

Race and the Philosophy of Religion

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*Forthcoming in Philosophy of Religion after “Religion,” edited by Richard Amesbury and
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The concept of religion is now being historicized and contextualized. The concept of race was historicized and contextualized a generation earlier. Recent scholarship has argued that the genealogies of religion and race are linked, that they emerged at the same historical moments in the same places due to some of the same forces. If this is the case, then the philosophy of religion is always the philosophy of religion and race. Ignoring discussions of race in the philosophy of religion distorts the philosophy of religion as much as ignoring, say, religious practice in favor of an exclusive focus on religious belief.

What is the philosophy of religion? It is often defined by a set of questions: Does God exist? What is evil? Is faith in God justified? Can we be good without God? But philosophy of religion could also be understood as a tradition of inquiry, defined by certain conversations, institutions, values, and authoritative texts. While much of a tradition of inquiry does involve grappling with certain questions, the two perspectives on the philosophy of religion are important to keep distinct. Exploring the entangled genealogies of religion and race may add qualifying clauses to those questions that make up the first definition of the philosophy of religion, transforming philosophy into intellectual history. Instead of asking, what is evil?, it may now be necessary to ask, what is evil for white European Christians? Or, what is evil for African American women who are spiritual but not religious? The philosophy of religion would then

cease to be an exchange of arguments and instead track the arguments of others, in a particular place, at a particular time.

If the philosophy of religion is considered in the second way, as a tradition of inquiry, the entangled genealogies of religion and race open new sorts of questions; philosophy is not reduced to intellectual history. As a tradition of inquiry, the philosophy of religion is already understood to be a predominantly white, European and American enterprise. Its authoritative texts – Plato, Voltaire, Hume, Nietzsche, Plantinga – were written by white men, it flourishes in predominantly white institutions, and it is informed by concerns of its predominantly white practitioners. The qualification – *for white men* – is built into the definition of the tradition. So is Christianity, or something like it: the tradition of inquiry is implicitly informed by specifically Christian concerns, even when Plato is being read in a secular classroom. That is the lesson taught by genealogies of the category of religion.

Whiteness and Christianity do not only make the philosophy of religion provincial. They also imply that the enterprise itself is implicated in naturalizing whiteness and Christianity, and these concepts are implicated in naturalizing the enterprise of philosophy of religion. In light of the imperial legacy of Christianity and the racist legacy of whiteness, the philosophy of religion appears deeply political. As a tradition of inquiry, the values, institutions, authorities, and conversations that constitute this tradition have the potential to perpetuate white supremacy and to sanctify imperial hegemony. Indeed, this is the default effect of participation in the tradition. Very careful, strategic maneuvering within the tradition is necessary to have any other effect. To get such strategic maneuvering right, confronting either the legacy of white supremacy or the legacy of Christian imperialism is not enough. They must be deliberately confronted together.

Before such a confrontation – really a redemption of the philosophy of religion – is possible, it is necessary to fully and clearly understand how religion and race are entangled. In the pages that follow, I will examine how they are entangled historically, then conceptually. Next, I will consider two figures prominent in recent philosophy of religion, Jacques Derrida and Giorgio Agamben, attending to how religion and race are entwined in their work. Then I will consider some worries about Derrida and Agamben’s projects based on recent cultural and economic changes. Finally, I will take Sylvia Wynter as offering an example of an approach to the philosophy of religion that takes race seriously but also takes account of late capitalism. Her work, I suggest, points to new directions this tradition of inquiry may take in the future.

“Race” and “Religion”

Recent efforts to denaturalize the concept “religion” have suggested that this concept emerges only with the confrontation of an “other.” It is usually implied that this “other” is another culture, but in fact this “other” could also be understood as another race. While an earlier generation of critics of religion, led by Wilfred Cantwell Smith, located the concept’s emergence in rifts between Catholics and Protestants in Europe, a more recent generation of scholars has pointed to evidence suggesting that it was the surprise of encountering those with very dramatically views of God that gave rise to the concept.¹ There is no consensus, however, among these more recent scholars about which particular foreign encounter consolidated the concept.

¹ Wilfred Cantwell Smith, *The Meaning and End of Religion: A New Approach to the Religious Traditions of Mankind* (New York: Macmillan, 1963). For the influential accounts of religion emerging from within Christianity, see Jonathan Z Smith, “Religion, Religions, Religious,” in Mark C. Taylor (ed.), *Critical Terms in Religious Studies* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 269-284; Talal Asad, *Genealogies of Religion: Discipline and Reasons of Power in Christianity and Islam* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993).

Three candidates have been proposed: the encounter between Judaism and Christianity in late antiquity, sixteenth century encounters with indigenous communities in the Americas, and nineteenth century colonial encounters.

According to Daniel Boyarin, Jewishness in the ancient world was an ethnic identity.² While projecting either race or ethnicity onto the ancient world brings with it risks, it also brings with it rewards, adding important dimensions to how we view race.³ You could be a Greek or you could be a Jew, not both. Judaism only became a religion after Christianity had established itself. Christianity created “religion” as a concept where there was no religion before. The components of religion existed, of course, but they only congealed into the category “religion” with Christianity. Previously, religious beliefs and practices were simply characteristics of an ethnic group, along with laws and land. Christianity extracted religious beliefs and practices from this broader mix of beliefs and practices, placing them in the category “religion” that existed independent of ethnic identity: one could have both an ethnic identity and a religious identity – a Greek Christian or a Jewish Christian, for example. Then, in the third century, Jews also adopted the category of religion for their own identity, following the Christian example and identifying specific religious beliefs and practices that constituted Judaism separate from ethnic identity. Boyarin and other scholars have tracked the discourses of heresy that helped to consolidate these religious identities over and above ethnic identities as the conceptual space for “Jewish Christians” slipped away. In this genealogy of “religion,” religion supersedes race,

² Daniel Boyarin, “Semantic Differences; or, “Judaism”/”Christianity” in *The Ways that Never Parted*, Adam H. Becker and Annette Yoshiko Reed, eds. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2007), 65-85; Idem, *Border Lines: The Partition of Judaeo-Christianity* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004).

³ This point is made persuasively in Denise Buell’s introduction to her *Why This New Race: Ethnic Reasoning in Early Christianity* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005).

offering a new way to identify what may be considered the most important aspect of human identity. The “Jewish Christian” example illustrates the contest over whether race and religion operate in the same domain or separate domains – in other words, whether religion is really separable from race. It is a contingent fact of history that this separation succeeded and that no “Jewish Christians” remain.

Boyarin’s discovery of the origins of “religion” in late antiquity is unusual; more often, the moment of origin is an encounter with a previously unknown community.⁴ Before this encounter, there was a continuum of difference between us, those a little different than us, those a bit more different from us, and those quite a bit different from us. Crossing the Atlantic introduced radical discontinuity. Native Americans were extraordinarily different in many ways than Europeans. Making sense of this difference required the invention of new ways of understanding self and other, and it resulted in two: race and religion. Both concepts were invented on both sides of the encounter, by Europeans and by Native Americans, at the same time. Jared Hickman makes this point compellingly, finding it allegorized in the encounter between Robinson Crusoe and Friday in Daniel Defoe’s novel. When he was home, Crusoe never had to defend his religious beliefs and practices or even to conceive of them as a religion. On an island, confronted with drastic difference represented by the indigenous Friday, Crusoe realizes that what he has is a religion and that he must be able to articulate it as such. As a religion, Crusoe can share his beliefs and practices, argue about them, and refine them. As Hickman concludes, “Crusoe’s previously unself-conscious Christianity thus becomes a self-conscious philosophy of religion in which Christianity is, to some extent, a subordinate point of

⁴ See especially Jonathan Z. Smith, “Religion, Religions, Religious” and Jared Hickman, “Globalization and the Gods, or the Political Theology of ‘Race’,” *Early American Literature* 45:1 (2010), 145-182.

reference.”⁵ Now that religion exists, Crusoe can see Christianity as one token of this type – and so engage in second-order inquiry, in the philosophy of religion. At the same time, Crusoe understands his racial distinctiveness: race and philosophy of religion arrive together. Hickman also shows how the same transformation is happening on the indigenous side of the encounter, with Native American groups transforming their mythologies to include different peoples with distinctive, disconnected ancestors.

Other scholars locate the invention of religion not in the European encounter with radical difference but in the European conquest and management of radical difference – that is, in colonialism.⁶ Before colonialism, in the soon-to-be-colonized context religious practices and beliefs ran together in a cultural stew, together with all other cultural practices and beliefs. Creating a category of religion and removing a ladleful of cultural stew to be placed under this heading had several advantages for colonial administrators. Religion could become an apolitical, so unthreatening, category. Religious experts could be selected so as to leverage the persuasive force of religious idioms for the interests of the colonizers. Fractures could be named and managed within a previously relatively unified community by naming sects. Christian missionaries could present a clear alternative to what was now classed as native religion. That native religion could be molded into the safe, manageable form of Protestantism (or Catholicism) even if it would never achieve Christian greatness – adjudicated by a discourse of comparative theology or philosophy of religion.⁷ All aspects of this process of religion-making essentially

⁵ Hickman, “Globalization and the Gods,” 155

⁶ For example, David Chidester, *Savage Systems: Colonialism and Comparative Religion in Southern Africa* (Charlottesville, VA: University Press of Virginia, 1996); Richard King, *Orientalism and Religion: Postcolonial Theory, India, and “the Mystical East”* (London: Routledge, 1999).

⁷ See Tomoko Masuzawa, *The Invention of World Religions, Or, How European Universalism Was Preserved in the Language of Pluralism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005).

depend on another element of colonial logic: a racial distinction between the colonizer and the colonized.

The concept of religion may come about through encounters with racial others, but the concept of race also leaned heavily on religion to be seen as plausible and, in some cases, as sacred. The concept of race, like the concept of religion, has a specific history and gained legitimacy for specific reasons. In the most famous case, of North America, it has been thoroughly demonstrated that the transformation of “black” from a color to a subordinate class of people was aided by Christian ideas. For example, the Biblical story of Noah’s curse of Canaan was interpreted in racial terms. Ham, who was Noah’s son and Canaan’s father, peered at the drunk Noah’s naked body. In response, Noah decreed that Canaan would be a “servant of servants” (the reason that the curse, as depicted in Genesis, skips a generation remains obscure). Ham was seen as Black, the ancestor of present-day Blacks, so they were justly condemned to servitude – according to defenders of slavery.⁸ This is but one of many examples in which religious texts, images, and authorities were invoked to naturalize racial categories: Colin Kidd goes for as to describe race as “*primarily* a theological problem.”⁹

Race and religion are connected historically, but they are also connected conceptually.¹⁰ In other words, independent of their origins and development, the concepts of religion and race that we have now, that circulate in the contemporary social imagination, have deep affinities with each other. This is not obvious. Race would seem to name groups of people based on external

⁸ Stephen R. Haynes, *Noah’s Curse: The Biblical Justification of American Slavery* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007) and, more generally, Colin Kidd, *The Forging of Races: Race and Scripture in the Protestant Atlantic World, 1600-2000* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006).

⁹ Kidd, *Forging of Races*, 25, italics in original.

¹⁰ I develop this point more fully in Vincent Lloyd, “Race and Religion,” *Critical Research on Religion* 1:1 (2013): 80-86.

characteristics, such as skin color, while religion would seem to refer to an internal disposition – to the heart rather than to the skin. Recent scholarship has challenged both of these approaches, with the result that race and religion no longer seem so distinct. If race was once thought a feature of biology, then thought a harmful fiction to be eliminated, now race is seen as a social construction with very real effects. Those effects include not only stigma and marginalization but also senses of belonging, shared values, and distinctive practices. In other words, rather than approaching race as a claim about individuals that may be proven or disproven, it is more helpful to examine what race does in the world. People act as if there is race and that is what matters, not whether they are right or wrong. Similarly, if religion was once thought a feature of the heart or soul - its attunement to the divine, for instance – or to be a certain set of beliefs, now the practical, material, and communal dimensions of religion are seen as crucial as well.

When race and religion are cut loose from their anchors in biology and God, respectively, they begin to look quite similar. Both involve sets of practices, values, and beliefs shared by a community and that help define a community in opposition to other communities. Both can overdetermine how minority communities are viewed, perpetuating the domination of those wielding power. Blacks and Muslims, in the contemporary Western context, are obvious examples, and examples that illustrate the fuzzy boundaries between these two categories when we consider darker-skinned French Muslims and darker-skinned Muslims in Israel. Both religion and race are also lived realities, to some extent imposed on the individual and to some extent resisted or creatively appropriated by the individual who is understood to be of a certain race or of a certain religion. There are clearly significant differences between religion and race that remain - religion usually involves formalized authorities and institutions more often than race, for example – but the similarities of form remain striking.

Furthermore, the similarities go beyond isomorphism. Race and religion both shape a world: how we see ourselves, others, and everything around us. They are not just one more aspect of our complex identities; they can each be seen as the definitive aspect of our subjectivity. This is obvious in the case of religion, as there are robust second-order discourses, theologies, that allow us to describe ourselves and our worlds in religious terms. That this is also the case for race has only recently become clear, at least in the scholarly literature. It is easiest to see in minority communities. Continually derogatory treatment clearly distorts an individual's self-image and perceptive capacity. This derogatory treatment varies depending on the specific racial dynamics at play, but it also results in various sorts of responses. Racial communities manage to survive sustained derogation through a variety of techniques which allow for resilience in the face of seemingly unbearable circumstances. These techniques involve modes of understanding self and world that counter the distortions inflicted by the racial majority. But it is not only racial minorities that are deeply shaped by race. Majority races – paradigmatically, whites –also suffer from distorted senses of self and perceptions of the world because of race. As Martin Luther King, Jr., put it, “hate distorts the personality of the hater”; James Baldwin adds, “[T]he white man is himself in sore need of new standards, which will release him from his confusion and place him once again in fruitful communion with the depths of his own being.”¹¹ Continually treating a class of humans as less than human inevitably disfigures the humanity of the racist herself. Racists in this sense are determined not so much by specific acts but rather by the racist (e.g., white) culture they participate in, a culture that includes not only the subordination of other races but also its own practices, values, and institutions. Race and religion

¹¹ Martin Luther King, Jr., *The Papers of Martin Luther King, Jr.*, Vol. 4 (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), 321; James Baldwin, *The Price of the Ticket: Collected Nonfiction, 1948-1985* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1985), 375.

can both be viewed as constitutive of our subjectivity, a conclusion which suggests but does not explain a strong relationship between the two.

In sum, recent scholarship has shown not only that religion and race are concepts that were adopted at specific points in time, due to various contingent factors, but also that the genealogies of these two concepts are intertwined. This is a stronger claim than that religion and race are co-constituted, which would suggest only a close relationship at various points in time.¹² To study one without the other, or, more specifically, to participate in a tradition of reflection on one but not the other therefore naturalizes both. Even beneath the concepts, in the sets of practices that constitute both, there are deep resonances that confirm the need to study both together – that confirm the need for the philosophy of religion to take race seriously. In the sections to follow, I will track how two prominent figures in the philosophy of religion succeed in treating religion and race similarly, but I will also show how they do not fully grapple with the shared genealogies of these concepts limned above.

Example I: Jacques Derrida

In his later years, Jacques Derrida was fond of calling attention to his identity as an Algerian Jew, a label that blends the racial and the religious.¹³ In the French context of his youth,

¹² Henry Goldschmidt, “Introduction: Race, Nation, and Religion” in *Race, Nation, and Religion in the Americas*, eds. Henry Goldschmidt and Elizabeth McAlister (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 3-31; See also Hickman’s criticism of Goldschmidt in “Globalization and the Gods,” 161.

¹³ For discussion of Derrida’s reflections on race, see for example Christopher Wise, *Derrida, Africa, and the Middle East* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009); Grant Farred, “‘Nostalgeria’: Derrida, Before and After Fanon,” *South Atlantic Quarterly* 112:1 (2013), 145-162; Pal Ahluwalia, “Origins and Displacement: Working Through Derrida’s African Connections,” *Social Identities* 13:3 (2007): 325-336; Agnes Czajka and Bora Isyar (eds.), *Europe after Derrida: Crisis and Potentiality* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2014).

to be Algerian was to be the quintessential racial other and to be Jewish was to be the quintessential religious other. Derrida explicitly racializes his Algerianness, describing himself as “a little black and very Arab Jew.”¹⁴ Indeed, this description comes as Derrida recounts his expulsion from school, under the Vichy regime in 1942. He does not just happen to be a racial minority; he experiences the pinnacle of racial violence in Europe, the Nazi persecution of the Jews. Derrida’s claim to black, Arab, and Jewish identity also comes within his “Circumfession,” a text offering a Jewish inflection on Augustine’s *Confessions*. Derrida’s text takes a religious form, and it also discusses religious topics. This text is the first place where Derrida extensively discusses his own identity, and Derrida comes out, as it were, as both a racial and a religious minority at the same time, in the same place. He does so in a text composed as a challenge: he was to write something that could not be fit into a systematic exposition of Derrida’s thought. Derrida’s *oeuvre* was expansive; to meet the challenge, Derrida turned to himself, to his own life. Race and religion are presented as aspects of that life; as such, they also do not fit with the systematized Derrida. Indeed, they are not just components of that life. Derrida’s choice of Augustine as his model puts race and religion at the center of the text and of his life. Augustine was not only religious but also non-European, in fact also Algerian.

One of Derrida’s primary philosophical arguments is that the attempt to distinguish form and content is always futile, a special case of his central philosophical argument, that every attempt to make rigorous distinctions or systems falls short, leaving an excess that threatens to undermine the distinction or system entirely. In “Circumfession” there is yet another level of recursion. The purpose of the text is to demonstrate that Derrida’s philosophical point holds for

¹⁴ Geoffrey Bennington and Jacques Derrida, *Jacques Derrida* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993), 58.

his own philosophy: that any attempt to systematize it falls short. In this light, Derrida is claiming that race and religion have a particularly privileged function in marking that which exceeds system. Derrida provides many names for this role of destabilizing force; among the most famous are supplement and differance. When this role is named by words we use in ordinary language, Derrida is careful to mark the two distinct senses in which they might be used, the ordinary sense and the destabilizing sense: justice beyond justice, the gift beyond the gift, and so on. Such terms both refer to something within a system (i.e., ordinary language) but also point beyond it. This, then, is how we should understand Derrida's references to race and religion, in "Circumfession" and elsewhere. By religion, he does not only mean a religious community, tradition, or belief, but also that which cannot fit in the well-ordered, essentially secular world – that which marks the precariousness of the secular world and which threatens to scramble its well-ordered categories. By race, Derrida does not only mean skin color or marginalized community, but also that which cannot fit in the well-ordered, essentially white world, marking the precariousness of whiteness and the possibility of a non-white future. While both race and religion threaten "the system," as it might loosely be called, each term highlights a different aspect of "the system": its whiteness or its secularism. Understood in this way, with race and religion playing the same role in Derrida's critical project, we are implicitly invited to reflect on the ways in which whiteness and secularism are entwined, and the ways race and religion are entwined.

Before Derrida turned to religion, and before he reflected on his own "black" identity, he already hinted at the entanglement of race and religion that he would later more fully explore. In his 1971 article "White Mythology: Metaphor in the Text of Philosophy," philosophy is "the system" that imagines itself to be well-ordered and rational and mythology is the loose thread on

which Derrida pulls to unravel the system.¹⁵ “What is metaphysics? A white mythology which assembles and reflects Western culture: the white man takes his own mythology (that is, Indo-European mythology), his *logos* – that is, the *mythos* of his idiom, for the universal form of that which it is still his inescapable desire to call Reason.”¹⁶ At the end of the day, all philosophy is mythology: narrative, flexible, unsystematic, fictional, and reflecting the interests of those who circulate it, specifically, whites. But this is not just any story, it is *mythology*, a fundamentally religious story – concealed as its opposite, as entirely secular, rational, as *philosophy*. In this way, it is not just that race and religion (as two of Derrida’s loose threads) can disturb “the system,” but that race and religion can secure “the system,” making what is a historically and geographically specific way of understanding the world seem natural, timeless, and universal: colorblind philosophy is actually white mythology. Derrida famously embraces this sort of equivocal significance of his key concepts, pointing to the model of the *pharmakon*, the Greek term both for a poison and for a cure.¹⁷

Given this equivocation, so fundamental to Derrida’s critical project, it is tempting to suggest that Derrida actually has nothing at all substantial to say about race and religion as lived experiences or social practices; he is, rather, concerned with them as concepts, part of the constellation of concepts that make up the ruling ideas of our day. The political implications of his project, on this reading, would be a challenge to the powers that be through a challenge to the purported stability of their ideas – their ideas that are sold to us as inevitable but which Derrida shows are deeply precarious. Yet Derrida also intervenes on concrete social issues involving

¹⁵ Barnor Hesse very productively develops this point in his “Racialized Modernity: An Analytics of White Mythologies,” *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 30:4 (2007): 643-663.

¹⁶ Jacques Derrida, “White Mythology,” *New Literary History* 6:1 (1974), 11.

¹⁷ Jacques Derrida, “Plato’s Pharmacy” in *Dissemination*, trans. Barbara Johnson (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981), 61-119.

racism in a way that takes sides rather than confines itself to the indirect political work of destabilizing ideas. He supported the anti-apartheid struggle, mobilizing fellow intellectuals in support of Nelson Mandela through conferences and publications. In an essay on Mandela, Derrida explores how Mandela was loyal to the law and how Mandela demonstrated that whites themselves, despite their claims to lawfulness, were the ones unfaithful to the law.¹⁸ Here, as in Derrida's writing that more directly focused on the topic of law, what is commended is a higher law, a law beyond the law of the land, and Derrida holds up moments when we catch a glimpse of such a law – such as when Mandela at his own trial exposes the limits of the law.¹⁹ In a sense, Derrida embraces a natural law theory, a commitment to a law whose provenance is beyond the secular world, whose provenance might even be called divine.²⁰ A religious idea is suggested to overthrow the racist regime. Yet even in a concrete political context defined by racism, it seems as though Derrida, using religion, wants to be rid of the idea of race, wants the post-racial, rather than offering an account of racial justice. In the conceptual realm, emphasizing the play of concepts like religion and race might have a powerful intellectual effect, but it remains unclear whether the post-racial, post-secular society Derrida would seem to commend is a just society, as he seems to assume.

This tension between Derrida's intellectual aspirations for philosophical work concerning religion and race and concrete social realities was even more acute in his early years. Edward

¹⁸ Jacques Derrida, "Admiration of Nelson Mandela, or The Laws of Reflection," *Law and Literature* 26:1 (2014), 9-30. See also Jacques Derrida, "Racism's Last Word," *Critical Inquiry* 12 (1985), 290-299.

¹⁹ See also Jacques Derrida, "The Force of Law: The 'Mystical Foundation of Authority'" in Drucilla Cornell, Michel Rosenfeld, and David Carlson (eds.), *Deconstruction and the Possibility of Justice* (New York: Routledge, 1992), 3-67.

²⁰ Merold Westphal, "Derrida as Natural Law Theorist" in *Overcoming Onto-Theology* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2001), 219-228.

Baring has recently pointed out that Derrida's embrace of an Algerian Jewish identity came quite late in his life.²¹ As a young man, Derrida aligned himself with the French colonists in Algeria, the Pieds-Noir. While he did embrace liberal politics, he was certainly not a radical, and he became defensive when Leftist intellectuals attacked the colonists. Like other colonists, Derrida's education during his Algerian childhood was entirely French, following the French curriculum and taught by Paris-education instructors. He transitioned seamlessly to the center of the French intellectual world, to the Ecole Normale Supérieure and the Sorbonne, and remained there for his entire career, even while he was loudly advertising his purported marginality. In other words, in practice, Derrida was very much aligned with white, European Catholic or post-Catholic culture and politics, and he was appreciative of the Algerian resistance just as he was appreciative of Mandela – as challenging the purported closure of the “the system,” not as bringing structural transformation that would result in racial justice.

Example II: Giorgio Agamben

Race and religion are front and center in Agamben's writings, but he rarely dwells on the connection between them.²² Indeed, one way of reading Agamben's most influential work, *Homo Sacer*, is as tracking a certain social logic that has existed in the West for more than two

²¹ Edward Baring, “Liberalism and the Algerian War: The Case of Jacques Derrida,” *Critical Inquiry* 36:2 (2010), 239-261; Idem., *The Young Derrida and French Philosophy, 1945-1968* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011).

²² For discussion of race in Agamben's writings, see especially Ewa Plonowska Ziarek, “Bare Life on Strike: Notes on the Biopolitics of Race and Gender,” *South Atlantic Quarterly* 107:1 (2008): 89-105 and Andrew Benjamin, “Particularity and Exceptions: On Jews and Animals,” *South Atlantic Quarterly* 107:1 (2008): 71-87. Achille Mbembe very productively uses Agamben as a starting point to theorize race in his “Necropolitics,” *Public Culture* 15:1 (2003): 11-40. Mark Rifkin presents a fascinating assessment and development of Agamben's thought from an indigenous perspective in “Indigenizing Agamben: Rethinking Sovereignty in Light of the ‘Peculiar’ Status of Native Peoples,” *Culture Critique* 73 (2009): 88-124.

millennia, a social logic on which race and religion supervene.²³ What is foundational for Agamben is this logic; concepts like race and religion fill the content in a pre-existing form. While Agamben offers myriad historical examples, he is not concerned with historical causation. His historical examples, for the most part not given chronologically, simply exemplify the underlying social logic and bring into view further features of this social logic. Indeed, Agamben does not straightforwardly describe the social logic; it comes into view one glimpse at a time, each glimpse from a different angle, offered by a different historical example. For Agamben, race and religion are features of specific historical circumstances, so they enter into his writing here and there, in some of the historical vignettes he provides but not in others. At the end of the day, however, race and religion are essentially connected for Agamben because both race and religion play the same role in the social logic of the West. They have no *philosophical* significance outside of this social logic, even though race and religion may have *historical* significance. In short, Agamben is not concerned about God or evil or the good life; he is concerned about how claims about these religious concepts consistently show up in the same configuration at quite different moments in the history of the West, and racist concepts show up in exactly the same configuration.

What is the social logic that Agamben argues is so fundamental? Where Derrida valorizes concepts that are both included in “the system” and undermine “the system,” Agamben explores what this would mean in terms of society. What would it mean for a part of society, or an individual member of a society, to be both inside and outside at once? The social logic that Agamben identifies holds that for any society to function it must have certain elements in this

²³ Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1998). For Agamben’s own reflections on his method, see Idem., *The Signature of All Things: On Method* (New York: Zone Books, 2009).

special position, both inside and outside. In a sense, *Homo Sacer* is a catalog of such elements with suggestive remarks about how they are necessary for the very existence of the societies where they are found. One such element, which is neither explicitly religious nor explicitly racialized, is the sovereign: “The paradox of sovereignty consists in the fact the sovereign is, at the same time, outside and inside the juridical order.”²⁴ In other words, the sovereign is a member of a society, subject to the laws of that society, but the sovereign also stands above that society, capable of suspending those very laws (recall Carl Schmitt’s infamous definition of the sovereign as he who decides on the exception). Agamben cleverly shows how the sovereign has a mirror image in the person or people subject to the sovereign’s extra-legal will. Whether they are given mercy or arbitrarily detained, these figures are also inside and outside the law at once. Indeed, as touched, in a sense, by sovereignty, such figures themselves acquire an aura of sovereign power – and the sovereign himself always brings with him some of the abjection of his mirror image. This dynamic, Agamben shows, is often associated with the language of religion. Sacred man, *homo sacer*, labels this equivocal figure, abject and in a way sovereign.

Among the various approaches Agamben takes to describing the social logic of which *homo sacer* serves as the paradigm is an extended discussion of taboo in the history of religions. Marshalling the theories of William Robertson Smith, Sigmund Freud, Marcel Mauss, Emile Durkheim, and others, Agamben notes a “mix of veneration and horror” at certain people or objects – those that are essential to a community but also rejected from that community.²⁵ In other historical vignettes, Agamben describes how *homo sacer* can be killed but not sacrificed: sacrifice would imply that such figures are members of the society they have been excluded

²⁴ Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, 15.

²⁵ *Ibid*, 77.

from, but that very exclusion entails their membership in the sense that the society still can make decrees concerning them, even if those decrees authorize their death. Such individuals are treated not as political subjects but as “bare life,” stripped of social relations and exposed to death. Concerning the flip side of the logic of exception, Agamben develops Ernst Kantorowicz’s reflections on the strangely dual figure of the sovereign. Like Christ’s simultaneously divine and human nature, the medieval king is thought to have both a human body, subject to illness and death, and a political or mystical body that stands above the limitations of the human body. In this way, the sovereign is also inside and outside the law, both part of human society and above human society. This is made possible by the “mystical” body, by the Christian theological imagination, although such religious elements are contingent rather than necessary features of the logic in question.

While Agamben’s many examples come from varied historical moments, and while he does not make any claims about historical causation, Agamben does make one crucial periodization. While the social logic that Agamben describes persists with the advent of modernity, modernity brings changes in social conditions that have important effects. Sovereign power is no longer exercised on individuals in unusual circumstances. In the modern world, life is politicized in two senses, both of which involve race. In the first sense, sovereign power is no longer confined to political life but also extends to bare life. Following Michel Foucault, Agamben sees modern nations concerned with the health of their population, with birth control and euthanasia, with census figures, and with issues that previously would have been considered outside of the political sphere. Among these issues, notably, is race: nations become concerned with classifying and organizing the races of their populations. Yet the social logic that Agamben considers foundational persists, and this is the second way in which life is politicized in

modernity. There are still those who are both inside and outside political society, but now their number has grown and their condition has worsened. They are found, most notably, in concentration camps but also, more recently, in Guantanamo Bay.²⁶ Those in the camp are defined by a political regime but stripped of their political rights, reduced to bare life. An important but ultimately contingent feature of those interned in campus is their race: Jews or Arabs, for example, or, in today's US immigration detention camps, Latinos. The ultimate worry of *Homo Sacer* is that the exceptional space of the camp will become the model for all state management of life: we will all become Jews, we will all be racialized. Put another way, the social logic that once produced the sacred now, in modernity, produces race, and this has potentially dire consequences.

There is another thread that runs through Agamben's work linking race and religion. One of the features of the pre-modern sovereign and his inverse is the blurred line between human and animal. The bandit, excluded from political community and exposed to death, was once considered a wolf-man, Agamben asserts. Inversely, Agamben points to myths that associate the werewolf and the sovereign, featuring kings transforming into wolves and back into kings – again, blurring the line between the animal and the human. This is a theme to which Agamben devotes another book, *The Open: Man and Animal*, where he argues that the division between the human and the animal is essential:

It is more urgent to work on these divisions, to ask in what way – within man – has man been separated from non-man, and the animal from the human, than it is to take positions on the great issues, on so-called human rights and values. And perhaps even the most

²⁶ The latter is explored in Giorgio Agamben, *State of Exception* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005).

luminous sphere of our relations with the divine depends, in some way, on that darker one which separates us from the animal.²⁷

Agamben shows how the distinction he is interested in has been a perpetual concern of Jewish and Christian thought and the concern persists in secular form today with the expansion of the camp, that space which blurs the boundary between animal and human. This boundary is, in an important sense, about race: defining the human race and deciding who is excluded. Racialization, after all, is about exclusion from the human race. Agamben urges us to think explicitly about this question of race and to make use of religious traditions in doing so – otherwise, with secular questions drawing on secular resources, we all become Jews. In sum, for Agamben, the philosophy of religion and the philosophy of race are both gateways to something deeper, to the questions that really matter – to the philosophy of the social and, perhaps, to justice.

Secularism, Multiculturalism, and the Philosophy of Religion

Derrida and Agamben both reject the timelessness and universality of the concept of religion. They both, in different ways, demonstrate how religion and race are deeply entwined. And they both offer models for how philosophy that is concerned with religion can investigate religion and race together, cognizant of their entwined genealogy. Yet the issues addressed by these two authors are quickly being superseded by a new set of concerns motivated by rapidly changing social and especially economic conditions. One need not believe that religion is part of a superstructure that rests on an economic base to recognize that the dramatic shifts in production and consumption in recent years have affected culture, including race and religion. Specifically,

²⁷ Giorgio Agamben, *The Open: Man and Animal* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2004), 16.

the individual is no longer a consumer only in the grocery store; the consumer mentality privileging individual choice based on personal desire extends to romantic relationships, schools, hometown, job, and identity, including racial and religious identity. While this consumer mentality is certainly at odds with the realities of many who lack the financial or cultural capital to acquire what they desire, it is widely disseminated through media, government and cultural institutions, and social networks. The result is that race and religion, as identities to be chosen, must compete in the marketplace of identities and activities – yoga classes, charity runs, Facebook games, Caribbean cruises - and so are themselves directly or indirectly shaped into the form of their competitors.²⁸

Closely related to the pressures of the identity marketplace is the now regnant ideology of diversity. According to this set of ideas, we are all different, and that is beautiful. It is to be celebrated. Culture was imagined as monolithic for too long, repressing valuable (in both moral and economic senses) differences; today we can be ourselves. Of course this is not difference unlimited: there are discrete differences from which we are to choose, different tokens of the same type, different responses to the same question on the government questionnaire – male / female / transgender; white / black / Asian / Latino; Christian / Jew / Muslim / Buddhist / Hindu / atheist; and so on. This cultural embrace of diversity creates another set of pressures on religious and racial groups to conform to an ostensibly neutral model so as to fit comfortably next to a box on a government questionnaire.²⁹ Of course no such neutrality exists: such standpoints simply mask the interests of the dominant group – whites, Protestants, etc. – allowing them to subtly

²⁸ For a similar worry, see Luke Bretherton, *Christianity and Contemporary Politics: The Conditions and Possibilities of Faithful Witness* (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010), Chapter 1.

²⁹ Vincent Lloyd, “Introduction: Managing Race, Managing Religion” in Jonathon Kahn and Vincent Lloyd, eds., *Race and Secularism in America* (Columbia University Press, forthcoming).

exert pressure on minority or marginalized groups that stray too far from comfortable beliefs or practices. Or, from a more Marxist perspective, it is a neoliberal economic system which uses the language of diversity to manage unruly subjects, subjects who take their identities so seriously that it prevents them from laboring or consuming properly.

In this social and economic landscape, secularism and multiculturalism are the ideologies that come to manage religion and race. They implicitly offer a set of standards by which to judge which religious or racial expressions are proper and which are improper, all under the label of ostensible neutrality. In so doing they shape religion and race with the result that any study of religion and race today will go wrong if it presumes to access its objects directly. Studies of religion and race must thoroughly account for the way that their objects are not autonomous but are deeply and thoroughly shaped by these ideological pressures. Moreover, these same pressures shape the perspective of the academy at the present so, for example, historiography and ethnography are naturally disposed to find religions and races in the far corners of the world and the far reaches of history that look curiously similar to the religion and race licit under our present secularism and multiculturalism.

The philosophy of religion has so far had little to say about secularism and multiculturalism. In fact, there are ways in which Derrida and Agamben, as exemplars of recent philosophy of religion, fit perfectly with the secularist and multiculturalist ideological program.³⁰ Derrida embraces difference and delights in undermining monolithic “systems.” Certainly Derrida would resist any fixed set of differences, for example on a government questionnaire, but the critical practice that Derrida performs and commends functions not at the level of social

³⁰ For a related concern, see Walter Benn Michaels, *The Shape of the Signifier: 1967 to the End of History* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2004).

practice but at the level of ideology. At the level of ideology, secularism says: show us how your tradition complicates the historically dominant Christian assumptions? Multiculturalism says: show us how your Latino or indigenous or Filipino identity complicates historically dominant white culture? But those intellectual questions result, when implemented by institutions, in questionnaires with boxes to check.

Moreover, for both Derrida and Agamben, religion and race have only contingent roles to play in their philosophical projects. They are two differences among many. Derrida is also deeply interested in gender, sexuality, nationality, immigration, ghosts, and much else as threads that can be pulled to undermine “the system”; Agamben explicates many other details of the historical and social snapshots he presents in order to develop the underlying social logic in which he is centrally interested. For both Derrida and Agamben, then, religion and race are two among many categories of difference. They are features of the world that point to what is really significant. Religion and race do not offer ways of seeing the world, or traditions.

What would it look like to approach the philosophy of religion in a manner that is cognizant of the entwined genealogies of religion and race but that is also cognizant of the way that religion and race are carefully managed in the present? Such an approach would explore the aspects of religion that are the most difficult to translate into a secularist idiom and the aspects of race that are most difficult to translate into a multiculturalist idiom.³¹ Such an approach would also explore the dialectical struggle between an unmanageable knot of religion and race and the attempts to individuate and manage these categories. The philosophy of religion would be a deeply political project because it would recover something especially threatening to today’s

³¹ For a related point in postcolonial theory, see Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000).

hegemonic ideology, and it would expose the workings of that ideology. In a sense, the philosophy of religion would do in the world of social practices what Derrida attempts to do in the world of ideas: locating a knot of practices that is never smoothed over by ideology and asking what it might mean for this knot to thwart “the system.” This does not mean that theology must displace the philosophy of religion; theology itself is subject to internalized secularism, and to multiculturalism.³² The philosophy of religion has a distinctive role as second order reflection on the always vexed process of translation between religious-racial ideas contaminated by secularism-multiculturalism and a non-religious community of inquiry also contaminated by secularism-multiculturalism.

Example III: Sylvia Wynter

To explore what this style of philosophy of religion responsive to recent social and economic developments might look like, I turn in conclusion to the example of Jamaican writer and feminist theorist Sylvia Wynter. While not trained as a philosopher, Wynter has become a central figure in Black feminist philosophy. She writes extensively about religion, but she has not as yet been embraced by the religious studies academy, and she remains marginal, at most, to conversations in the philosophy of religion. Wynter is part of a group of Black studies scholars who unapologetically embrace the uniqueness of Black experience and the unique evil of anti-Black racism. For this group, often referred to as Afro-pessimists, Blacks do not just happen to

³² Theological efforts to address these issues, along with the entangled genealogies of race and religion, include J. Kameron Carter, *Race: A Theological Account* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008) and Willie James Jennings, *The Christian Imagination: Theology and the Origins of Race* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2010).

be suffering violence at various points in time.³³ Rather, anti-Blackness is central to the metaphysics of the West, and anti-Blackness will not go away until that metaphysics is overturned. Ameliorative social programs and even reparations are not enough. Wynter carefully examines how anti-Blackness became so fundamental to the West, and in her investigations she shows how anti-Blackness and religion have a deep, shared history.

Wynter describes the colonial encounter as coinciding with a shift in how Western man (the masculine gender is particularly significant for her) viewed himself. Once, in the feudal world, society was ordered hierarchically. God guaranteed this order. Then, with the rise of the nation state and its intellectual champions, God's role was to guarantee the rationality of each citizen (rational nature displacing noble blood), and in so doing God secured the position of humans as distinct from the natural world. When Columbus landed in 1492, he was acting according to this logic in claiming the newly found land for Spain and the newly found goods to repay his financial backers.³⁴ Most significantly, with the colonial encounter, "The construct of *Nigger* as well as that of the non-European *native* now came to serve as the inversion of the divinely instituted realm of the supernatural and therefore as the extrasocietal source."³⁵ Instead of humanity and social order defined by a God above, they came to be defined by sub-humans below, by Blacks and indigenous people whose non-humanity secured the humanity of Europeans and whose exclusion from the social structure secured that structure. Wynter goes on

³³ Frank Wilderson offers a compelling description and synthesis of such theory in the introduction to his *Red, White, and Black: Cinema and the Structure of U.S. Antagonisms* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010).

³⁴ Sylvia Wynter, "1492: A New World View" in *Race, Discourse, and the Origin of the Americas: A New World View*, eds. Vera Lawrence Hyatt and Rex Nettleford (Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1995), 5-57.

³⁵ Sylvia Wynter, "Beyond the Word of Man: Glissant and the New Discourse of the Antilles," *World Literature Today* 63:4 (1989), 642.

to argue that this shift also involved the replacement of religious language with scientific language. Instead of theologically defined divine superiority there now was biologically defined Black and indigenous inferiority. Wynter tracks the consequences of this linked process of secularization and racialization, including its psychic effects. In Christian Europe, subjects defined themselves against non-Christians, and that included their pre-Baptismal selves. Each individual was split against herself, saved but still the same person who was once damned. This earlier self represents “the embodiment of ‘fallen natural humanity’ enslaved to Original Sin”; with the colonial encounter, it is now the Black or indigenous who fill this role.³⁶ The result, post-secularization and post-colonialism, is that Black and indigenous people who aspire to respectability must despise their Blackness or indigeneity.

The thread that runs through this transformation, as Wynter describes it, is the figure of Man. Today, Man is not humanity but rather the Western bourgeoisie; this identification is part of a racial and theological history of exclusion. Wynter charges scholars who wish to be genuinely critical with the task of envisioning what comes after Man. In one formulation, she suggests that the category of the human has been contaminated by its association with the category of Man, given the latter’s racial-theological origins, and she opens the question of how an uncontaminated category of the human might be recovered. Wynter acknowledges that this cannot happen by simply adding minority voices to the conversation that would purport to show more dimensions of our humanity. It is the “order of discourse” itself that must be overturned because the current (anti-Black, anti-indigenous) discourse can accommodate and even be strengthened by incorporating minority voices.³⁷ Wynter labels the critical practice she

³⁶ Ibid, 643.

³⁷ See, for example, Sylvia Wynter, “On Disenchanting Discourse: ‘Minority’ Literary Criticism and Beyond,” *Cultural Critique* 7 (1987), 207-244.

commends “disenchanted discourse,” a critique of explicitly or implicitly religious concepts that also functions as a critique of racism. Such disenchantment should proceed from multiple directions, for the exclusions created by the category of Man are many. The multiple lines of protest that flourished in the 1960s started this critical task, but they did not end it; ultimately 1960s critique was incorporated into the order of discourse itself, further enchanting it and further strengthening its hold.³⁸

It might seem as though Wynter uses religion and race instrumentally, like Derrida and Agamben, as two differences among many that point towards a deeper, philosophical problem. But for Wynter there is no philosophical problem deeper than the construction of Man as the hero of our order of discourse – that is, of our way of seeing the world. This construction grows out of a religious, specifically Christian, way of seeing the world in terms of the damned and the saved, and this construction takes on new meaning with the colonial encounter, as Blacks and indigenous people play the role of the damned. For Wynter, the philosophy of religion must investigate religious and racial concepts together because of their shared genealogy and because it is the powers that be today, not the truth, that would separate them. Considered as a model, Wynter’s work suggests the value of engaging with philosophy of religion as a tradition because of the continuing power of this tradition. But her work also suggests the importance of investigating religion and race together in new, unexpected, extra-canonical sites that might provide new ways of envisioning the human beyond Man. For example, she points to the fundamental Aztec theological commitment to a “flow of life” both on earth and in the heavens. According to Aztec belief, the world was created through gods’ self-sacrifice, creating a sacred debt for

³⁸ Wynter, “Unsettling the Coloniality of Being/Power/Truth/Freedom: Towards the Human, After Man, Its Overrepresentation—An Argument,” *CR: The New Centennial Review* 3:3 (2003), 257-337.

humans. This debt could be repaid by the Aztecs' performance of sacrifice, including human sacrifice, which would then restore the flow of life. Wynter notes:

Columbus's behaviors were not unlike the ritual acts of sacrifice of the Aztecs. Their behaviors, too, were impelled by an ethico-behavioral system based on securing what seemed to them to be the imperative goal of "ensuring the good of the Commonwelath," and to do this by maintaining, as their founding supraordinate goal prescribed that they should do, "the flow of life." Columbus's equally Janus-faced behaviors were to be no less prescribed by the emergent religio-secular political and mercantile goal of the state, which Columbus would come to see as the vehicle both for the spread of the faith and for the advancement of his own status. So the Aztecs' "flow of life" imperative would become for Columbus and the Spaniards (to the Aztecs' horror and astonishment) the imperative of maintaining a "flow of gold."³⁹

Through such analysis, a pluralized philosophy of religion can complicate and destabilize the narrative of the colonizer, of the European, of the white – and of the Christian. Before they were Man, the Aztecs were human and Columbus was human, grappling with the religious ideas of their communities and their own self-interests. This is what philosophy of religion at its best can discern, but this can only be discerned once the conceptual and physical violence of religion and race, twinned, is fully appreciated.

³⁹ Wynter, "1492," 16.