

# Theological Intonation: Opening Dialogue Between Confessional Theology and Religious Studies

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This article is addressed primarily to theologians and secondarily to religious studies scholars who might dialogue with them. It seeks to highlight a subtle change in tone of voice, inflection, and posture that will assist theologians with confessional presuppositions in opening up productive exchanges with those who do not share their presuppositions. The need for improving this exchange was highlighted by Thomas Tweed in his 2015 presidential address to the American Academy of Religion, where he observed that we often “talk past one another or don’t talk at all.”<sup>1</sup> This article explores resources for this endeavour in the work of Tyler T. Roberts, who, from the standpoint of a religious studies scholar, has called for the inclusion of theology in religious studies. It also sets such a dialogue within the philosophy of religious studies articulated by Jim Kanaris, a philosophy which seeks to move the conversation beyond the dichotomies of confining religion to “the examination of publicly observable phenomena”<sup>2</sup> or defending religious subjectivity from such reductionism. Since religious studies emerged historically from

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1. Thomas Tweed, “Valuing the Study of Religion: Improving Difficult Dialogues Within and Beyond the AAR’s ‘Big Tent,’” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 84, no. 2 (June 2016): 287.

2. Jim Kanaris, “Introduction,” *Reconfigurations of Philosophy of Religion: A*

Christian theology seeking a place of objectivity, it has often taken great pains to distance itself from its subjectively engaged parent. One strategy has been to exclude theology from religious studies as an ideology that does not properly belong in academia. This is represented today by the new materialist approach of scholars such as Russell McCutcheon, which largely reduces the study of religion to historical, cultural, psychological, and sociological factors, revealing the political structures of power behind religious ideology and practice.<sup>3</sup> Another strategy has been to invite theology back to the family table under certain conditions. For instance, Sheila Greeve Davaney has advocated for the place of “academic theologians” in the religious studies conversation, provided they operate as a subset of religious studies. As such, they must consent to the reduction of the study of religion to a “naturalizing and culturizing of the human phenomena we study.”<sup>4</sup> This sounds like new materialist rules to the game. Paula Cooley widened her invitation slightly to include those theologians who would dialogue on the common (albeit shaky) ground provided by Kantian-style presuppositions.<sup>5</sup> Both inclusions implicitly exclude confessional

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*Possible Future*, ed. Jim Kanaris (New York: SUNY Press, 2018), 176.

3. Russell T. McCutcheon, *Manufacturing Religion: The Discourse on Sui Generis Religion and the Politics of Nostalgia* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 45, 47; cf. Tyler T. Roberts, “Rhetorics of Ideology and Criticism in the Study of Religion,” *Journal of Religion* 85, no. 2 (2005): 369–76.

4. Sheila Greeve Davaney, “Rethinking Theology and Religious Studies,” in *Religious Studies, Theology, and the University: Conflicting Maps, Changing Terrain*, ed. Linell E. Cady and Delwin Brown (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2002), 150.

5. Paula Cooley, “The Place of Academic Theology in the Study of Religion from the Perspective of Liberal Education,” in *Religious Studies, Theology, and the University: Conflicting Maps, Changing Terrain*, ed. Linell E. Cady and Delwin Brown (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2002), 179.

theologians who operate from revelational presuppositions, thereby depriving religious studies of quintessential insider voices. However, Roberts' approach may allow theologians to enter into the conversation with their presuppositions not only intact, but even functioning to enhance the dialogue.

We will first outline Roberts' critique of the new materialist exclusion of theology from the academic study of religion on the basis that it is ideology. In two landmark articles, Roberts successfully turns the tables on the new materialists by revealing the ideology present in their own approach.<sup>6</sup> He also questions their characterization of theology as a particular kind of ideology – inherently self-authorizing, shielded from critical inspection, and stabilizing. He offers examples of theologians who speak about God in ways that are the opposite of this characterization and can thus contribute productively. Secondly, the specifics of Roberts' approach will be reviewed. He demonstrates the viability of contributing to the study of religion by “think[ing] critically in and through, as opposed to distanced from, our attachments.”<sup>7</sup> Thirdly, I connect Roberts' approach with the religious studies philosophy of Jim Kanaris, which allows for both subjective involvement in religious concerns and critical self-reflexivity to find points of objective analysis. Fourthly, this article will explore Roberts' identification of a particular way of speaking theologically, which I am referring to as theological intonation. Examples will be provided

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6. Tyler T. Roberts, “Exposure and Explanation: On the New Protectionism in the Study of Religion,” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 72, no. 1 (2004): 143–72; Roberts, “Rhetorics of Ideology and Criticism in the Study of Religion”; cf. Kanaris, “Introduction,” xviii; Tweed, “Valuing the Study of Religion,” 295.

7. Tyler T. Roberts, “Reverence as Critical Responsiveness Between Philosophy and Religion,” in *Reconfigurations of Philosophy of Religion: A Possible Future*, ed. Jim Kanaris (New York: SUNY Press, 2018), 194.

from a variety of Roberts' works that are viable from the context of confessional theology.<sup>8</sup> In a sense, we will conclude by redirecting Roberts' insights from how religious studies can approach theology to how theology can approach religious studies. A summary will be provided of ways of being and speaking theologically that open up a disruptive and seminal two-way dialogue between confessional theology and religious studies in a "postmodern" environment.

### **Destabilizing Ideology in Theology and Religious Studies**

In "Exposure and Explanation: On the New Protectionism in the Study of Religion" (2005) and "Rhetorics of Ideology and Criticism in the Study of Religion" (2005), Roberts argues that new materialist approaches to religious studies need to acknowledge their own ideology, which creates "an unsupportable opposition between religion and scholarship."<sup>9</sup> New materialist approaches to religious studies characterize their work as non-ideological and critically self-reflexive, while framing religion or theology itself as a non-critical enterprise<sup>10</sup> that cannot be engaged with except as "data."<sup>11</sup> A new materialist definition of religion offered by Bruce Lincoln in *Guide to the Study of Religion* (2000) says its "defining characteristic" is that it "invest[s] specific human preferences with transcendent status by misrepresenting them as revealed truths, primordial traditions, divine commandments and so forth."<sup>12</sup> There

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8. Tyler T. Roberts, "Theology and the Ascetic Imperative: Narrative and Renunciation in Taylor and Hauerwas," *Modern Theology* 9, no. 2 (April 1993): 181–200; Tyler T. Roberts, *Encountering Religion: Responsibility and Criticism After Secularism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2013).

9. Roberts, "Rhetorics of Ideology and Criticism," 369.

10. Roberts, "Rhetorics of Ideology and Criticism," 374, 372.

11. Roberts, "Exposure and Explanation," 145.

12. As quoted in Roberts, "Exposure and Explanation," 147.

is little room for conversation if religious studies begins with an ideological judgement that theology is a fundamental “misrepresentation” that obscures material reality.<sup>13</sup> Nor are their ears tuned to hear protests from theological insiders that outsiders in religious studies may be misrepresenting their religion because the data is not supposed to talk back.<sup>14</sup> Theology itself is deemed to be conversation-ending due to its totalizing appeals to transcendent authority, stabilization of current power structures, and being closed to critical questioning.<sup>15</sup>

Roberts begins his response by highlighting several theologians – Rowan Williams, Charles Winquist, and Francis Fiorenza – none of whom speak in these ways.<sup>16</sup> In fact, these sophisticated and engaging thinkers are willing to destabilize their own viewpoints and provide resources for a helpful destabilization of the ideology of the new materialists. While they do have certain faith presuppositions, they are also willing to complicate their positions by acknowledging historical and social factors in approaching religious texts, authority, and the creation of religion. They are open to dialoguing with new materialists about such factors, and new materialists could, in turn, benefit from some complicating of their exclusively materialist explanations for religion.<sup>17</sup> These theologians are not the enemies of enlightenment, modernity, or even post-modernity, but surprisingly experimental

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13. Roberts, “Exposure and Explanation,” 155.

14. Roberts, “Exposure and Explanation,” 154.

15. Roberts, “Rhetorics of Ideology and Criticism,” 372–75; Roberts, “Exposure and Explanation,” 150.

16. Roberts, “Exposure and Explanation,” 151.

17. Roberts, “Exposure and Explanation,” 155.

thinkers<sup>18</sup> who often engage productively in discourses beyond the borders of theology.<sup>19</sup>

Depending on how a theologian approaches terms such as “God” or “transcendence,” these terms can actually disrupt human certainties about reality.<sup>20</sup> Influenced by Derrida, Lacan, and Levinas, thinkers such as Eric Santner, Hent de Vries, and Winkler function in borderlands between philosophical, religious, and theological discourse, and are able to formulate “theologically inflected critique[s]” that challenge both *sui generis* and materialist formulations of religious studies.<sup>21</sup>

Besides offering critique, theology also provides language and practice appropriate for “singularity.” In dealing with the sign “God,” theology has developed tools for dealing with a singularity that goes beyond the bounds of language and exposes the incompleteness of any discourse. These tools can be used for dealing with singularity as it is experienced in many areas: the “me” beyond my predicates, the discontinuities of material explanations of experience, and the incompleteness of encounter with any “other.”<sup>22</sup> “God” indicates both a gap in a discourse and “an indicator of something more.”<sup>23</sup> Roberts quotes De Vries’ (controversial) re-definition of theology as “no longer [...] church dogmatics, or biblical exegesis, but as the self-articulation, exposition, and re-enactment of faith [...] that brings us face to face,

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18. Roberts, “Rhetorics of Ideology and Criticism,” 385, 389.

19. Roberts, “Exposure and Explanation,” 153.

20. Roberts, “Exposure and Explanation,” 160; Roberts, “Rhetorics of Ideology and Criticism,” 378–379.

21. Roberts, “Exposure and Explanation,” 160–61.

22. Roberts, “Exposure and Explanation,” 161–62.

23. Roberts, “Exposure and Explanation,” 163.

not with God, but with our forgetfulness vis à vis God.”<sup>24</sup> It is a simultaneous motion toward and away from God (*à dieu* and *adieu*) as “it tries to speak finitely about the infinite and acknowledges that this effort necessarily fails.”<sup>25</sup> This is in line with St. Augustine’s admission: “What intellectual capacity has a man got to grasp God with, if his own intellect with which he wishes to grasp him still eludes his grasp?”<sup>26</sup>

It must be noted, though, that such humility about our ability to adequately speak about God is balanced for confessional theologians by a presupposition that God has spoken to us in revelation. This presupposition is often seen as a barrier for conversation with religious studies, which views it as a conversation-ending “limit-setter.” However, revelation can also be understood as a traumatic disruption of “the ways we make sense of ourselves and our world.”<sup>27</sup> As Roberts notes via Santner, revelation “is not so much the positing of an alternative and competing standard of value as *an intervention into the very syntax by which values are determined.*”<sup>28</sup> As such, revelation forms discontinuities that can become fruitful points of opening conversation. This accords well with the Christian perception of Jesus as the one whose very person upset the order of the world, and whose words declared

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24. Roberts, “Exposure and Explanation,” 163. See also: Hent de Vries, *Philosophy and the Turn to Religion* (Baltimore, MD: John Hopkins University Press, 1999), 221.

25. Roberts, *Encountering Religion*, 153.

26. Saint Augustine, *The Trinity: De Trinitate*, ed. John Rotelle O.S.A., trans. Edmund Hill O.P., 2nd ed., vol. 5, *The Works of Saint Augustine: A Translation for the 21st Century* (Hyde Park, New York: New City Press, 2012), bk. 5.0.2.

27. Roberts, “Exposure and Explanation,” 163.

28. Roberts, “Exposure and Explanation,” 164. Emphasis added by Roberts. See also: Eric Santner, *On the Psychopathology of Everyday Life* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2001), 97.

the last first and the little great. As J. Z. Smith has observed, if Jesus was a revelation, he was so in the form of a riddle.<sup>29</sup> Roberts makes the case that new materialists, who have otherwise followed the lead of Smith, may have missed an opportunity to develop the rhetoric of incongruity, which he sees as central to religion.<sup>30</sup>

In Winquist, Santner, and de Vries, Roberts finds a humble theology that is certainly not “queen of the sciences” and not even a confession of faith, but rather “a minor literature” (a demotion theologians may balk at). While largely unacknowledged by new materialists, this kind of theology shares in a larger program of discourse critique with religious studies and other disciplines, a program which should be conscious of how “theological terms, tropes, and concepts continue to shape modern and postmodern ethical and political discourses.”<sup>31</sup> Given this shaping influence, theology should be viewed as a discipline that can be “interruptive and critical rather than systematizing and stabilizing”<sup>32</sup> – something Roberts asserts becomes clear when we “examine critically the bonds of ideology and identity from the perspective of a [socially intelligible] self-consciousness that recognizes the futility of searching for an identity free of such bonds,” and which, moreover, is open to that which is beyond ourselves.<sup>33</sup> Roberts challenges

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29. Jonathan Z. Smith, *Map Is Not Territory: Studies in the History of Religion* (Leiden: Brill, 1978), 300–301.

30. Tyler T. Roberts, “Encountering Incongruity: On J. Z. Smith,” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 87, no. 1 (March 2019): 38–39, <https://doi.org/10.1093/jaarel/lfy049>.

31. Roberts, “Exposure and Explanation,” 165.

32. Roberts, “Exposure and Explanation,” 165; Robert’s expands upon this point in “From Secular Criticism to Critical Fidelity,” *Political Theology* 18, no. 8 (December 2017): 693–708, <https://doi.org/10.1080/1462317X.2017.1333816>.

33. Roberts, “Exposure and Explanation,” 165.



McCutcheon and the like to acknowledge that they too are embedded in their own ideologies and values and thus cannot claim an academic neutrality that is free of them.<sup>34</sup> Why is new materialism set on *explaining* religion largely in terms of material causes? Why is religious ideology perceived only as repressive rather than as something which contains aspects of liberation? These questions reveal values that must be examined, and in many cases, reveal an anti-religious bias rather than neutrality.<sup>35</sup> McCutcheon might have once responded that it was materialist explanations that were being forced out of religious studies by *sui generis* ones, and that no one explanation of religion is adequate.<sup>36</sup> But Roberts has demonstrated that the pendulum has now swung too far in the opposite direction, to the exclusion of religious and theological explanations. Although Roberts is addressing new materialists, Martin Kavka notes that he leaps from a critique of their ideology to an assertion of the value of including insider discussions about divinity/divinities without much argumentation.<sup>37</sup> But theology can model how such a leap can be made by holding to its value presuppositions self-critically.

### An “Enecstatic” Philosophy of Religious Studies

Before we explore the specifics of Roberts’ approach in “Reverence as Critical Responsiveness Between Philosophy and

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34. Roberts, “Exposure and Explanation,” 166.

35. Cf. Davaney, “Rethinking Theology,” 143–146.

36. McCutcheon, *Manufacturing Religion*, 28, 48.

37. Martin Kavka, “Review: Encountering Religion: Responsibility and Criticism After Secularism, by Tyler T. Roberts,” *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 76, no. 1 (August 2014): 97, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11153-013-9440-3>.

Religion” (2018), I would like to spend some time articulating Jim Kanaris’ “enecstatic” philosophy of religious studies, as I believe Roberts’ approach fits well within Kanaris’ vision for the field. This will be achieved by an exploration of a chapter from a forthcoming monograph by Kanaris.

Kanaris is responding to an ethos that Cooley describes well: “poststructuralist epistemologies challenge the very notion of a stable subject who can know without reference to the subject’s [...] interests, values, and social location” and is thus unable to achieve objectivity.<sup>38</sup> Kanaris’ philosophy modifies Bernard Lonergan’s proposal to refashion theological methodology. It starts with a move away from theory to interiority, to avoid a devolution of the mediating phase of religious meaning into a “necrology of data and facts.”<sup>39</sup> Indeed, it can move deeper than interiority, says Lonergan, even “into the realm in which God is known and loved.”<sup>40</sup> This dialectical procedure in religious studies self-critically engages “implicit and explicit assumptions that shape methodological enquiry.” It is a kind of reflexivity that “pushes through mere being a self to taking possession of the self merely being.”<sup>41</sup> It asks, “How are my normative assumptions and presuppositions shaping my research?” “Blocking my access to the objects of religious studies?” Then it proceeds with research using accepted methods of objective procedure. “Genuine objectivity is the fruit of authentic subjectivity,” says Lonergan.<sup>42</sup> McCutcheon’s “thinking about

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38. Cooley, “The Place of Academic Theology,” 174.

39. Jim Kanaris, *The Normative Impetus of Enecstatic Philosophy of Religion: Dialectic and Foundations* (SUNY: forthcoming), 4.

40. Kanaris, *The normative Impetus*, 4; citing Bernard Lonergan, *Method in Theology* (New York: Herder & Herder, 1972), 83–84.

41. Kanaris, *The Normative Impetus*, 5.

42. Quoted in Kanaris, *The Normative Impetus*, 11.

religion” was moved forward by Ivan Strenski’s alternative of “thinking with religion,” but both are still about or with an *object*.<sup>43</sup> Kanaris seeks to move beyond “object-constitutive” tasks to “subject-constitutive” tasks.<sup>44</sup>

Kanaris offers “a subject-constitutive discourse designed for the current critical platform of representation.”<sup>45</sup> Poststructuralist critique destabilizes the language of subjectivity as a construction of “the modern ideals of autonomy and disembodied consciousness.”<sup>46</sup> To rescue subjectivity, Kanaris ironically utilizes Heidegger’s treatment of “being,” where all being stands *out from* (*ek-stasis*) being collectively in a way that undermines the subject. Kanaris coins a term, *Enecstasis*, which adds “in” (*en*) to emphasize an element already present in Heidegger’s “care of self”: the subjective self, standing in as a subject even as it stands out from collective being. This forms a foundation for the subjective and objective aspects of studying religion. It is something we are engaged *in* subjectively, as we acknowledge our engagement in meaning construction; and as we are aware of this self-critically, we can simultaneously stand *out* for objective viewpoints. Roberts does not develop his own philosophical approach to deal with the poststructuralist “death of the subject,” but instead adopts positions put forward by scholars such as Robert Orsi and Michael Jackson.<sup>47</sup> Humans are intersubjective, both profoundly shaped by social

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43. Kanaris, *The Normative Impetus*, 11.

44. Kanaris, *The Normative Impetus*, 9.

45. Kanaris, *The Normative Impetus*, 12.

46. Roberts, *Encountering Religion*, 103; cited in Kanaris, *The Normative Impetus*, 11.

47. See, for example: Robert Orsi, *Between Heaven and Earth* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005); Michael Jackson, *Methodology and History in Anthropology*, vol. 11, *Existential Anthropology* (New York: Berghahn, 2005), especially the introduction.

discourses and improvising as subjects within them.<sup>48</sup> Kanaris explicitly differentiates his subject-constitutive *enecstatic* approach from Roberts' similar object-constitutive approach. He sees Roberts as opening the way for theology to move from being an object of study to being resources *for* the study of religion.<sup>49</sup> However, this is still object-constitutive. It becomes subject-constitutive when a move is made towards "explicit preoccupation with self-making."<sup>50</sup> *Enecstasis* recognizes that in the choice between two objects of value (two alternative mediating viewpoints), one's own subjective foundations and values are revealed. "How do such ideas implicate me? Why do they resonate (or not) with me? Do I need a change of heart, a change of mind, a moral compass?"<sup>51</sup> It withdraws from the object to the self, and self-critically returns to the object seeking greater objectivity even as self-construction occurs in relation to the object.

However, there is evidence of a move in practice by Roberts towards a subject-constitutive *enecstasis*. We see self-conscious engagement as Roberts studies Rowan Williams' theology and finds himself personally moved at the representations of insight, beauty, and humanity, even in Williams himself – one subject influencing another.<sup>52</sup> Roberts is revealing when he says, "Whatever else they are, religions have and continue to provide a context in which human beings experiment with their subjectivity and intersubjectivity, engaging in forms of reflection and practice about

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48. Roberts, *Encountering Religion*, 104.

49. Kanaris, *The Normative Impetus*, 16. See also: Roberts, *Encountering Religion*, 20.

50. Kanaris, *The Normative Impetus*, 18.

51. Kanaris, *The Normative Impetus*, 19.

52. Kanaris, *The Normative Impetus*, 16–17.

what does and what should matter to them.”<sup>53</sup> In the process, “one’s life and one’s connection with others is expanded and vivified.”<sup>54</sup> This sounds like an expression of “self-making” that is usually implicit in Roberts, one that matches Kanaris’ explicit preoccupation.

### Religious Studies in Dialogue with Theology

With this initial review of Roberts’ approach to religious studies and Kanaris’ *enecstatic* framework in mind, we will now explore Roberts’ substantive engagement with theology in his 2018 article “Reverence as Critical Responsiveness Between Philosophy and Religion.” A central question for Roberts will be, “Does religious ‘attachment’ necessarily compromise critical thinking, or is it possible to think critically with and through one’s attachments, religious or otherwise?”<sup>55</sup> A central theological objective for my purposes will be, as Rowan Williams says, to “better learn from this how to speak to others without assuming their refusal.”<sup>56</sup> The two will prove to be related.

Roberts refers to David Wood’s description of philosophy after Heidegger, who reveals the role of the concept. On the one hand, conceptual systematization frees us from the obscurity of mystifying disorder and deferral of meaning; on the other hand, conceptual stability encloses us in the obscurity of over-ordering and premature closure to the other. A boundary space of liminality exists between these two conceptual tendencies.<sup>57</sup> In other words,

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53. Roberts, *Encountering Religion*, 117–118.

54. Roberts, *Encountering Religion*, 118.

55. Roberts, “Reverence as Critical Responsiveness,” 194.

56. Cited in Roberts, “Reverence as Critical Responsiveness,” 189.

57. Roberts, “Reverence as Critical Responsiveness,” 190–191.

between rigid ideology construction on the one hand, and endless critical deconstruction on the other, is “a practice by which we discern and give ourselves to, with attention, intelligence, and care, what is beautiful, worthy, and meaningful – even divine or sacred.”<sup>58</sup>

One such conceptual boundary exists between the critical study of religion and religion as the object of study. Critical thinking about religion (1) self-reflexively disengages; (2) critiques the limits of concepts; (3) and exposes the role of power and desire in constructing concepts using “historical, psychological, sociological, and linguistic methods.”<sup>59</sup> In Nietzschean fashion, this presupposes the superiority of “autonomous preference formation” over heteronomous concepts given to a subject from outside themselves, and thus is often rooted in and results in the repudiation of religion – a presupposition crying out for critique.<sup>60</sup> Roberts introduces a fourth form of critical thinking, purportedly to be abstained from in objective critique: evaluation. This moves from critical detachment to (*enecstatic*) critical engagement and construction.

A crucial question from Roberts is whether theology can appeal to revelation without a conversation-ending appeal to heteronomy. “Is there a way of thinking – and do we want to still call it critical? – between ‘autonomous preference formation’ and the heteronomy of imposed and unreflective attachments?”<sup>61</sup> This form of theology would think self-reflexively from within a place

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58. Roberts, “Reverence as Critical Responsiveness,” 190.

59. Roberts, “Reverence as Critical Responsiveness,” 192.

60. Michael Warner, “Uncritical Reading,” in *Polemic*, ed. Jane Gallop (New York: Routledge, 2004), 18; cited in Tyler T. Roberts, “Reverence as Critical Responsiveness,” 193.

61. Roberts, “Reverence as Critical Responsiveness,” 195.

of religious attachment, nuancing evaluative judgements based on revelation by maintaining a simultaneous openness that invites critical dialogue. It would disrupt the autonomy/heteronomy binary. Roberts looks to philosophers Martha Nussbaum and Stanley Cavell for ways of doing an engaged philosophy of living and thinking that he calls critical responsiveness – “the view that we always think and critique as participants in particular social formations and histories and as enmeshed in the natural world.”<sup>62</sup> Objects are approached not from critical detachment but openness of the self in trust to other selves and objects so that a response can be generated by them. In critical responsiveness, a greater understanding of self and others can emerge, not limited just to foundationalist means of knowing available to the critical spectator. As these secular philosophers give themselves to the interstices of art or poetry with philosophy, they find themselves “brought up against the limits of autonomy,” invited to response with signs like “grace,” “mystery,” “gratitude,” “praise,” and “God,” and freed to expand their categories in fuller “connections with each other and the world.”<sup>63</sup>

Roberts explores, not only theologian Rowan Williams’ concept of criticism as responsiveness, but also his way of speaking which invites responsiveness in others. This theological intonation is speaking ““in a way which allows of answers,”” that does not ““seek to prescribe the tone, the direction, or even the vocabulary of a response,”” says Williams.<sup>64</sup> Rather than making pronouncements based on final truths that end conversation, Williams reveals his “fundamental axioms” around which critical and enlivening questioning revolves – a disclosure Tweed similarly

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62. Roberts, “Reverence as Critical Responsiveness,” 197.

63. Roberts, “Reverence as Critical Responsiveness,” 199.

64. Rowan Williams, *On Christian Theology* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2000), 5; cited in Roberts, “Reverence as Critical Responsiveness,” 200.

calls for from all participants.<sup>65</sup> These axioms, such as “the scandal of the cross” or “sacrifice,” are fundamental doctrines of the Christian faith, but they are deployed in a fundamentally different manner. They are first deployed to disrupt, destabilize, and dispossess as finite the one who would be open to engaging. Only then do they have value as a new frame of reference and a practice of reverence – a new self emerges before a reality that one struggles to even put in language or concepts.<sup>66</sup> The axioms may be similar to those utilized by pulpit- pounders or pontificators, but the approach is quite dissimilar. William’s axioms are presented humbly, not with assumed value as revelation but with value revealed by “the way they can illuminate particular, concrete phenomena in the context of social interaction, and thus further connection, conversation, reflection, and action.”<sup>67</sup> Other explanations of these same socially experienced phenomena, relying on different fundamental axioms (socio-historical or otherwise), can be reflected upon and discussed as well, as no contributor resorts to totalizing strategies. We might presume that insights, both destabilizing and framing, can be appropriated even by participants who do not hold the same fundamental axioms.

This way of speaking arises from a finite way of being in contemplation. In contemplation of God as infinite, a self’s aggrandizement is revealed, its complicity in damage to other selves, and its inadequacy – while yet being loved by God. In returning from contemplation, a finite inability to fully capture this God in concepts or language keeps a theologian aware of “the humanness of their discourse” and from speaking for God in a

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65. Tweed, “Valuing the Study of Religion,” 298.

66. Roberts, “Reverence as Critical Responsiveness,” 201.

67. Roberts, “Reverence as Critical Responsiveness,” 200.



totalizing manner. Wonder induces worship and a reverent questioning that is open to other discourses.<sup>68</sup> Williams, using a phrase from Ricoeur, identifies this way of being and speaking as “non-heteronomous dependence.”<sup>69</sup> Dogma and revelation provide a source outside the self for fueling questioning and reorientation that leads not away from critical thinking but towards it, resulting in creativity.

I note that Williams may be downplaying aspects of theology that could be labelled heteronomous. As Roberts notes, the fundamental Christian axioms he is committed to have “less to do with definitive propositions about God [...] than with a process of questioning.”<sup>70</sup> Moreover, for Williams “the language of sin has much *more to do with* [...] our own complicity in forms of oppression [...] than a moralizing attack on worldly joy or pleasure,”<sup>71</sup> and, finally, in his work, “Revelation is addressed *not so much* to a will called upon to submit as to an imagination called upon to ‘open itself.’”<sup>72</sup> Minimizing heteronomous elements, such as Jesus’ “not my will but your will” or of dogmatic statements, is to minimize the centrality of such content in the sources. Williams misses a more productive philosophical opportunity: the dialectical nature of heteronomy and autonomy. Roberts, however, seems to see such an opportunity.<sup>73</sup> St. Irenaeus expressed this paradox of

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68. Roberts, “Reverence as Critical Responsiveness,” 200–203.

69. Paul Ricoeur, “Toward a Hermeneutic of the Idea of Revelation,” in *Essays on Biblical Interpretation*, ed. L.S. Mudge (London: SPCK, 1981), 102; cited in Roberts, “Reverence as Critical Responsiveness,” 204.

70. Roberts, “Reverence as Critical Responsiveness,” 201.

71. Roberts, “Reverence as Critical Responsiveness,” 203.

72. Roberts, “Reverence as Critical Responsiveness,” 204. See also: Williams, *On Christian Theology*, 146–147.

73. See Roberts, “Reverence as Critical Responsiveness,” 206; He makes this point more explicit in Roberts, “From Secular Criticism,” 702.

freedom well: “the more expansive operation of our liberty implies that a more complete subjection and affection towards our Liberator had been implanted within us.”<sup>74</sup> Thus we can ponder how dogmatic axioms might open up productive areas of thinking, how pleasure sometimes exists in an inverse relationship with fulfillment, and how revelation and creativity can grow in exponential relationship. Dialectical questions, properly intonated, could spark creative dialogue around a wide range of cultural concepts and phenomena connected with autonomy and heteronomy.

Roberts then moves on to philosopher William Desmond and critical reverence. Reverence “is the fundamental religious [...] disposition; [...] a receptiveness or attunement to the givenness of being.”<sup>75</sup> It is functioning at the borderland that Woods identified between conceptual stability and chaos, where concepts give way to an excess of being – to mystery. Questioning and criticism can begin from wonder in a different way than they begin in skeptical doubt. Realizing the givenness of being and the wonder of being leads to an approach “that renounces controlling and manipulative efforts to unilaterally and finally determine the other – whether God, world, or other persons.”<sup>76</sup> Reverence guides when to use concepts and when to recognize that concepts are inadequate for expressing an “other.” Dependence of being releases a response of love for God and a way to question and understand all other loves. It is thus a wisdom of engaged love rather than detached criticism.

Roberts insists we “have to look beyond the modern, but by now well-worn idea that where philosophy and other forms of

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74. Irenaeus, *Against Heresies: The Ante-Nicene Fathers*, ed. Alexander Roberts, James Donaldson, and Arthur Cleveland Coxe, vol. 1 (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1975), bk. 4.13.3.

75. Roberts, “Reverence as Critical Responsiveness,” 205.

76. Roberts, “Reverence as Critical Responsiveness,” 206.

modern thought are critical, religious thought, based as it is on faith and reverence, is not.”<sup>77</sup> In contrast Roberts emphasises that “philosophers will think critically and expansively enough *about* religion only when they also learn to think *with* religion.”<sup>78</sup> He is ever so close to the position of Kanaris, who might say that we are all already thinking *in* and *out of* the object of religion as subjects to begin with.

### Theological Intonation

Roberts’ “encounter and response” approach clears the way for religious studies scholars to have “humanistic encounters with religious texts and theology.”<sup>79</sup> The remainder of this article will seek to reverse that direction by utilizing Roberts’ insights to clear the way for confessional theologians to approach religious studies with a theological intonation that lends itself to “productive cross-disciplinary conversation.”<sup>80</sup>

Jonathan Tran, in his review of Roberts’ 2013 book, *Encountering Religion*, notes two reactions a confessional theologian like himself might have. The first he felt was gratefulness (“perhaps even a tad vindicated”) that someone in religious studies felt Christian theology had something worthwhile to share. The second was a wariness he thought others might feel that Roberts’ approach was a Trojan horse designed to secularize

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77. Roberts, “Reverence as Critical Responsiveness,” 190; contra Donald Wiebe, *The Irony of Theology and the Nature of Religious Thought* (Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 1991), 213ff.

78. Roberts, “Reverence as Critical Responsiveness,” 207.

79. Roberts, *Encountering Religion*, 17.

80. Tweed, “Valuing the Study of Religion,” 300.

theology.<sup>81</sup> It certainly could be seen that way: some of the examples of theologians and philosophers presented indeed seem to dilute the strength of revelation and dogmatics down to a level acceptable to postmodern culture and religious studies departments (e.g. Williams' words about "the humanness of [theological] discourse" or theology as "minor discourse"). Instead, I see Roberts' approach as a way to open communication with potential partners who have been pre-programmed to discount theological discourse.

Roberts seems to have cut his scholarly teeth dealing with one of postmodernism's architects, Nietzsche, and in reinterpreting his anti-Christian rhetoric in a way that opens his line of thinking to Christian insights.<sup>82</sup> It does not sound promising at first, as Roberts summarizes Nietzsche's position: "To live life to the fullest, instead of the living death of the [self-denying Christian] ascetic ideal, one must resist the bewitching calls of Truth or God."<sup>83</sup> Christian asceticism defers fulfillment of desire to a heavenly future, leaving people susceptible to earthly control by religion, to a "slave mentality." People are part of "the herd" and made average by the hegemony of religion that deprives the strong of their power and takes it for itself.<sup>84</sup> The popularity today of ideology critique and the suspicion of heteronomy derive in large part from Nietzsche.<sup>85</sup> But

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81. Jonathan Tran, "Review: Encountering Religion: Responsibility and Criticism after Secularism, by Tyler T. Roberts," *Modern Theology* 32, no. 4 (October 2016): 669–671.

82. Tyler T. Roberts, "'This Art of Transfiguration is Philosophy': Nietzsche's Asceticism," *The Journal of Religion* 76, no. 3 (July 1996): 402–427; cf. Tyler T. Roberts, *Contesting Spirit: Nietzsche, Affirmation, Religion* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001).

83. Roberts, "Nietzsche's Asceticism," 426.

84. Roberts, "Nietzsche's Asceticism," 423; cf. Roberts, *Encountering Religion*, 19.

85. Roberts, *Encountering Religion*, 19–20.

Roberts makes a controversial reinterpretation, arguing that Nietzsche was pursuing this-worldly asceticism in a classical spiritual quest, designed to arrive at self-mastery and realization of the will to power.<sup>86</sup>

Using the insights gained, Roberts delivers Christian asceticism from the portrait drawn by Nietzsche and develops theology along lines that those schooled by Nietzsche may find compelling. In “Theology and the Ascetic Imperative: Narrative and Renunciation in Taylor and Hauerwas” (1993), Roberts illustrates some principles for theology from Geoffrey Harpham’s treatment of aesthetic spiritual quest narratives.<sup>87</sup> They are “discourses of temptation” featuring both elements of closure (a confessional tendency) and aspects that resist closure (a postmodern tendency). The nature of desire itself is complicated by Harpham. Desire resisted becomes desire heightened as it is deferred and displaced to a greater desire for God – not in the extinction of power but in an intensification of life and spiritual power.<sup>88</sup> We can see Roberts weaving a path between Nietzsche’s (and Freud’s) stark alternatives of autonomy/satisfaction or heteronomy/repression:

Harpham rejects strong contrasts between the anarchic and playful forces of desire, often equated with liberation, and the repressive forces of truth, propriety, and order. Instead, his theory of asceticism envisages a mutual resistance between the desire for coherent, trans-

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86. Christopher Strathman, “Review: Contesting Spirit: Nietzsche, Affirmation, Religion by Tyler T Roberts,” *Perspectives in Religious Studies* 29, no. 1 (2002): 128; cf. Roberts, *Contesting Spirit*, 406, 425, 427.

87. Geoffrey Galt Harpham, *The Ascetic Imperative* (Chicago, IL: University of California Press, 1987).

88. Roberts, “Theology and the Ascetic,” 190.

cent meaning, on the one hand, and the deconstructive license of the desire for free-play and infinite plurality, on the other.<sup>89</sup>

This issues in three tensions between openness and closure for theology in (1) how to be spiritually, (2) how to read Scripture, and (3) how to talk about God.

Spirituality is humble and powerful. At the moment an ascetic becomes aware of progress towards perfection, a simultaneous awareness of pride at transgressing upon God's perfection occurs. This leads to a re-examination of the self, revealing ever deeper temptations. It is here, at the intersection of perfection and transgression, that spiritual power is found and life heightened.<sup>90</sup> Roberts is presenting theology as "spiritual discipline"<sup>91</sup> – an ancient prerequisite that the academy is often quick to dispense with.<sup>92</sup>

In reading Scripture, elements of closure must not be allowed to erase elements of discontinuity. While the Scriptures say there is one God, there is no single narrative of who God is because he goes beyond any narrative,<sup>93</sup> so the theologian must not highlight one strand of the narratives and forget others. Referring to the differences in the four Gospels, he says, "Even the story of Jesus has never been a single story."<sup>94</sup> By reading it as an ascetic narrative with elements of closure and elements that resist closure, the tendency to make it a master narrative is reduced. Here, multiple perspectives are allowed, and there is an acknowledgement of the

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89. Roberts, "Theology and the Ascetic," 190.

90. Roberts, "Theology and the Ascetic," 195.

91. Roberts, "Theology and the Ascetic," 196.

92. E.g., Davaney, "Rethinking Theology," 151.

93. Cf. Roberts, *Encountering Religion*, 132.

94. Roberts, "Nietzsche's Asceticism," 194.

humanness of the words that the theologian believes are yet God's words. *When narrative closure has been overemphasized, the openness for human response is minimized* because it is in the deferral of closure and the struggle with discontinuity, in faith and doubt, that human response occurs.<sup>95</sup> On the other hand, the narrative is not to be relativized by denying the elements of closure that are present.

As for theological speech, Roberts begins his article with the question, "What can today's theologians still learn from Barth about speaking of God?"<sup>96</sup> Barth had spoken about a simultaneous theological imperative and inability to speak of God. Theology makes statements about God that it must also resist as inherently finite statements about the infinite. Insofar as theology works within this tension, it is an ascetic discipline.<sup>97</sup> Roberts asks, "Even if the ascetic imperative helps one avoid the extremes of anarchic fragmentation and oppressive closure, does the imperative to resist result in a paralyzing inability to make any real affirmations or negations?"<sup>98</sup> True to his program, Roberts resists a closed answer: "Perhaps theology is not a discipline which strives to fill God's absence with knowledge of God as God is in Godself, but rather an ascetic discipline that seeks to sustain and enliven the human desire for God."<sup>99</sup> As such, it is a form of worship.<sup>100</sup>

I find this article particularly germane to the question of theological intonation since it is early Roberts, perhaps when he spoke from a personal place closer to Christian theology than the

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95. Roberts, "Theology and the Ascetic," 194.

96. Roberts, "Theology and the Ascetic," 181.

97. Roberts, "Theology and the Ascetic," 182.

98. Roberts, "Theology and the Ascetic," 195.

99. Roberts, "Theology and the Ascetic," 197.

100. Roberts, "Theology and the Ascetic," 196.

later Roberts. His words are directed to theologians rather than his other work which is directed to religious studies about theologians. The theologian he describes is certainly the voice of the insider, the worshipper. It is certainly a theologian who lives and breathes from the Scriptural narrative(s). And it is certainly a theologian who is humbled by God's ineffability. To the question, "What is his name?" this God says, "I am who I am"; a name revealed in "the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge" who "is able to accomplish abundantly far more than all we can ask or imagine" (Ex. 3:13, Ex. 3:14, Eph. 3:19-20 NRSV). Discontinuity, resistance to closure, humility, finitude, William's stammering speech – are all fitting here. Univocal language fails, and apophatic speech alone is entirely true, but not all bridges to comprehension are lost. With Thomas Aquinas, we must add to Roberts' presentation the language of analogy; that in our givenness of being, fragmentary elements of continuity can be signified between the given and the Giver.<sup>101</sup>

The core insider presupposition is that these are not just human words about God but ultimately God's words about himself to humanity – words given to communicate something. These words are signs of *différance*, to use Derrida's term; of difference from any one sign and the deferral of closure of meaning by reference to an endless string of related yet still inadequate signs. Yet, they give much more than ambiguity; they are a thousand redirections in a trajectory to the infinite, pointing one in a direction. Maybe not a map,<sup>102</sup> but certainly a compass (Gen. 12:1). Nor do these signs direct people to an infinite thing (a philosophical preoccupation),

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101. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, trans. Fathers of the English Dominican Province, 2nd ed. (London: Burns, Oates and Washbourne, 1920), bk. 1.13.5–6, <http://www.newadvent.org/summa>.

102. Cf. Smith, *Map Is Not Territory*.



but to a series of relationships centred on a singular relationship with God (a spiritual quest). This personal task is one for which words are more adequate. Like words about being in love (it's like being on fire but peaceful; you like them so much they drive you crazy; it's perfect but flawed), they are a series of opposites that progressively redirects one to a circumference of meaning that is recognizable once one enters it relationally. Perhaps this is what Roberts meant when he said theology's purpose was to "sustain and enliven the human desire for God."<sup>103</sup> Words are not to be worshipped or relativized but responded to in some way. That is a point of tension that a confessional theologian can embrace.

Theological speech about revelation must be steeped in humility, for then it is human words about divine analogues, and it needs to know the difference. Its most natural pairing is with spiritual being, as Roberts ventures, for thinking is not the only response engendered by revelation. It is not an overpowering master narrative but rather one that crescendos in the strangest mixture of discontinuity, doubt, and failure along with love, hope, and power. Preservation of indefiniteness within coherence gives the space for human becoming, struggling, thinking, and experimenting. It is a space that Roberts thinks can be entered by outsiders, at least provisionally, and is likely to leave them productively disoriented.

### Summary of Theological Intonation

If "totalizing appeals to transcendent authority" close conversations, then the goal is to open them.<sup>104</sup> As Williams said, it is speaking "in a way which allows of answers," that does not "seek

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103. Roberts, "Theology and the Ascetic," 197.

104. Roberts, "Rhetorics of Ideology and Criticism," 372–375.

to prescribe the tone, the direction, or even the vocabulary of a response.”<sup>105</sup> Yet confessional theologians must speak with a theological intonation that is simultaneously faithful to their presuppositions and opens a dialogue with those holding different presuppositions. Such dialogue is necessary for better apprehension of the object of religion and of ourselves as subjects in relation to it. As per the presidential call from Tweed, the following summary offers ways of being, speaking, and listening for confessional theologians wishing to productively converse with religious studies:

1. *Have an attitude of receptive humility.* Reverence and a sense of dependence of being releases a response of love for God and a way to question and understand all other loves. It is a “vulnerable receptivity.”<sup>106</sup> With Augustine, we must admit our limitations and fallibility, and in that posture come to conversations equally ready to receive as to give.<sup>107</sup> Lean in to listen with uncrossed arms.
  
2. *Engage in the larger cultural critique to illuminate its theological dimensions.* Because “theological terms, tropes, and concepts continue to shape modern and postmodern ethical and political discourses,” there is common ground for theological insight into culture.<sup>108</sup> But if de Vries is right, then the insights will end up being far more than cultural: “every discourse, even the most secular, profane, negative, or nihilistic of utterances, directs and redirects itself

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105. Roberts, “Reverence as Critical Responsiveness,” 200.

106. Roberts, *Encountering Religion*, 135.

107. Tweed, “Valuing the Study of Religion,” 298.

108. Roberts, “Exposure and Explanation,” 165.

unintentionally and unwittingly toward the alterity for which—historically, systematically, conceptually, and figuratively speaking—'god' is, perhaps and so far, the most proper name?"<sup>109</sup>

3. *Utilize enecstatic self-reflexive criticism.* Kanaris offers a way to be simultaneously aware of our own religiously engaged subjectivity and use critical self-reflexivity to look for points of objective analysis, using the occasion as an opportunity for self-construction. From this position, we can attempt entry into other's frames of reference. We invite outsiders to do the same with us, as, for example, Romand Coles used John Howard Yoder and Williams to reimagine his radical democracy, in a way that bridged insider/outsider distinctions.<sup>110</sup> *Enecstasis* describes a place where the recognition of spiritual being, even confessional, is not a barrier to critical objectivity but a necessary pre-cognition.
  
4. *Reveal fundamental axioms in their destabilizing revealability.* Be overt in confessionalism, admitting that both your questioning and things you hold as beyond questioning revolve around the axiom of divine revelation in Christ. But in wider discourses where that preposition is not shared, revelation will be granted validity only indirectly as it is applied in revelatory ways to "concrete phenomena in the context of social interaction."<sup>111</sup> The

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109. Roberts, *Encountering Religion*, 153.

110. Roberts, *Encountering Religion*, 139.

111. Roberts, "Reverence as Critical Responsiveness," 200.

axiomatic statement that has been accepted by you with a period must be presented to those who do not accept it with a question mark that invites thinking. Revelation “works” as it reveals and destabilizes existing frames of reference and illuminates productive space for new ones.

5. *Complicate explanations* by acknowledging degrees of historical and social factors in approaching religious texts, authority, and the creation of religion. The church “must open itself to the judgement of the world and make such judgement an integral part of the process by which it finds its identity.”<sup>112</sup> In turn, complicate materialistic judgements with explanations of religion that make sense not just from motivations of power but love, trust, and altruism.<sup>113</sup> Show elements of incongruity that persist in resisting materialist reductionism.
  
6. *Demonstrate the dialectic nature of heteronomy and autonomy.* Nietzsche’s critique of heteronomy can be met by demonstrating its paradoxical relationship with autonomy as Irenaeus described it. Dogma and submission can provide a source outside the self for fueling reorientation that leads not away from life’s power and experimental thinking but towards them.<sup>114</sup>
  
7. *Allow Scriptural narratives to be discoverable in the tension between closure and discontinuity.* As Roberts demonstrates

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112. Roberts, *Encountering Religion*, 137.

113. Roberts, “Reverence as Critical Responsiveness,” 206.

114. Roberts, “Reverence as Critical Responsiveness,” 200–203, 206; cf. Roberts, *Encountering Religion*, 169.

in “Theology and the Ascetic Imperative,” the incongruous elements in Scriptural narratives defer closure, creating space for doubt and faith to struggle, leading to places of reflection for both insiders and outsiders. Heidegger engaged Paul as the best way to get at the facticity of the unrest of human life.<sup>115</sup> Derrida gained insight from discovering the discontinuities of gift in Matthew.<sup>116</sup> The passion and resurrection narratives involved both worship and doubt.

8. *Deploy apophatic and analogical language aware of both their limits and potential.* Theology attempts to speak about “that which slips away,” as Taylor says.<sup>117</sup> In dealing with the sign “God,” theology developed tools for dealing with a singularity that goes beyond the bounds of language and exposes the incompleteness of any discourse.<sup>118</sup> I extend Roberts’ approach with the help of Aquinas to include not just apophatic language but also analogical. These signs provide direction to a space of personal encounter with the God who meets us incarnationally.
  
9. *Balance conceptual chaos and stability to create liminality.* Here, concepts give way to an excess of being – to mystery.<sup>119</sup> Reverence guides when to use concepts and when to recognize that concepts are inadequate for

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115. Roberts, *Encountering Religion*, 155–158.

116. Roberts, *Encountering Religion*, 161–162.

117. Mark C. Taylor, *About Religion* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1999), 1; cited in Roberts, *Encountering Religion*, 3.

118. Roberts, “Exposure and Explanation,” 161–162.

119. Roberts, “Reverence as Critical Responsiveness,” 206.

expressing an “other,” thus preventing premature closure. It helps to make the distinction between what is divinely received and what is merely speculation open to preferences. Clear ethical commands and theological axioms can be seen as boundary markers of liminal space – holding it open. Tweed notes that coherence and complexity are values that overlap in religious studies and theology.<sup>120</sup> Thus, liminal conceptuality becomes a theological gift to a field and culture that might help it move on from endless deconstruction towards seminal construction.

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120. Tweed, “Valuing the Study of Religion,” 302.