

*Why Study Religion?* (Oxford University Press, 2021) is a metadisciplinary inquiry into the academic study of religion that calls for a course correction in the field. The book is motivated by three questions: Can the academic study of religion be justified? Should it be included in the curricula of higher education? Do good reasons exist that could motivate scholars to take up the study of religion as a profession? I pose these questions on the view that scholarship in religion, especially work in theory and method, is preoccupied with matters of methodological procedure and thus inarticulate about the goals that can justify the study of religion and motivate scholarship in the field. Tackling my motivating questions, I argue, is hampered by an episteme in Religious Studies that is underwritten by a Weberian commitment to value-neutrality along with principled worries about self-justification about being one's own judge and jury. This episteme instantiates an "ascetic ideal"—a form of power/knowledge that imposes a wall of silence about values that can animate and guide the study of religion—what I call a "hermeneutics of abstinence." Theoretical work in Religious Studies aims to hammer out the proper *means* of research without sufficient reference to its proper *ends*. For that reason, the field suffers from a crisis of rationale. I also identify where, despite this ideal, matters of value and commitment nonetheless find expression in theory and method. This cryptonormativity is a regular partner of the ascetic ideal, and its repressed presence ensures the quixotic if not internally contradictory character of contemporary theory and method in the guild.

The body of the book substantiates these claims through a critical examination of six methodological paradigms in the field. I cast those programs as ideal types and examine their principal architects. They are: the *Interpretive-Comparative Method* (Jonathan Z. Smith), the *Scientific-Explanatory Method* (Donald Wiebe), the *Theological-Anthropological Method* (Paul Tillich), the *Materialist-Phenomenological Method* (Manuel A. Vásquez), the *Genealogical-Ideological Method* (Russell T. McCutcheon, Timothy Fitzgerald, Saba Mahmood), and the *Philosophical-Evaluative Method* (Stephen Bush and Kevin Schilbrack). I devote a chapter to each of these methodologies and their theorists by isolating and comparing their defining features, foils, and core claims. I also identify their fundamental weaknesses—weaknesses that are a function of the ascetic ideal that I describe above. These methods repeat and reinforce the guild's wall of silence or enable us to begin reshaping its imperatives by offering some very preliminary steps toward an argument that can justify the academic study of religion.

As an alternative to this preoccupation with matters of method, I offer a way of thinking teleologically about studying religion, focusing on the ends rather than the means of humanistic scholarship. I call my teleological proposal *Critical Humanism*, and it lies at the heart of what I call the ethics of religious studies. On my account, Critical Humanism offers a distinctive way of knowing that is held together by four values: post-critical reasoning, social criticism, cross-cultural fluency, and environmental responsibility. It involves habits and pleasures of mind that go beyond conforming to methodological protocols by trying to expand the moral imagination. With those values in hand, scholars of religion can relax their commitment to matters of methodological procedure, justify their work, and avow the desirability of studying religion.