. The opposition between the office of the absolute wise man and the scholar of religious studies, therefore, seems radical and unsurmountable.

The Secular Wisdom of Religious Studies

In order to explore the possibility of a Catholic religious studies—despite the chasm separating naturalism and supernaturalism—I think we need to approach it (as Aquinas did with natural theology) from the perspective

"metaphysical questions by treating all metaphysical positions as equally possible" (*A Dictionary of Atheism* [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016], s.v. "Methodological Atheism"). This makes first a definition of metaphysics crucial, which puts a limit on the suspension of ontological judgment; and second it is doubtful whether it is even methodologically feasible to treat all possible worlds as simultaneously equally possible (materialism, idealism, monism, Aztek theism, etc.). Somehow, the researcher needs to settle at least for a likely possible world. Michael Cantrell, on the other hand, in a reference to Ninian Smart, describes methodological agnosticism as "a normative suspension of judgment as to the ultimate reality of the sacred" ("Must a Scholar of Religion Be Methodologically Atheistic or Agnostic?," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 84, no. 2 [2016]: 373–400, at 388). Here, the notion of "sacred" and "ultimate" need defining, as, presumably, the sacred is not necessarily supernatural, and "ultimate" pushes the ontological question as far away as possible. Cantrell also mentions recent alternatives as methodological ludism, reciprocal illumination, and ontological pluralism.

¹⁷ Craig Martin, "Incapacitating Scholarship: Or, Why Methodological Agnosticism is Impossible," in Blum, *Question of Methodological Naturalism*, 53–73.

¹⁸ *SCG* I, ch. 9.

of wisdom. Even if there are scholars, such as Donald Wiebe, who argue that religious studies should be a purely descriptive and explanatory science, only laying bare the unvarnished truth of religions; religious studies (history of religions, comparative religion) has always been part of attempts at regulating social life toward its proper ultimate good (as variously imagined).¹⁹ In fact, I would like to make a case for the position of Aquinas that the theoretical understanding of religion is part of the practical business of ordering piety in accordance with the truths discovered, or presumed a priori. To make religious belief irrational is also to deny it influence on the rational ordering of society.

To begin with, studies of religion are founded and financed based on certain knowledge interests, either of the secular state or of organizations in civil society (for example, churches), and they often serve to educate teachers or religious specialists. Moreover, the knowledge produced is used for (and the scholars themselves active as experts in) the regulation of religion in the public sphere.

Despite the study of religion being part of larger value based social institutions, one may maintain that this does not rule out that it, like physics or chemistry, can have a purely truth centered core, which should be the same (as regards methods and theories) irrespective of ideological interests. But an important difference between physics and religious studies is that declaring the material of physics to be matter (or energy) does not violate the beliefs of a majority of human beings; while, on the other hand, to understand and treat religion as if no supernatural entities exist, does. The physical world will continue to function in the same manner irrespective of different physical theories. In the case of religion and society, this is highly unlikely, as it concerns human behavior and its ultimate goal. To deny rationality to religious beliefs (and thereby to the practices they inform) is also to undermine them and, at least implicitly, to propose that the rational ordering of society should not proceed in accordance with such beliefs.

If supernatural entities are beyond the reach of human rationality, and all revelations can be satisfactorily explained by natural causes, then this

¹⁹ For example, in 2006, Wiebe expressed his disappointment over the fact that the majority of religious studies scholars in Canada “still function in terms of the traditional conception of the role of the college and university which involved the formation of the good citizen, which requires addressing questions about the purpose and meaning of human life, and inculcating moral virtues and spiritual values that will prepare students for public service” (“The Learned Practice of Religion: A Review of the History of Religious Studies in Canada and Its Portent for the Future,” *Studies in Religion* 35, no. 3–4 [2006]: 475–501, at 495).

has profound consequences for the affirmation of truth and the rejection of false beliefs, that is, the ordering that is an integral part of teaching. To say otherwise would be to accept lies (for example, denying the influence of the DNA code on human biology and psychology; or affirming that Christianity originated in Norway) as ordering principles of social life, and therefore also ultimately those of universities, as they are not isolated islands, but organic parts of larger systems of higher education. The study of religion, therefore, inescapably proceeds from value-saturated knowledge interests and has consequences for religions, as astronomy has for astrology.

If one presumes that the highest rationally justified entity no longer is God, but society (which even a methodological agnosticism presumes), then the knowledge expanded and reflected upon by religious studies is part of the wisdom of a society worshipping (showing piety toward) itself. One of the most famous examples is the theory of religion formulated by the French sociologist Émile Durkheim (1858–1917), who was born into a Jewish family and was expected to carry on a long line of rabbis, but who lost his faith and instead became a champion of secular science. In his influential book *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life* (1912), he writes: “The sacred principle is nothing more or less than society transfigured and personified. . . . It is real only in so far as it has a place in human consciousness.”²⁰ In other words, what the scholar of religious studies (in this case, more precisely, sociology of religion) analyzes are actually civil religions embellished by supernatural mythology.

Durkheim was an explicit ontological naturalist: he did not merely make epistemological statements regarding our knowledge of the gods; he denied their existence. This position is sometimes called “sociological reductionism,” reducing or translating statements about supernatural entities into social facts.²¹ By such a translation, religion remains rational—not according to its myths and dogmas, but according to its underlying social function.

From the nineteenth century, scholars created a quickly expanding pool of knowledge about the bewildering diversity of historical and contemporary religions, which they thought science had falsified; but beneath it, they thought, was something genuinely human, which needed to be spelled out for the benefit of modern society. This is an argument with many variants. Some made religion rational by translating it into a moral code; another

²⁰ Émile Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, trans. Joseph Ward Swain (London: George Allen, 1915 [originally 1912]), 347.

²¹ For a discussion (and defense) of reductionism, see Robert A. Segal, “In Defense of Reductionism,” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 51, no. 1 (1983): 97–124.

understood it as manifesting underlying psychological mechanisms or group survival instincts. All of these underlying causes of religion are rational in that they serve the higher good of the group itself. In other words, religious beliefs and rituals hide and distort their true foundation, and therefore it was the task of science to expose their mistaken truth claims.

The anticipated gradual withering away of religions, nevertheless, worried Durkheim and other pioneering scholars of the study of religion. Something, they thought, needed to take the place of religion and fulfill its specific unifying function for society, thereby integrating individuals into a collective. Otherwise, the citizens, when waking up from the illusion of supernaturalism, might reject the moral community necessary for societal cohesion. Someone, therefore, would have to formulate a new form of highest wisdom, combining scientific truth with values, to integrate a mass of individuals into a people, a nation, and ultimately a unified humanity.

This line of thought began already in eighteenth century with, among others, Jean Jacques Rousseau (1712–1778), and during the French revolution, radicals such as Maximilien Robespierre (1758–1794) and Antoine-François Momoro (1756–1794) experimented with practical applications (the cult of reason and then that of the Supreme Being). The impetus was toward a religion in which the people or humanity worshipped itself, either directly or indirectly through its representative: the revolutionary movement, party, or the great leader. Robespierre famously said:

Since my schooldays I've been a fairly lukewarm Catholic: I have never been a lukewarm defender of humanity. This makes me even more attached to the moral and political ideas which I have suggested. If God did not exist we would have had to invent him.²²

Durkheim, therefore, speculated about the coming truly modern religion:

There is something eternal in religion which is destined to survive all the particular symbols in which religious thought has successively enveloped itself. . . . In a word, the old gods are growing old or already dead and others are not yet born. . . . A day will come when our societies will know again those hours of creative effervescence,

²² Quoted in Jonathan Smyth, *Robespierre and the Festival of the Supreme Being: The Search for a Republican Morality* (Manchester, UK: Manchester University Press, 2016), 15.

in the course of which new ideas arise and new formulae are found which serve for a while as a guide to humanity.²³

In an earlier text, he was more explicit:

The human person . . . is considered as sacred, in what one might call the ritual sense of the word. It has something of that transcendental majesty which the churches of all times have given to their Gods. . . .

This is why man has become a god for man, and it is why he can no longer turn to other gods without being untrue to himself. And just as each of us embodies something of humanity, so each individual mind has within it something of the divine, and thereby finds itself marked by a characteristic which renders it sacred and inviolable to others. The whole of individualism lies here. That is what makes it into the doctrine that is currently necessary.²⁴

This cult of man, of humanity, or the individual, was, Durkheim believed, “the only system of beliefs which can ensure the moral unity of the country.”²⁵

Importantly, religious studies as a school of thought was born, and has since lived, in the shadow of this dream of a radically modern worldview that will give birth to a universal moral and ritual community supplanting the traditional, dogmatic, theist religions. Sometimes, this took hard forms such as Marxist materialism, which tried to expose and eradicate supernaturalism and religion all together. Sometimes, it came, as with Durkheim, in softer forms, as the ideal of a global religion of human fraternity resting on a set of hallow values derived from the inherent dignity of the human person. In the liberal democracies of the West, the expectation is presently that religious studies will contribute to the latter vision by investigating the fabric of religious plurality with a view to mutual tolerance, and at the same

²³ Durkheim, *Elementary Forms*, 427.

²⁴ Émile Durkheim, *L'individualisme et les intellectuels*, trans. Steven Lukes in “Durkheim’s ‘Individualism and the Intellectuals,’” *Political Studies* 17, no. 1 (1969): 14–33, at 21 and 26.

²⁵ Lukes, “Durkheim’s ‘Individualism and the Intellectuals,’” 25. See also the earlier attempt at a religion of humanity formulated by Auguste Comte (1798–1857); see Andrew Wernick, *Auguste Comte and the Religion of Humanity: The Post-theistic Program of French Social Theory* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004).

time highlight the moral unity underlying the complex systems of dogma and colorful ritual traditions.²⁶

In current introductory textbooks, the future of religion is, therefore, sometimes portrayed as that of non-dogmatic spiritualities flourishing after the decline of institutionalized religion—a vision similar to that of Durkheim. It is a variation on the secularization theme, but when religion withers away, globalized spiritualities gain ground. For example, *Religions in the Modern World*, a fairly standard overview of religions, ends not with a prognosis of irrevocable secularization, but with an essay by Paul Heelas titled “The Spiritual Revolution: From ‘Religion’ to ‘Spirituality.’” In it he writes:

Looking to the future, . . . it can reasonably safely be predicted that the spiritual revolution will continue apace. . . . The declining realm of institutionalized religion as a whole will be increasingly “taken over” by theistic spiritualities of life.²⁷

The final sentence of the book is the (rhetorical?) question: “A worldwide spiritual revolution?”

Another example is *Religion and Globalization: World Religions in Historical Perspective* by John L. Esposito, Darrell Fasching, and Todd Lewis. The introductions of religions in the book are set into a framework proposing a postmodern religious attitude fitting for the globalized world. We are, they write, living in a time of radical relativism, standing on the

²⁶ However, in Western Europe, the harder form of secularism (which presently is most strikingly operative in China) is gaining ground especially in the battle against Islamist radicalization. The result is a shrinking of the scope of religious freedom. A clear signal of this change was the speech of the French president, Emmanuel Macron, on October 2, 2020, on Islamist separatism in France. Macron announced changes to the law of 1905, separating church and state (“La République en actes: discours du Président de la République sur le thème de la lutte contre les séparatismes,” www.elysee.fr/emmanuel-macron/2020/10/02/la-republique-en-actes-discours-du-president-de-la-republique-sur-le-theme-de-la-lutte-contre-les-separatismes). In his vision of a strengthened laicism, education plays a central role, including the training of imams and the formation of Muslim theologians and intellectuals. See also the move in Sweden to prohibit new religious schools, even if this comes into conflict with human rights (“Nya regler för skolor med konfessionell inriktning SOU 2019:64,” January 8, 2020, regeringen.se/remisser/2020/02/remiss-sou-201964-nya-regler-for-skolor-med-konfessionell-inriktning).

²⁷ Paul Heelas, “The Spiritual Revolution: From ‘Religion’ to ‘Spirituality,’” in *Religions in the Modern World*, ed. Linda Woodhead, Paul Fletcher, Hiroko Kawanami, and David Smith (New York: Routledge, 2002), 357–77, at 373–74.

threshold of a truly postmodern era.²⁸ In distinction to fundamentalists and modernists, the authors state, postmodernists value plurality and pass over into the faiths of others, partaking of their “spiritual wisdom,” then return enriched to their own traditions.²⁹ The hero of the “postmodern option” is Mahatma Gandhi and his “new age spiritual practice.”³⁰ *Religion and Globalization* proposes Gandhi, together with Martin Luther King and Leo Tolstoy, as

models of a postmodern spirituality and ethics that transform post-modern relativism and eclecticism into the opportunity to follow a new spiritual and ethical path—“the way of all the earth”—the sharing of spiritual insight and ethical wisdom across religions and cultures in an age of globalization.³¹

And the students are invited “to embark on a similar journey through the world’s religions today.”³²

The model might sound attractive in its openness, but a nonsystematic sharing of wisdom over religious boundaries cannot in itself guarantee the desired understanding and tolerance necessary for global peace. It presumes a more basic ethical level, which postmodern relativism denies. A global moral community requires an agreement on some fundamental ethical principles, either as rationally justified (for example, natural law) or in a contractual form. This is important, as religions otherwise might share their worst practices as human sacrifices, religious warfare, and caste systems. Usually, as for Esposito, Fasching, and Lewis, the implicit moral framework is, therefore, a variant on social liberalism based on a radical openness to the Other and an affirmation of the inherent value of the human individual.

The foremost question for religions in a post-metaphysical world is, thus, unsurprisingly, that of a global ethics, not salvation.³³ If previously religious

²⁸ John L. Esposito, Darrell Fasching, and Todd Lewis, *Religion and Globalization: World Religions in Historical Perspective* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 7.

²⁹ Esposito et al., *Religion and Globalization*, 551.

³⁰ Esposito et al., *Religion and Globalization*, 551.

³¹ Esposito et al., *Religion and Globalization*, 550.

³² Esposito et al., *Religion and Globalization*, 33.

³³ See, for example, the foundation for a global ethic (*Weltethos* [weltethos.org]), initiated by the controversial Catholic theologian Hans Küng, who also wrote the draft of the declaration “The Global Ethic,” which was ratified by the 1993 Parliament of World Religions (on the centenary of the first meeting in Chicago in 1893). Even if the declaration bases itself on a presumed ethical consensus among religions, there is

cosmologies and engaging narratives (myths) anchored the central moral values of different peoples, now religions are expected to affirm a universal ethical code of hospitality, friendship, and understanding. The implicit frame is a secular, liberal, world society and its understanding of life and morality. In this openness toward different religions, their affirmations of something transcending the natural world are domesticated by a relativism as regards spiritual truth and tempered by the expectation that a new form of religion, more adapted to the new era, will soon emerge.

The Spiritual Wisdom of Religious Studies

Even if many forms of religious studies are explicitly atheist or strictly methodologically naturalist, as have been recent strands of cognitive studies of religion,³⁴ there have been and still are traditions of supernatural wisdom, particularly within comparative religion and history of religions. The important point to understand when constructing a Catholic religious studies endeavor is that these are also thoroughly modern and, therefore, fit nicely (despite clashes) with the vision of a religion of humanity, with an added spiritual and (perhaps) ritual dimension.

Most positions within religious studies that are open to transcendence do not focus on human reason, but on pre-rational traits supposedly common to all religions. Instead of dogmas, the interest is, typically, in interior mystical experiences interpreted as evidence of a unitary spiritual substrate behind the bewildering plurality of rituals, texts, and prayers. Consequently, such forms of natural religion rely (as the empirical sciences) on human experiences and not (at least explicitly) on metaphysics. This is important to keep in mind, as it harmonizes well with the focus on the human person, the subject of experience, and the idea (of, for example, Durkheim) that there is a vital reality behind all the exuberant mythology of theism.

no indication that justice extends into a life after death. The focus is exclusively on the earth and the transformation of “individual and collective consciousness,” increasing “awareness by disciplining our minds, by meditation, by prayer, or by positive thinking,” with the goal of “socially beneficial, peace-fostering, and nature-friendly ways of life” (quote originally from parliamentofreligions.org version of Küng’s work, which is no longer easily found online, but was published as *A Global Ethic for Global Politics and Economics* in 1998 by Oxford University Press).

³⁴ For an overview of the cognitive study of religion, see Jason D. Slone and William W. McCorkle, *The Cognitive Science of Religion: A Methodological Introduction to Key Empirical Studies* (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2019).

The openness to transcendence within religious studies comes in two major versions: the esoteric and the modernist Christian.

The wisdom of the Theosophical Society (founded in 1875 in New York) and similar movements rests on the premise that all religions contain hidden grains of spiritual knowledge and that, with a comparative method (and access to unique revelations), one can recover this lost ancient wisdom. It is, therefore, no surprise that Western esotericism was a crucial inspiration for the first World Parliament of Religions in Chicago in 1893 initiated by the Swedenborgian, Charles Bonney (1831–1903). The guiding idea was that of an experiential unity behind the plurality of outer dogmatic forms, a basis that provided a bridge between the spiritualities of the East and the West, opening up for the later New Age movement. In 1895, when looking back to the World Parliament two years earlier, Bonney wrote:

In a certain high and representative sense, the Parliament of Religions was an exemplification of monism in religion. For it showed that with all the differences in the forms of religion, there is, nevertheless, something underlying them all, which constitutes an incorruptible and indestructible bond of brotherhood, which, like a golden cord, binds all the races of men in one grand fraternity of love and service.³⁵

This idea of a spiritual and ethical brotherhood resurfaces now and then within the study of mysticism in the form of “perennialism” (the positing of a type of transcultural mystical experience), for example, the notion of a “pure consciousness event formulated by Robert Forman:

A pure consciousness event may [be] defined as follows: the subject is awake, conscious, but without an object or content for consciousness—no thoughts, emotions, sensations, or awareness of any external phenomena. There is an utter blank. There is not even the thought that “I am experiencing X” or “Oh, now I am having an extraordinary experience.” Yet neither is the subject sleeping, for he may afterwards confidently report that he was not asleep. Because this state differs so markedly from ordinary experiences,

³⁵ Charles C. Bonney, “The World’s Parliament of Religions,” *The Monist* 5, no. 3 (1895): 321–44, at 323.

we may not want to call it an experience: let us call it the pure consciousness event.³⁶

Perennialist forms of religious studies are parallel with nineteenth-century reformulations of Asian religious traditions of which a prominent example is the monism of neo-advaita Vedanta. It was informed by Western idealism that, in its turn, was mediated by transcendentalism, unitarianism, and variants of esotericism.³⁷ In harmony with Durkheim's idealized sacred individual, the transcendent principle is a deified modern subject, a cosmic Self, who constructs both individuality and the world. The goal is to rest in the self-awareness of pure subjectivity.

For example, on the final pages of his textbook *Comparing Religions*, Jeffrey Kripal (1962–), professor of philosophy and religious thought at Rice University, indicates his own understanding of religion and mysticism as ultimately relying on the Self. It is a principle behind all experiences, which constructs a human person in the interaction with a human body. Kripal suggests that the brain functions like a filter channeling the absolute Self:

It seems more likely that the human personality is created from the interaction of the energy of consciousness and the biological TV that is a human being. It is as if the cosmos evolved a biological organism to broadcast and watch itself.³⁸

And, as usual, the final lines of the book point to the future spirituality:

We might imagine a future form of consciousness becoming aware not of just more and more culture and more and more cognition, but of *consciousness itself*.³⁹

³⁶ Robert K. C. Forman, "Pure Consciousness Events and Mysticism," *Sophia* 25 (1986): 49–58, at 49.

³⁷ Elizabeth De Michelis, *A History of Modern Yoga: Patañjali and Western Esotericism* (London: Continuum, 2004); Kay Koppedrauer, "Hybrid Constructions: Swami Vivekananda's Presentation of Hinduism at the World's Parliament of Religions, 1893," *Religious Studies and Theology* 23, no.1 (2004): 7–34.

³⁸ Jeffrey J. Kripal, *Comparing Religions: Coming to Terms* (Chichester, UK: Wiley Blackwell, 2014), 391.

³⁹ Kripal, *Comparing Religions*, 392.

A similar perennialist premise informed some earlier forms of comparative religion (often under the name “phenomenology of religion”) that emerged within the post-Kantian world of liberal Protestantism. The Lutheran theologian and scholar of comparative religion Rudolf Otto (1869–1937) famously formulated such a unitary principle in his book *The Idea of the Holy*, published in 1917.⁴⁰ According to his friend Nathan Söderblom (1866–1931), the archbishop of the Lutheran state church of Sweden and historian of religions, Otto made the “Holy” primary (or the “Numinous” as he named it—an impersonal divine power), and the idea of a personal god secondary. According to Otto, the human response in relation to this completely different reality is awe: fear (“daemonic dread”) mingled with fascination. Such transformative experiences constitute the origin of religion and are present in all religions, especially in their mystical traditions, forming a fundamental revelation underlying all dogmas.

Although Otto acknowledges Christian ideas about God, and at different places inserts passages extolling the superior nature of Christianity, the focus is on human emotional reactions; and the characterization of the “Divine” does not proceed much beyond that of an irrational power. In an earlier book, where he defends religious belief against naturalism, Otto writes:

It is only in exaltation, in quiet enthusiasm, that religious feelings can come to life and become pervasive, and religious truth can only become a possession available for everyday use in proportion as it is possible to make this non-secular and exalted state of mind permanent.⁴¹

Knowledge of God

My reason for bringing up different wisdom discourses that have influenced religious studies—the secular humanist, esoteric, and Christian modernist—was to show that Aquinas’s understanding of truth as naturally involving teaching (with its affirmations and denials) and an ordering of human life also applies to religious studies. The principal challenge for

⁴⁰ Rudolf Otto, *The Idea of the Holy: An Inquiry into the Non-rational Factor in the Idea of the Divine and its Relation to the Rational*, trans. John W. Harvey (London: Oxford University Press, 1924 [originally 1917]).

⁴¹ Rudolf Otto, *Naturalism and Religion*, trans. J. Arthur Thomson (London: Williams & Norgate, 1907 [originally 1904]), 13.

a Catholic religious studies is, therefore, not to reconcile a value-neutral scientific study with a normative theological one, but to take a stand vis-à-vis the rejection of metaphysics and the ensuing relativism as regards knowledge of the divine and fundamental moral principles. In its different forms (ontological or methodological), naturalism gives rise to particular modern forms of wisdom: sometimes materialist, sometimes spiritual, but with common characteristics. This means that a Catholic religious studies cannot simply import theories and methods from its secular analogue in order to complement Catholic theology in its systematization and interpretation of divine revelation.

Thomas Aquinas acknowledged that “some truths about God exceed all the ability of the human reason,” but he maintained, “there are some truths which the natural reason also is able to reach.”⁴² This provides a foundation for rational critique of belief and puts a limit on the sharing between religions, as it judges some ideas of the divine to be false, and therefore in need of correction. Such a natural knowledge of God also functions as a safeguard against Christian theology retreating under pressure from the natural sciences and technology into an understanding of God as a completely mysterious, irrational power.

Moreover, instead of the implicit liberal ethics presumed by most versions of religious studies, Aquinas argues (though not in *SCG*) that there are fundamental moral principles knowable by human reason, that is, natural law. This ought to be then, if we follow Aquinas, the ethical foundation for a conversation about and between religions.⁴³

The disturbing alternative is otherwise that, after having acknowledged the inevitable value-oriented nature of religious studies, one must admit there is no rational way of knowing which these values should be. They are then simply the outcome of choice (and ultimately rest on power and preferences). An example of such a position is the following defense of “critical religion” by Warren Goldstein in a response to the critique by Russel McCutcheon.⁴⁴

To criticize, to critique, is to hold humans and their actions to a higher set of ideals, which are ultimately based on values (whatever they may be), values of truth, equality, freedom, democracy, and justice, among others. These values are historically situated and

⁴² *SCG* I, ch. 3.

⁴³ See instead *ST* I–II, q. 91, a. 2.

⁴⁴ Russell T. McCutcheon, *Fabricating Religion: Fanfare for the Common E.G.* (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2018), ch. 6.

contingent; they therefore are contested and subject to revision, but understandings of them evolve as societies develop, thus they are potentially emancipatory.⁴⁵

If all values are contingent, then so is also emancipation, which is here put forward as a transhistorical ideal, fulfilling much the same function of ultimate goal as salvation in Christian theology. Instead, a Thomist position insists that the good, as a transcendental, is coextensive with being. The reach of our knowledge, therefore, gives rise to variants of wisdom, because “no one tends with desire and zeal toward something that is not already known to him.”⁴⁶ If we either deny the existence of the supernatural or claim that it is completely beyond the reach of human reason, then, as a matter of course, individuals and society will order their lives toward what we actually know. This means that a Catholic religious studies will be animated by a quite different wisdom compared with secular forms of religious studies, even if it does not use revelation as a primary source for its arguments.

Nevertheless, one could claim that this optimism regarding human rationality (in natural theology and natural law) applies only to a Thomist position and not to a Catholic one as such. In response, we must acknowledge that the Catholic Church has affirmed at its highest dogmatic level the possibility of rational knowledge of God. The First Vatican Council (1868–1870) declared:

The same holy mother church holds and teaches that God, the source and end of all things, can be known with certainty from the consideration of created things, by the natural power of human reason: *ever since the creation of the world, his invisible nature has been clearly perceived in the things that have been made* (Rom 1:20).⁴⁷

This 1994 *Catechism of the Catholic Church* appeals to this statement by Vatican I shortly after teaching:

⁴⁵ Warren Goldstein, “What Makes Critical Religion Critical? A Response to Russell McCutcheon Critical Research on Religion,” *Critical Research on Religion* 8, no. 1 (2020): 73–86, at 84.

⁴⁶ SCG I, ch. 5, no. 2.

⁴⁷ First Vatican Council, Dogmatic Constitution on the Catholic Faith, *De Filius*, ch. 2, in *Decrees of the Ecumenical Councils*, ed. Norman Tanner, vol. 2, *From Trent to Vatican II* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 1990), 804–11.

The world, and man, attest that they contain within themselves neither their first principle nor their final end, but rather that they participate in Being itself, which alone is without origin or end. Thus, in different ways, man can come to know that there exists a reality which is the first cause and final end of all things, a reality “that everyone calls God.”⁴⁸

In probing the idea of a Catholic religious studies, we therefore cannot reject the so-called “preambles of faith” without having to question also the teaching authority of the Church.⁴⁹

The Non-Contradiction of Truth

Even if a Catholic study of religions, as religious studies in general, does not directly argue from a divine revelation of truths unavailable to unaided human reason, it cannot contradict those proposed as dogma by the Church and stay Catholic in a strong sense. In *SCG* I, ch. 7, Aquinas writes:

Since, therefore, only the false is opposed to the true, as is clearly evident from an examination of their definitions, it is impossible that the truth of faith should be opposed to those principles that the human reason knows naturally.

In other words, what is true in a study of religions cannot be false in dogmatic theology, and vice versa; either the first or the second must change. That theological opinions change, for example, in a theology of religions, is no principal problem—for example, by adjusting to the expanding knowledge of the world’s religions both in history and in the contemporary world. However, what the Catholic Church has declared solemnly as binding on the conscience of Catholics cannot be contradicted without undermining the Catholicity of that form of religious studies.

The Catholic ideal of a harmonious unity between natural and revealed knowledge, between nature and grace, is, of course, not a goal toward which a secular study of religion strives—as it would make it confessional

⁴⁸ *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1994), §34 (the concluding formula quoted from *ST* I, q. 2, a. 3).

⁴⁹ For a defense of the *praeambula fidei*, see Ralph McInerny, *Praeambula Fidei: Thomism and the God of the Philosophers* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2006).

and blunt its critical edge—while, on the other hand, this ideal provides a Catholic religious studies with its particular character and mission.

However, even a document as *Theology Today: Perspectives, Principles and Criteria*, released in 2011 by the papal International Theological Commission, does not include a consideration of the possibility of a Catholic religious studies. Instead, it portrays religious studies as essentially an outside perspective:

Religious sciences/studies deal with texts, institutions and phenomena of the Christian tradition, but by the nature of their methodological principles they do so from outside, regardless of the question as to the truth of what they study; for them, the Church and its faith are simply objects for research like other objects.⁵⁰

Indeed, even if the International Theological Commission acknowledges that religious studies are presently “integrated into the fabric of theological methods,” it states that:

There remains, however, an essential difference between theology and religious sciences/studies: theology has the truth of God as its subject and reflects on its subject with faith and in the light of God, while religious sciences/studies have religious phenomena as their subject and approach them with cultural interests, methodologically prescinding from the truth of the Christian faith.⁵¹

However, to integrate approaches that consider faith as “simply objects for research” into Catholic theology undermines the wisdom that is essential to theology and emphasized in *Theology Today*. It is this which makes a Catholic religious studies necessary, even if, from the perspective of the International Theological Commission, it might sound like a contradiction in terms. On the other hand, in the following paragraph, the commission sharply criticizes the rejection of theology from the sciences, and it reserves for theology the role of liberating the sciences from “anti-theological elements acquired under the influence of rationalism.” However, upholding at the same time that rationalism is part of the basic program of religious studies, and affirming that, to a large extent, it has been integrated

⁵⁰ International Theological Commission, *Theology Today: Perspectives, Principles and Criteria* (2011), §83.

⁵¹ International Theological Commission, *Theology Today*, §83.

into the work of theology, such a liberation must also be a task within theology itself. And a variant of religious studies inspired by Aquinas's work is precisely a discipline who has rejected rationalism and its hard limitation of rationality.

Conclusion

When looking at religious studies from the perspective of wisdom, inspired by Thomas Aquinas's presentation of the office of the wise man, the particular nature of a Catholic religious studies becomes both clearer and more difficult.

Two very distinct types of wisdom arise from the difference between, on the one hand, a modernist epistemology, dominant in religious studies, in which the divine is considered beyond the grasp of human rationality (or glimpsed through mystical experiences as an irrational force or pure subjectivity), and on the other hand, the Catholic insistence on a set of truths available to human reason in relation to the divinity. The first is oriented toward human society (national and global) as its highest good, while the second directs both studies and society toward God, thereby opening them up for divinization as an integral aspect of scholarship.

Even the most neutral, objective, and secular of contemporary religious studies is, then, by necessity, a form of "absolute" wisdom, despite its goal being contingent, fluid, and ever changing. The true and the good are intertwined concerns that cannot be separated easily, since the limits of reason affirm or deny rationality to religious beliefs and actions, something which has important consequences for the ordering of piety and society.

By both upholding the principle of non-contradiction (unity of knowledge) and deferring from contradicting the truths of Christian revelation, a Catholic religious studies strives toward harmony not only with natural theology but also with Church teachings. This makes necessary a conversation with various theological disciplines, but also with relevant disciplines within the humanities and social sciences. A tall order by any means.

Religious studies in its Catholic version is, however, not a subspecies of the theology of religions, at least not in a simple way, even if there are overlapping concerns. A Catholic study of religion has to investigate also the long history of religious beliefs and practices (both good and evil), their permutations in relation to modernity, and the present situation of religion and globalization, and probe the deeper basis for rituals and myths, both by empirical research and by the construction of falsifiable theories. One

cannot, therefore, deduce the results of Catholic religious studies from the principles of dogmatic theology.

A Catholic religious studies is theological in the sense of being part of a larger theological venture; but its focus on the rich world of religions and spiritualities, and the task of knowing this in detail and with adequate theoretical depth, provides it with a distinct character. Similarly, an empirical psychology that acknowledges the existence of the soul and the working of divine grace fulfills a unique role vis-à-vis theological anthropology.

Thomas Aquinas's integration of Aristotelean philosophy and science into his theological system can be an inspiration for the development of a genuinely Catholic religious studies. But it has to struggle with being true, at the same time, to the natural knowledge of the divine, to the task of painstaking research into the history and nature of religions, and to the divine revelation of which the Catholic Church is the caretaker.

With the clarification of what a truly Catholic religious studies would be like comes also an understanding of the difficulty involved in its realization. In the high Middle Ages, when Aquinas wrote the *Summa contra gentiles*, the overarching wisdom of society was Christian, and thereby supernaturally oriented. The university, even if at times rocked by theological disputes, was an institution within this wider social reality. Today, on the other hand, religious studies is set within the context of multireligious secular(izing) societies and globalization. The guiding (liberal or totalitarian) wisdom traditions of this world build on the relativization of religious truth claims. This transforms religions into lifestyle choices subordinated to the goal of social coherence and unity, of brotherhood and fraternity, resting on a common moral platform necessary for peaceful coexistence—or national strength.

Due to its fundamental principles, a Catholic religious studies inevitably disturbs such a vision exalting solidarity and social coherence as “absolute.” Its present countercultural nature, therefore, makes it a rare phenomenon, as also Catholic universities to a large degree have embraced a post-metaphysical foundation for the study of religions. Even when universities specialize in Catholic theology, the resources and commitment necessary for a comparative and theoretically strong discipline of religious studies (with its historical, philological, and cultural studies components) make the theology endeavor mostly a low priority in comparison with interreligious studies and its application in interreligious dialogue.

Religious studies focuses on religion itself (not only on interactions between religious traditions) and sees critique as an integral part of scholarship. For example, it lifts developments as the parallel phenomena of

increasing de-Christianization and the growth of alternative spiritualities in Western societies, including the overwhelming presence of the latter in popular culture. It discusses religious radicalization and terrorism, besides social integration. In this way, it is as disruptive as constructive. The twofold wisdom of a teacher includes, after all, both affirmation and denial, animated as much by love of truth as by “hatred” of falsehood and lies. And it is in this intersection between the contemplative concern of absolute wisdom and the practical wisdom of ordering human society and religion that the work of religious studies has to be carried out. N·V