

Article

# Feminisms and Challenges to Institutionalized Philosophy of Religion

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**Abstract:** For my invited contribution to this special issue of *Religions* on “Feminisms and the Study of ‘Religions,’” I focus on philosophy of religion and contestations over its relevance to the academic field of Religious Studies. I amplify some feminist philosophers’ voices—especially Pamela Sue Anderson—in corroboration with recent calls from Religious Studies scholars to diversify philosophy of religions in the direction of locating it properly within the current state of Religious Studies. I want to do this by thinking through two proposals in productive tension: first, any philosophy of religions worthy of the name is intrinsically feminist; second, any philosophy of religions worthy of the name is intrinsically traditional. I want to use the productive tension between these two to illuminate ways calls for broadening the field can be enhanced when such calls are seen as both feminist and traditional. I proceed as follows. First, I note three instances of explicitly feminist work in philosophy of religions that do not suffer from the same narrowness as so-called “traditional” philosophy of religion. Religious Studies critics of philosophy of religion overstate the case in claiming feminist philosophy of religion is too narrow. Second, I develop a useful distinction between the concepts of “tradition” and “institution” to locate forces of oppression more precisely in dynamics of institutionalization so that we might rehabilitate tradition as a resource for combating institutionalized oppressiveness. I do this in response to the hegemony of current philosophers of religion who claim to speak about “the traditional god.” And third, I briefly coordinate four topics in religions from diverse feminist perspectives to help refine paths of inquiry for future philosophy of religions that is both feminist and traditional. My hope is that these clarify a philosophy of religions renewed through feminisms—moving from fringe to normative topics in institutionalized philosophy of religion, maintaining focus on actually existing human beings rather than hypothetically existing transcendent entities. I turn our attention to technical issues surrounding the status of mae chis, Buddhist laity who seek monastic recognition in Theravada. I turn our attention to struggles over fitting criteria for leadership between Mary Magdalene and Peter in early Christian contexts. I have us listen to Muslim women who seek to speak for themselves, many of whom describe Muhammad as a feminist. I have us listen to Anderson’s criticism of arguments about the (non)existence of a god and her promotion of human yearning as guided by regulative ideals as a pointed challenge to institutionalized philosophy of religion. In all these ways and more, feminist challenges to institutionalized philosophy of religion further contribute to diversifying field.

**Keywords:** traditional philosophy of religion; feminism; Irigaray; Anderson; Schilbrack; mae chis; Mary Magdalene; Muslim feminists; god’s existence; regulative ideals

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For my invited contribution to this special issue of *Religions* on “Feminisms and the Study of Religions,” I focus on philosophy of religion and contestations over its relevance to the academic field of Religious Studies. In what ways have feminisms intervened or have been overlooked in philosophy of religion? Is this something that can be addressed more adequately by locating

philosophy of religion in Religious Studies? Because philosophy of religion is typically housed institutionally within departments of Philosophy, many representatives of philosophy of religion do not demonstrate engagement with the academic study of religion and the current state of the field, especially cutting-edge issues in methods and theories of religion as these are promoted by organizations such as the North American Association for the Study of Religion (NAASR). Moreover, looking at institutionalized norms of philosophy of religion so far, feminist philosophy of religion appears to be subordinate to prioritized or policed topics, such as the existence and nature of a peculiar kind of god, the so-called god of “traditional theism.” With this in mind, I amplify some feminist philosophers’ voices—especially Pamela Sue Anderson—in corroboration with recent calls from Religious Studies scholars to diversify philosophy of religion in the direction of locating it properly within the current state of Religious Studies. I choose Anderson in particular to honor her work in light of her recent death.

I wish to amplify feminist philosophers’ voices by thinking through two proposals in productive tension: first, any philosophy of religions worthy of the name is intrinsically feminist; second, any philosophy of religions worthy of the name is intrinsically traditional. I want to use apparent tensions between these two to illuminate ways calls for broadening the field can be enhanced or deepened when such calls are seen as both feminist and traditional. I proceed as follows. First, I note three instances of explicitly feminist work in philosophy of religions that do not suffer from the same narrowness as so-called “traditional” philosophy of religion. Religious Studies critics of philosophy of religion overstate the case in claiming feminist philosophy of religion is too narrow. Second, I develop a useful distinction between the concepts of “tradition” and “institution” to locate forces of oppression more precisely in dynamics of institutionalization so that we might rehabilitate tradition as a resource for combating institutionalized oppressiveness. I do this in response to the hegemony of current philosophers of religion who claim to speak about “the traditional god.” And third, I briefly coordinate four topics in religions from diverse feminist perspectives to help refine paths of inquiry for future philosophy of religions that is both feminist and traditional. My hope is that these clarify a philosophy of religions renewed through feminisms—moving from fringe to normative topics in institutionalized philosophy of religion, maintaining focus on actually existing human beings rather than hypothetically existing transcendent entities. I turn our attention to technical issues surrounding the status of *maechis*, Buddhist laity who seek monastic recognition in Theravada. I turn our attention to struggles over fitting criteria for leadership between Mary Magdalene and Peter in early Christian contexts. I have us listen to Muslim women who seek to speak for themselves, many of whom describe Muhammad as a feminist. I have us listen to Anderson’s criticism of arguments about the (non)existence of a god and her promotion of human yearning as guided by regulative ideals as a pointed challenge to institutionalized philosophy of religion. In all these ways and more, feminist challenges to institutionalized philosophy of religion further contribute to diversifying field.

I need to make some preliminary stipulations to be upfront with my standpoint or starting-point. First, because my contribution is rooted in recent conversations within the academic field of Religious Studies, not the discipline of Philosophy, I assume some familiarity with challenges to the “world religions paradigm.” This paradigm has been shown often to serve imperial and colonialist interests by reifying cultural phenomena as discrete abstract entities or essences (like “Buddhism” or “Islam”) standing in distinction from lived practice and culture (see, for example, [Masuzawa 2005](#)). Religion is *in* culture, and this complicates our ability to say, for example, that culture can corrupt a purportedly true essence of a religion.<sup>1</sup> Second, I take to heart feminist challenges to dominant models of “critical thinking” and “argument.” Sylvia Burrow, for instance, advocates for a cooperative model of argument as opposed to the adversarial model definitive for the discipline of Philosophy and higher education more broadly ([Burrow 2010](#)). When “argument” itself is modeled in analogy to battle, such as

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<sup>1</sup> This is, for example, how Sumbul Ali Karamali explains some instances of sexism in Islamic communities ([Ali-Karamali 2008](#)).

“defending your position,” we get caught up with needing to “win” an argument (see [Lakoff and Johnson 2003](#), pp. 4–5). I am not out to “defend a thesis,” but to invite you to explore and develop a different vision and set of regulative ideals for philosophy of religions with me. I assume this is an early stage of, and not the end of, our conversation. Third, I approach our exploration from the perspective of hermeneutic phenomenology, in rough alignment with Paul Ricoeur (see [Ricoeur 1975](#)). Hermeneutic phenomenology is a distinctive method in Religious Studies for scholars seeking to empathize with yet maintain critical distance from religious others (see [Twiss and Conser 1992](#)). This is another motive for selecting Anderson in particular because she often works from this perspective.<sup>2</sup> Fourth, and finally, you may notice a downplaying of demarcating feminisms into distinct “waves” (such as the now institutionalized categories of “first wave,” “second wave,” and “third wave” feminisms). My preference is to be less strict about these political demarcations, and focus instead on broad strategies or specific tactics, where some aim at equality (such as the right to vote or fair wages), others aim at respect for gendered differences (such as valorizing virtues associated with femininities), and some others aim at respect for differences between women and intersectional variations (such as the different oppressions faced by privileged white women and those faced by women of color).<sup>3</sup> Yet I encourage you to see my composition as moving from second to third wave feminisms as we progress through the exploration if it helps track my moves toward expansiveness. While I primarily focus on people who have been called “second wave” feminists in section one, I make gestures aligned with “third wave” feminisms in section three. With these stipulations in mind, let us turn to work through recent calls by Religious Studies scholars for philosophy of religion to adapt to the current state of the field of Religious Studies.

### 1. Feminist Contributions to an Expansive Philosophy of Religions are Not Missing

Any traditional philosophy of religions worthy of the name is intrinsically feminist. I propose this as a regulative ideal, not a proposition to defend. We can see a few complications with this as a descriptive proposition that render it indefensible. First, based on sheer historical contingencies, norms of the practice of philosophy of religion as we know it today emerged within medieval patriarchal Jewish, Christian, and Islamic institutions and early Western academies. As trends in publications about it over the last forty years show, a narrow set of topics, arguments, and historical figures related to medieval monotheistic theology constrain what counts as “traditional” philosophy of religion—such as arguments for (or against) the existence of a god, the problem of evil, the logical consistency of divine attributes, the nature and rationality of religious belief, and more (see [Knepper 2013](#)). If this state of the field represents the best philosophy of religions has to offer—framed and sanctioned by university publishers, no less—then one might conclude not only that philosophy of religion is *not* intrinsically feminist, but also that it is perfectly fine not being so.<sup>4</sup> Not only does this version of philosophy of religion seem licensed by religions themselves, it is also institutionally buttressed through hegemonic reiterations—such as when authors claim to develop arguments about “the traditional god” or call this kind of work “traditional philosophy of religion,” or when textbooks from the last fifty years claim to represent comprehensive overviews of the field.<sup>5</sup> Such authors and publishers and academic departments police institutionalized norms of the practice. In many other areas of our lives, we do not

<sup>2</sup> This stipulation will prove more significant in part II on “tradition.”

<sup>3</sup> Simone de Beauvoir and Luce Irigaray, for examples, are sometimes labeled as “second wave” feminists. However, neither of them explicitly identify themselves or their work as such. As we know, once we get into the details of any particular person’s work, we may find features that complicate any completely accurate categorization. This recalls to mind for me Richard Rorty’s reading of Robert Brandom’s work, asking Brandom how he responds when someone calls him a “relativist” (see [Rorty 1997](#)).

<sup>4</sup> This is, in essence, William Wood’s simplistic dismissal proposals to diversify philosophy of religion and increase its interdisciplinary relevance (see [Burley et al. 2015](#)).

<sup>5</sup> We can describe this as the conservative bent of what I have urged elsewhere we should call “theism policers” (see [Dickman 2017a](#)).

confuse institutionally sanctioned activities with the whole of something, and in fact often challenge such restrictions. For example, no one believes that only state recognized relationships—whether marriages or civil unions—captures the heart of loving relationships. Many of us challenge and even reject such current institutional codes.

Second, in light of institutionalized atrophy, numerous Religious Studies critics of so-called “traditional” philosophy of religion seek an expansion of institutional norms of the practice. The main contributors to this conversation so far are Kevin Schilbrack (see [Schilbrack 2014](#)), Timothy Knepper (see [Knepper 2013, 2014](#)), and most recently Thomas A. Lewis (see [Lewis 2015](#)). Schilbrack, for example, explains that traditional philosophy of religion is narrow, intellectualistic, and insular. It is narrow in its topic selection because it considers few issues relevant to religions outside of monotheistic doctrines. It is intellectualistic in its predominant focus on the rationality of beliefs or doctrinal claims made about a god.<sup>6</sup> It is especially insular in that philosophers of religion pay little to no attention to interdisciplinarity, in particular where or how their work may be informed by or relevant to the field of Religious Studies. So, philosophy of religion should strive to be broader, include focus on embodiment, and open up to interdisciplinarity with Religious Studies. When it comes to identifiably feminist philosophy of religion, though, Schilbrack and Knepper claim that this work is subject to the same narrowness, intellectualism, and insularity as traditional philosophy of religion. In other words, feminist philosophy of religion as developed so far does not yet seem worthy of this re-envisioned ideal for philosophy of religions. So, again, traditional philosophy of religion as it is now is not intrinsically feminist—or, rather, feminist philosophy of religion is not yet sufficiently expansive. This is the key inspiration for my contribution: I agree with these Religious Studies scholars about the narrowness, intellectualism, and insularity of current philosophy of religion as practiced in Philosophy departments. However, I think we can better serve feminist philosophy of religions than to position it as similarly narrow to “traditional” philosophy of religion.

One further complication here concerns reticence on the part of Western European feminist philosophers to engage religions or philosophy of religion (see [Anderson 2001](#)). Inasmuch as religions have proven to be sexist institutions, to engage them rather than reject them wholesale may make one susceptible to complicity with oppression. Western European feminists, especially of the first and second waves, generally display a suspicion of religion. As Anderson writes,

Feminists have not been able to imagine that either feminism or philosophy could exist in the subject area . . . of *religion*. On the one hand, there is the political commitment of feminism that appears to clash, if it is not inconsistent, with personal religious (or ‘private’) commitment; and on the other hand, there is once more the supposed neutrality of philosophy, especially analytic philosophy. ([Anderson 1998](#), p. 191, Anderson’s emphasis)

Have not empirical-historical religions proven to be patriarchal? How can a philosophy of religions worthy of the name be intrinsically feminist if religions themselves marginalize women? This is the third complication to the proposition that genuine philosophy of religions is intrinsically feminist. It seems that for many, feminist philosophies would prefer to have nothing to do with religions or philosophy of religions. Moreover, good “men” seem hard to find, perhaps especially in philosophy of religion (see, for example, [Lombrozo 2013](#)). Those of us in the field are susceptible both to structural and practical dynamics of masculine subjectivity, as well as to institutional and disciplinary conventions as these are affected by the hegemony of masculine subjectivity and Western European hegemony on the academy. Anderson describes this susceptibility as the masculine subject’s need for admiration in conquering, in subordinating and instrumentalizing feminine subjects to a use-value for what the masculine subject creates (see [Anderson 1998](#), p. 238).

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<sup>6</sup> In part III, we will see this is precisely Pamela Sue Anderson’s challenge to institutionalized philosophy of religion—even its conception of “rationality” is superficial and merely buttresses institutional interests of patriarchy rather than illuminates the depth of thought and reason.

Patriarchal biases play out in current philosophy of religion in two significant ways. On the one hand, most of what purports to be philosophy of religion is merely normatively policed Christian theism, centered on a father-god and hypermasculine trinity or boys' club. We need not rehearse here Christian feminist theological criticisms of patriarchy's effect on Christianity from radical directions with Mary Daly or from reformist directions with Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza and Sallie McFague. The point is merely that since philosophy of religion is predominantly Christian-centric and since Christianity is problematically patriarchal, then without sufficient reflexivity and honest self-criticism philosophy of religion merely reinscribes Christian patriarchal norms—and, perhaps even more insidiously, may be a line of defense protecting and policing those norms with rhetorics of "rationality." We can witness this in merely identifying recent high priests of the academic discipline, particularly those in the analytic bent, such as Alvin Plantinga, William Lane Craig, Nicholas Wolterstorff, and even the late William Rowe representing "friendly atheism." These philosophers purport to argue about "the *traditional* god" and to represent "*traditional* philosophy of religion" as if they are the proper vessels transmitting a past in its purity to the present. As Catherine Bell emphasizes, "[Traditionalization] is, in itself, a creative act of production, a strategic reproduction of the past in such a way as to maximize its domination of the present, usually by particular authorities defined as the sole guardians of the past and experts on ritual" (Bell 2009, p. 123). So-called "traditional theism" or "traditional philosophy of religion" is a creative and strategic production of a past to vie for domination in the present.

It is difficult, yet amusing, to imagine any of these representatives speaking on feminist issues in philosophy of religion. In conference panels or anthologies on analytic theology, a select group of analytic philosophers participate as the usual suspects to represent women's voices, such as Sarah Coakley and Linda Zagzebski. From the outside, they might come off as tokenized, where the high priests can claim "See, we are not sexist. We have many friends who are women." Coakley in particular is aware of this concern. Coakley addresses it by claiming that analytic theology is a legitimate field of inquiry and so it makes sense that anyone (including women) would research in it. Yet Coakley simultaneously advocates for further inclusiveness of more women, more subjects, and perhaps even more religions. Coakley writes, "For me, as a Christian feminist philosopher of religion, everyone is welcome at the *Analytic Theology* table. But those who want to join in just have to stay long enough, and work and argue cooperatively enough, to produce a delicious and sustaining new philosophical banquet for the next generation of philosophy's children" (Coakley 2013, p. 608). While I appreciate this invitation, does she really mean *everyone*? What about a feminist philosopher of religion who incorporates Nagarjuna's tetralemma to destabilize one's tendency to project essences on which to cling? Regardless, Coakley recognizes that institutionalized philosophy of religion in its current state is affected by sexist domination. As Coakley writes,

I take it as read that feminist critiques of analytic philosophy of religion have, at the very least, established the existence of a suspicious gender "subtext" in much writing in the discipline: the making of "God" in the image of the autonomous, Enlightenment "generic male," and, as I have argued elsewhere, the positing of an unconditioned "incompatibilistic" view of freedom as a supposedly necessary adjunct to the solution of the problem of evil are just two signs of the inherent elevation of a certain form of masculinism over the concerns of relationship, closeness, desire, or dependence, which have rightly exercised feminist theorists and ethicists. (Coakley 2005, p. 215)

Coakley agrees that recent philosophy of religion has a gender subtext, a sexist one. Yet Coakley seems neither particularly concerned about its narrow focus on only one religion nor especially concerned about its lack of interdisciplinarity with Religious Studies.

On the other hand, Religious Studies critics of analytic philosophy of religion, such as Schilbrack, Knepper, and Lewis, downplay rather than amplify feminist contributions to re-envisioning a more robust and comprehensive philosophy of religions beyond analytic Christian philosophical theology. That is, these Religious Studies scholars, while advocating for interdisciplinarity in philosophy of religion, do not seem to see feminist philosophy of religion as corroborating their calls for expansion.

Women's voices are at least inadvertently instrumentalized into foils for clarifying this niche. Knepper, for example, considers and critiques Anderson's advocacy for a "critically self-reflexive and self-aware" philosophy of religion available in continental philosophy. Knepper writes, "There are feminists . . . But . . . there is something more to be said . . . Beyond feminism, I just don't see many critical voices present in the inquiring community—not in the collections I examined, anyway—nor do I see here much critical self-awareness of continental philosophy of religion's ideological hegemony" (Knepper 2013, p. 58).<sup>7</sup> Schilbrack goes further. He writes, "Whether feminist philosophers of religion use the analytic approach or (more commonly) the Continental approach, they typically focus on the biases and distortions woven into traditional, masculine accounts of God and how these might be avoided. But the questions of theism are still usually central" (Schilbrack 2014, p. 10). Both Schilbrack and Knepper seem to respect the critical possibilities of feminist philosophy, but also express disappointment with applications of feminisms to philosophy of religion so far. Instead of pushing philosophy of religion beyond traditional boundaries, feminisms—in *their* eyes—merely reinscribe Christian-centric philosophical theology. While both Schilbrack and Knepper express some reticence (e.g., "not in the collections I examined, anyway") in downplaying feminisms, let us do the opposite and amplify a few voices already in corroboration with Schilbrack's and Knepper's advocacy for a re-envisioned philosophy of religions. I want to point out just three conveniently available illustrative sources, primarily from what has been called "second-wave" Western European feminist thought. Presumably if it works for these feminist thinkers, it works even more so for reflexive or "third wave" feminists. These three illustrations, I believe, provide a sufficient start of counterexamples to the claim that feminist philosophy of religion is too theistic made by Religious Studies critics of philosophy of religion.

In 1994, *Hypatia*—an explicitly feminist philosophy journal—put out a special issue volume devoted solely to feminist philosophy of religion. The articles and authors cover an assortment of topics—from interdisciplinarity where the relevance of religion is discussed for refining feminist social theory, to diverse religious traditions such as Hinduism and Buddhism in addition to Christianity, to issues about divine symbols and concepts, to problems in conceiving of the self, to a particular emphasis on embodiment. I list all these out because this special issue meets many of Schilbrack's main standards for the new vision of philosophy of religions. For example, he spends the second chapter of his book advocating for an embodied account of religiousness in order to readjust focus in philosophy of religions away from mere doctrinal propositions to the meaning of lived practices (Schilbrack 2014). In this way, *Hypatia's* special volume contributes to (and even preceded!) the quest to decenter the intellectualism of analytic philosophy of religion. Moreover, specific articles mention arguments for or against the existence of a god solely to indicate what they are *not* doing. Marjorie Hewitt Suchocki, for example, focuses on gender(s) intrinsic to different ideas of a god and ways feminists think "god" as beyond gender (Suchocki 1994, pp. 59–60). Perhaps more importantly, numerous articles delve into religions beyond Western monotheisms (see Patel 1994; Klein 1994). In these ways, the special volume contributes to (and even preceded!) the quest to overcome the narrowness in subject matters from which so-called traditional philosophy of religion suffers. Of particular interest for the relevance of philosophy to the study of religion is the representation of metatheoretical considerations about the relation(s) between feminisms and the study of religion. Amy Newman writes,

What I am advocating is that feminist social critics turn from abstract and ideologically motivated constructions of "religion" to empirically based constructions that express the actual self-understanding of particular persons or groups. My contention is that the cultivation of a more complex and sophisticated understanding of the role of both religious

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<sup>7</sup> The collections Knepper refers to are the numerous publications purporting to represent comprehensive overviews of the main topics in philosophy of religion. These collections include titles such as *Contemporary Debates in Philosophy of Religion*, edited by Michael Peterson and Raymond VanArragon (2004) and *Explorations in Contemporary Continental Philosophy of Religion*, edited by Deane-Peter Baker and Patrick Maxwell (2003) (see Knepper 2014).

and antireligious ideology in the perpetuation of various forms of oppression will result in feminist social criticism that is more realistic and effective, and that contributes to, rather than hinders, a better understanding of other cultures. (Newman 1994, p. 32)

In this way, the special volume contributes to (and even preceded!) the quest to overcome the disciplinary insularity of institutionalized philosophy of religion. These feminist philosophers of religion ought to be seen as collaborators with the efforts of Religious Studies critics of philosophy of religion.

In 1998, the late Pamela Sue Anderson published a thoroughgoing and rigorous proposal of “a feminist philosophy of religion” (Anderson 1998). What is particularly interesting about this statement alone, that formed the title of the work, is that Anderson deliberately uses the indefinite rather than the definite article in order to leave open the possibility of diversity and inclusiveness. Rather than being the final and definitive statement, Anderson instead proposes this philosophy of religion as one among many possibilities and opportunities to build within the field. Anderson spends the majority of the text questioning presuppositions about “rationality” in empirical and realist conceptions of rationality. Anderson writes,

The most questionable form of religious belief depends upon truth-claims about an ultimate reality, formulated from an allegedly unmediated experience of the world and reached by inductive reasoning from a supposedly neutral point of view. The implied objectivity, with its naïve standpoint on the empirical world, can be easily challenged; but the standpoints of less naïve empiricists might wisely be scrutinized as well. (Anderson 1998, p. 17)

In this way, Anderson challenges the intellectualist bias of institutionalized philosophy of religion. While not exactly focused on meanings of embodied or lived practice, Anderson turns to root symbols and metaphors as they give structure to concepts, in an attempt to ground concepts in lived practice. Although these two topics are the primary foci of the text, Anderson also includes considerations of religions beyond Western ones such as bhakti in Hinduism (see Anderson 1998, p. 171), and addresses metatheoretical concerns about the relations between psychoanalysis, standpoint feminism, and philosophy of religion (ibid., p. 100). In these ways, Anderson also challenges the narrowness and insularity of institutionalized philosophy of religion. Anderson, then, should be seen as a collaborator by Religious Studies critics of philosophy of religion.

In 2003, Luce Irigaray published *Between East and West: From Singularity to Community*. Irigaray draws resources from her personal experience of Asian religious practices, such as yoga and meditation, which she uses to criticize patriarchal dynamics of Western religions and philosophy. She writes, for example,

It seems to me that Schopenhauer could have learned from the traditions of India that the divine is not situated in an inaccessible transcendence. It is what I become, what I create. I become and I create (the) god(s) between immanence and transcendence. The rupture between immanence and transcendence is due, it seems to me, to... the release of each man and each woman from concern for realizing each day the passage from the microcosm to the macrocosm, from the mortal to the immortal, from tearing apart to unity... (Irigaray 2002a, pp. 43–44)

For Irigaray, speech-centered religions that focus on doctrines and propositions and beliefs forget that speech is dependent on breath. These doctrines become oppressive in part due to “immobilization of breathing” (Irigaray 2002a, p. 51). In this way, these religions and philosophy of religion substitute words for life. We can see here Irigaray’s contribution to challenging both the intellectualistic distortion and the narrowness of institutionalized philosophy of religion. While Irigaray does not seem to address disciplinary insularity directly in this text, it could be an interesting study to raise questions about this work as orientalist or culturally appropriative. Such a study would, I think, draw out more clearly Irigaray’s metamethodological themes where Irigaray shifts between philosophy, psychoanalysis,

and the study of religion. Nevertheless, Irigaray should be seen by Religious Studies critics as a compatriot in critiquing philosophy of religion.

These three counterexamples are resources—perhaps among others<sup>8</sup>—that I believe can be further amplified as explicitly feminist voices contributing to the expanded vision for philosophy of religions. This is not to say that institutionalized philosophy of religion has been feminist for some time. It is only to say that Religious Studies critics could have, and perhaps should have, included more mention of at least these as corroborators in their criticism of institutionalized philosophy of religion. As self-identifying feminist works, all three illustrate the pertinence of feminist philosophy of religions in corroboration with calls from Religious Studies scholars. All these are comrades in our pursuit of genuine philosophy of religions. Let us turn to focus closely on the rhetoric of “traditional” as qualifying certain conceptions of gods and qualifying certain conceptions of philosophy of religions.

## 2. “Traditional” Philosophy of Religion Has an Inadequate Notion of “Tradition”

Just as any philosophy of religions worthy of the name is intrinsically feminist, I also want to advocate for the regulative ideal that any philosophy of religions worthy of the name is intrinsically traditional. I find it disturbing that only some concepts of gods and only some concepts of philosophy of religion get the honor of being called “traditional” or identified as purportedly representing “the tradition.” Perhaps for some critics, it is not at all an honor to be traditional. Feminists like Kathleen MacIntosh and Kate Bagley advocate confronting and challenging traditions, as if traditions are the locus of oppression (see [MacIntosh and Bagley 2007](#)). This in part depends upon what “tradition” even means. This matters in thinking through feminist challenges to philosophy of religion because women have been and continue to be both bearers and transmitters of tradition, of culture, of upbuilding the human spirit—as we will examine in part three below. By recognizing this, we are positioned better both to comprehend and to attempt to rectify contortions oppressive to what Irigaray calls “feminine subjectivity” ([Irigaray 2007](#)). The aim here is to expose the vacuity of institutionalized philosophy of religion’s rhetorical use of “tradition.” Institutionalized philosophy of religion uses the rhetoric of “tradition” to make it seem as if current work is authorized by alignment with the weight of some imagined past. We are not just arguing about any god, but “the traditional” one, they might say. How or why has this vacuous rhetoric taken root in institutionalized philosophy of religion? Even Religious Studies critics give it this prestige—Schilbrack, for example, refers to the problematic kind of philosophy of religion as “traditional philosophy of religion” ([Schilbrack 2014](#), p. 3). I want to develop my proposed regulative ideal as an antidote to this hegemony. To support this, in this section I develop a distinction between the concepts of “tradition” and “institution” rooted in hermeneutic phenomenology.

One apparent problem with saying that genuine philosophy of religions is both feminist and traditional is that women’s voices have been excluded and erased from many traditions. Irigaray, for example, emphasizes this in her advocacy for recording female genealogies ([Irigaray 2007](#), p. 8). Irigaray writes, “Patriarchal power is organized by submitting one genealogy to the other . . . The masculine line of filiation . . . doesn’t symbolize the woman’s relationship to her mother” (*ibid.*, pp. 8–9). Institutions concerned with genealogies do not symbolize matrilineal filiations. In relation to this, Irigaray underscores that male divine symbols inhibit female spiritual projection. Rooted in a spin on Feuerbach’s anthropological theology, Irigaray explains that without female symbols of

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<sup>8</sup> We might consider, for example, Leah Kalmanson’s recent comparative work studying bell hooks in relation to Buddhism with regard to aesthetics and liberation (see [Kalmanson 2012](#)). There are a couple of issues here. While this work clearly extends beyond Christian-centrism and includes reflexive (or third-wave) feminist thought with hooks, it does not explicitly develop interdisciplinarity in the direction of Religious Studies. For example, how might such a project change in light of Lopez’s (see [Lopez 1995](#)) and Masuzawa’s (see [Masuzawa 2005](#)) work on the construction of “Buddhism”? Indeed, this problem may be a factor for the three listed counterexamples in general. How have feminist philosophers of religion, even those that demonstrate expansiveness, shown an awareness of their work as situated in conversation with Religious Studies scholarship? This is, in actuality, the major point Schilbrack, Knepper, and Lewis make.

the divine, women's ability to develop subjective or spiritual possibilities is inhibited (Irigaray 2007, p. 11). Moreover, as de Beauvoir urges, women are disenfranchised in ways other minority groups are not, and so women are essentially "other" (De Beauvoir 2009, pp. 6–8). In light of this, it seems obvious that women's voices have not been included within traditional religions. Nevertheless, we also know women have contributed in various substantive ways to shaping spiritual traditions, such as medieval Christian mystics like Hildegard of Bingen, Hadewijch of Antwerp, and Teresa of Ávila. Consider also how the historical Buddha's step-mother, Mahaprajapati, was instrumental in creating opportunities of ordination for women as Buddhist nuns. And this says nothing about the various dynamics of social history and lived experience happening behind the scenes of typical presentation of historical developments in terms of what McRae describes as a "string of pearls" or lives of "great men" (McRae 2003). Feminist philosophy of religions cannot merely be a confrontation against "traditional philosophy of religion" because some women—however few—have been effective contributors to religious traditions in ways available to them despite institutionalized patriarchal conditions. I want to respect those contributions, while simultaneously both recognizing that conditions are still oppressive and recognizing the imperative need to change things. We should move toward a culture, as Irigaray advocates, where women can express themselves from themselves and for themselves (see Irigaray 2007, p. 98). At the same time, we should respect and own traditions which women have already created. Yet my focus is not on *being* religious or religious philosophy, but on the academic study of religion. As noted in the previous section, there is a tension in the academic study of religion as philosophy of religion takes place in Philosophy departments (representing the location of most institutionalized philosophy of religion) versus in Religious Studies departments (representing the location of advocacy for an expanded vision of philosophy of religions). The "tradition" at stake is the academic discipline of philosophy of religion, not a specific religious tradition or religious philosophy. My concern here is to advocate that both feminist *and* traditional philosophy of religions ought to confront not "tradition" but what I have been calling *institutionalized* philosophy of religion. I have addressed ways feminist philosophy of religions contributes to this challenge. I now seek to explain how we might rehabilitate a notion of "tradition" to challenge its vacuous usage within institutionalized philosophy of religion.

I want us to approach our rehabilitation of "tradition" in rough alignment with the hermeneutic phenomenology of Ricoeur and Anderson. As Anderson emphasizes, an important feature of philosophical anthropologies that attempt to account for our *effort* to be or human growth is some notion of what we can call "projection" or "yearning" (see Anderson 2001, p. 197).<sup>9</sup> We are not human beings, but human *becomings*. Our effort to become is guided by futural projections, and these projections are structured by what Anderson calls "regulative ideals" (see Anderson 1998, pp. 135–37). Regulative ideals are what we are left with to guide practical reason in the place of transcendent metaphysical ideas (such as "God") after Kant's destruction of metaphysics.<sup>10</sup> They do not, as Anderson writes, "constitute knowledge. But they can direct human understanding toward a practical goal without forgetting the illusion of claiming to know what is beyond every given experience" (Anderson 2001, p. 137). Regulative ideals are concretized in specific symbols and archetypes, and these are configured and reconfigured into narrative wholes or myths (*ibid.*).<sup>11</sup> Symbols and myths open up possibilities for our becoming. They are regulative ideals through which we project our yearning and striving, and

<sup>9</sup> We can trace Anderson's emphasis on "becoming" in theorizing human being not only to Irigaray (see Irigaray 2002b, pp. 112–25) and Heidegger (see Heidegger 2010, pp. 138–48), but we can see it most clearly rooted in Feuerbach (see, for example, Feuerbach 1989, pp. 22–23) and Irigaray's spin on Feuerbach (see Irigaray 1993). Ricoeur develops his notion of our "effort" to be in his critique of Marx, Nietzsche, and Freud (see Ricoeur 1974, p. 446).

<sup>10</sup> Anderson develops this on the basis of Kant's critique of the ideas of pure reason, such as his paralogisms of the soul or his analysis of the ideal of pure reason (see Kant 2007, pp. 314–529).

<sup>11</sup> See Ricoeur on configuration, mimesis, and interpretation (Ricoeur). See also Tillich's development of symbols and myths as concretized or context specific expressions of ultimate concern (Tillich 2001, pp. 47–62; Dickman 2017b). Tillich provides illustrations of different symbols, such as money for success, the flag for nationalists or patriots, and religious symbols for religious communities like the cross in Christianity. Some key features of symbols are that they cannot be intentionally

re-appropriate ourselves for fuller self-realization. This is the fundamental feature of culture, or the cultivation of fully realized human beings. For example, when one sits in meditation or performs *zazen*, one alienates one's self from oneself in striving to emulate the Buddha and in so sitting one returns to oneself having sat in emulation of the Buddha. Irigaray argues that patriarchal societies have a limited, or marked absence of, symbols for projections and re-appropriations of feminine subjectivity (Irigaray 2007, p. 11).<sup>12</sup> The quest for equality, in Irigaray's eyes, can serve to promote men as the symbolic ideal toward which women strive. Irigaray points out that "motherhood," if deployed as symbolic of a regulative ideal for cultivating feminine selfhood, can be made complicit with patriarchal social systems. She writes,

So many young women and so many girls expect their cultural elders to give them a lead on the possibility of their becoming women without an *exclusive* subjection to motherhood, and without, for all that, being reduced to male identity. I think it shows that the goals of our liberation have remained tied to a culture that offers women no subjective opportunities, and that, for want of an identity of their own, many are, in a vague sort of way, trying to find a niche for themselves within a technological era that needs their energy to give itself the illusion of a future. (Irigaray 2007, p. 128)

Cultures function to cultivate human becomings through symbolic and mythic projections, and these are rooted in specific practices and rituals (see Bell 2009). Yet feminine subjectivity is inhibited by a lack of symbols, myths, and practices that could facilitate its blossoming. I am not inclined to explain this as a result of cultural traditions proper, but as a result of institutionalized restrictions on cultural and traditional productions. Allow me to elaborate by focusing more closely on "tradition" and "institution."

According to Alasdair MacIntyre, institutions are necessary for housing and preserving practices, but are dangerous to practices because they are constituted by forces centrifugal to the regulative ideals and internal goods of practices (MacIntyre 1981, p. 194). Institutions corrupt practices without proper critical oversight. For example, an athletic game can turn into a spectacle if the players and owners and audiences are more concerned about money, an external good, than about the game being played well or playing to the best of their abilities, a good internal to the practice. Yet money is necessary for the building and maintenance of spaces where most games can take place. I want the word "institutionalize" to denote that drift away from goods internal to a practice toward external goods and peculiar—often oppressive—distributions of those external goods. More men hold executive administrative roles. Men acquire more money than women. As a practice becomes more and more institutionalized (drifting toward external goods), the participants involved lose more and more sight of goods internal to the practice—perhaps to the point where the very practice itself is occluded. That is, the very power and capacity of symbols and myths to make possible self-realization of different selfhoods is undermined and blocked up. Institutionalization blocks up the circulation of projection. Moreover, institutionalization restricts and polices power distributions as well as specifies hierarchies of roles. And these institutional arrangements take on the veneer of what is "only natural."<sup>13</sup> While institutions structure material environments within which practices may take place, practices and symbolic orders structure spiritual cultivation of human beings.<sup>14</sup>

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invented and that they open up aspects of ourselves and reality unavailable without those symbols. This parallels Emile Durkheim's explanation of the development of totems in many ways (see Durkheim 2008).

<sup>12</sup> Mary Daly's later work represents a radical effort to create authentic feminine symbols and myths (see, for example, Daly 1990).

<sup>13</sup> This is nothing new to say. For example, Socrates discusses the unnatural subordination of women in Athenian institutions Martin in his advocacy that women can be rulers of the ideal city (Plato 1991, 456c).

<sup>14</sup> I think a further way to distinguish "tradition" and "institution" is through Heidegger's distinction between "world" and "earth" (see Heidegger 2001). Heidegger writes, "The world is the self-disclosing openness of the broad paths of the simple and essential decisions in the destiny of an historical people. The earth is the spontaneous forthcoming of that which is

Traditions are practices considered diachronically; practices are traditions considered synchronically (see Stout 2005, pp. 135–36). Traditions are practices under effects history and accumulation. Practices are cooperative activities with standards of excellence or regulative ideals, and participation in such activities involves comportment to and adoption of those standards (MacIntyre 1981). Rules of games free us to play them. If we take away the rules and standards of play, then we lose the freedom to play the games. Moreover, standards of excellence are inherited and change through innovative activity or superior insight. Through practices, we cultivate human beings or kinds of subjects, where we are empowered by appropriation of skills local to a practice and can extend our capacities to use those skills in contexts beyond the specific practice. (In education, we call these “transferable skills.”) Practices, however, have no goals outside themselves. They cultivate spiritual growth (see Gadamer 2013, p. 11). In them, we strive beyond our particularistic nature, such as giving way to anger, and rise to more universal perspectives where we can consider and understand a plurality of perspectives in an open horizon. Cultural symbols and practices make possible our striving for subjective realization and fulfillment (Irigaray 2007). As Gadamer elaborates, history conditions our horizons of significance and meaning while simultaneously opening us for innovations, and these effects of history are embodied in practices as traditions. As such, traditions are always a part of us, shaping our projections for becoming (Gadamer 2013, p. 294). The open horizon of possibilities is key for an adequate concept of tradition to confront the vacuous use of the term in institutionalized philosophy of religion. Traditions are dynamic, informed by processes of both sedimentation and innovation (see Gadamer 2013, p. 293; Ricoeur 1986, p. 125; Fingarette 1972, pp. 68–69; Bell 2009, pp. 123–24). Yet the word “tradition” is usually associated with only one side of that dynamic, making it seem as if it denoted some ahistorical sedimented and unchanging entity. Traditions are historically effected practices structured by symbolic and mythic conventions, in response to contextual contingencies. Indeed, such contingencies are often the stimuli by which innovations occur. This dialectic definitive for traditions can be observed in evolutions of musical performance. Each occasion a musical score is performed changes history of the piece. Each occasion is affected by contingent circumstances, from the acoustics of the space to the quality of the instruments to the skill or talent of the performer. This can also be observed in traditions of Quranic recitation (see Sells 2007, pp. 163–65). Yet for some instances, these factors coincide in a performance that sets a new standard for the tradition of recitation. This history and dynamism of tradition is precisely the opposite of what is implied by phrases in institutionalized philosophy of religion such as “traditional theism” or “traditional philosophy of religion.”

I want to draw out a few implications. First, I want to emphasize here that this differentiation between “institution” and “tradition” does not correspond to the categories of “nature” and “culture.” As Irigaray insists, those labels try to capture a difference between “what grows on its own” (nature) and what is made (culture). For Irigaray, this very distinction is itself “made” or artificial (Irigaray 2002a, pp. 112–25). All our cultural and natural blossoming and growth occurs through traditions within institutions. Second, I want to raise a question about the location of oppression. Are traditions, as historically accumulated symbolic and mythic orders embodied in practices, the sorts of things that can be oppressive? Or might we be better served to address forces of oppression strictly in terms of institutions? Of course, the word “tradition” gets used in many ways, and my stipulative development is not the dominant conventional use of the term. My question is about tradition so defined, not “tradition” as, say, Williams approaches it.<sup>15</sup> Moreover, both words get

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continually self-secluding and to that extent sheltering and concealing. World and earth are essentially different from one another and yet are never separated. The world grounds itself on the earth, and earth juts through world. But the relation between world and earth does not wither away into the empty unity of opposites unconcerned with one another. The world, in resting upon the earth, strives to surmount it. As self-opening it cannot endure anything closed. The earth, however, as sheltering and concealing, tends always to draw the world into itself and keep it there” (Heidegger 2001, p. 47).

<sup>15</sup> We need to realize there are other theories and analyses of “tradition,” such as that by Williams, who claims it is always ideologically suspect (see Williams 1983, p. 319). To me, it seems that “tradition” as it is developed in philosophical hermeneutics is merely a homonym with “tradition” as it is developed in Marxist criticism. I do not see a need to have

used in many ways, sometimes to the point where they might be used synonymously, or where institution might be a subordinate aspect of tradition. I think this question matters because I want to promote the option to make use of tradition as a resource to combat oppression. As we have seen, traditions are the fount of subjective possibilities for self-realization. But that does not mean traditions have control over or can control alternative uses of symbols. Irigaray, for example, does not critique any particular symbol itself as intrinsically patriarchal or oppressive. Presumably, men need symbols for their possibilities for projections and self-realizations. As noted above, Irigaray asks where symbols are available for distinctively feminine projections. The problem is the unequal distribution of subjective opportunities, opportunities for spiritual blossoming through projection and re-appropriation. We might benefit from considering a specific symbol, such as a swastika. Is a swastika oppressive? Which one? The Nazi assimilation of it and deployment of it to mobilize millions seems to suggest it is oppressive. Indeed, this perception of swastikas on the part of Westerners has led American Hindus to feel cognitive dissonance about putting decorative swastikas out for Diwali (see [Shah 2016](#)). Japanese officials have considered removing swastikas from their maps as the symbols for locating Buddhist temples (see [Wong 2016](#)), and some Buddhist temples in America have been pressured to remove swastikas on their buildings (see [Willis and Enriquez 1994](#)). Are these traditional issues—that is, issues best conceived in terms of dynamics of traditions and practices? Or are these issues institutional—that is, best approached in terms of institutional dynamics? It seems that, just as Japanese officials seek to use institutional power and policy to change maps, so did Nazi officials deploy swastikas strategically by means of institutional policies and so does patriarchy restrict symbolic possibilities through institutional control. Or, consider the “air Jordan” symbol. Does it emblemize yearning for athletic excellence, or has the Nike company mobilized it institutionally for profit? If we can raise this question, then perhaps we might be freed to make use of tradition so conceived here to confront institutionalized oppressions that concern inequitable distribution of opportunities for subjective projection and appropriation.<sup>16</sup>

The third implication I want to draw out more explicitly is how we might approach “authority” from the direction of traditions or from the direction of institutions. On the one hand, there is institutionalized authority, the authority structured by and executed from an institution. This is, I believe, how many people think of authority. As Western Europeans inherited from the Enlightenment thinkers and the Reformation leaders, all authority is looked on with suspicion, as if all authority is authoritarian (see [Gadamer 2013](#), pp. 283–91; [MacIntyre 1981](#)). Only institutions have the coercive power and resources to be authoritarian. Coercion forces things to happen, compels actions through tangible means and threats, treating people as mere objects (see [Fingarette 1972](#), pp. 8–11). On the other hand, there is what we can call “traditional authority.” The Enlightenment prejudice against all institutional authoritarianism distorted and occluded this kind of authority. It is, as Gadamer explains, rooted in and earned by superiority of insight and knowledge ([Gadamer 2013](#), p. 291). Traditional authority is not, as Bell seeks to explain it, an oppressive appeal to and deployment of the past compelling acceptance and dominating the present ([Bell 2009](#), pp. 120–23). That is an institutionalized use, or abuse, of “traditional authority” where it is about coercion and domination rather than depth of insight or projection of more fulfilling possibilities. In light of all the above, many representatives in contemporary philosophy of religion police the discipline through the vacuous rhetoric of “tradition.”

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loyalty to one use over the other as “the” meaning or use, but merely that we need to recognize the word as a homonym, like the word “bank,” and not confuse the many senses of the word.

<sup>16</sup> Christoffer Lammer-Heindel has pointed out to me that this characterization of practices may be naïve, because we can imagine oppressive practices—such as religious practices that lead to horrendous effects, like when the State intervenes on some religions that refuse to get children medical treatment. Tillich, for example, claims that some symbols can be “demonic” (see [Tillich 2001](#)). While I am still thinking this specific point through, I am choosing to preserve the distinction for now, in the hope that my illustrations help shed further light on dynamics of tradition as these are distinct from dynamics of institutionalization.

By invoking tradition, they coerce present reflection into the narrow, intellectualistic, and insular restraints of Christian theism, rather than expressing superior insight.

I want to apply this distinction to what we can mean by a genuinely traditional philosophy of religions. While traditions are created, transmitted, and revised within institutions, it is the institutions that are patriarchal, not traditions themselves. Institutions can involve oppressive structures and execute oppressive power. Traditions, instead, are projective horizons of significances and meanings that change over time in response to contexts and circumstances. Rather than confronting tradition, we might be liberated to harness all the innovative and sedimented resources of tradition to confront oppressive institutions. Christian theism policers claim to be *the* traditional philosophy of religion, and in doing so “the traditional philosophy of religion” seems to be an oppressive institution. Theism policers claim to represent “traditional theism.” Plantinga, in his apologetics against naturalism, defines naturalism as the claim that “there is no such person as the God of traditional theism” (Plantinga 1993, p. 270). Couhagen urges that Moltmann and McFague ought to not be dismissed as “bullshit” because of the serious questions they raise for “traditional theism” (Couhagen 2013, p. 589). Even critics consent to position contemporary Reformed Christian theism as representing “the” tradition. Both Schilbrack and Knepper refer to Plantingian apologists as “traditional theists” or their idea of a god as “the traditional theistic God” (see Knepper 2013, p. 133). This inadvertently reinforces Christian apologists’ institutional hegemony over traditional philosophy of religion. Let us focus briefly just on Plantinga. What counts as traditional theism? Presumably we are talking about Ramanuja’s criticism of Shankara, since these two are classical representatives of traditional religious philosophy? Or perhaps by traditional theism Plantinga intends to include Huaigan’s effort to resolve doubts about Amitabha’s Pure Land? He most certainly intends to include conceptions of Olodumare in the Yoruba pantheon, right? Perhaps I am mistaken, but it seems that Yoruba religious practices, Pure Land doctrines, and debates in Advaita Vedanta all constitute traditions, and—in as much as they include reflection on the divine—are indeed traditional theism and traditional religious philosophy. One is hard pressed ever to find explicit warrant for excluding all these from the category of traditional theism, except for perhaps Griffiths’ advocacy for Christian apologetics in the face of religious diversity (Griffiths 2001).

What appears even more problematic is Craig’s appropriation of medieval Islamic theological reflection on “kalam” (Craig 2000). How is this different from other naïve cultural appropriations? It is the “Christoga” of analytic theology’s attempt to look relevant in a diverse world. One might object here to the analogy because, as one might argue, at least Islam lays within the broader category of Western theism, which apparently only includes Christianity, Judaism, and (sometimes) Islam. These so-called philosophers of religion anachronistically project contemporary Reformed Epistemological theism onto radically different historical epochs even within their own religion, let alone across religions. As Long writes, “It is fair to say that historically speaking this has been the dominant theological model of God” (Long 2006, p. 144). Which “god”? Marduk? Zeus? Theism policers purport to be speaking about the omni-being, the omniscient, omnibenevolent, and omnipotent god.<sup>17</sup> The rhetoric of “traditional philosophy of religion” or “the traditional concept of God” give off a veneer of an ahistorical essence remaining the same across generations when it should do the opposite, illuminate how people across time with different concepts can nevertheless remain in dialogue. It is naively anachronistic to project onto, say, Maimonides that a contemporary concept of a transcendent deity in light of the big bang is speaking about the same thing as his concept of a transcendent deity that is only possible if the world is not eternal. That is, his interest in conceptual formulation is motivated by questions that are not live for thinkers today, and these questions are definitive for his concepts, and so one cannot use a naïve and transparent hermeneutic in approaching his texts. I highlight this in brief to indicate that the rhetoric of “traditional” is merely the politics of orthodoxy in new clothes. Orthodoxy, as an institution, is primarily defined by persecution of what differs from it—the seeking

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<sup>17</sup> Rowe clarifies this concept and refers to it as “standard theism” (Rowe 2006, pp. 83–84).

out and the destruction of heresy, even the murder of heretics. But orthodoxy in *all* traditions is always historically *younger* than other forms of traditions. Orthodox Judaism, for instance, emerged only in reaction to the institutionalization of Reformed Judaism in the 1800s. It is naïve to believe that contemporary Catholicism represents a more ancient form of Christian tradition, since Catholicism as we know it emerged in response to the Reformation. Let us apply this to the rhetoric of traditional philosophy of religion. The hegemony of Reformed Epistemology emerged in the 1980s *after* the development of radical theologies such as Altizer's and Rubenstein's Death of God theologies, inspired by Tillichian philosophical theology, thinkers somewhat adept in religious diversity.<sup>18</sup> And yet Craig and others purport to call thinkers aligned with such expansiveness "atheists."<sup>19</sup> The institutional effects of such policing and persecution is that little to no such philosophy of religions is housed within Anglo-American Philosophy departments. That is, such policing has undermined the livelihood of philosophers of religions concerned with expansive and global questions. The publication industry in philosophy of religion reinforces this institutionalization of Reformed Epistemology as the norm or standard for "true" or "traditional" philosophy of religion. Yet, in light of my criticism, we ought to be able to see that defenses of the "traditional God" are little different from chants of "make America great again."<sup>20</sup>

The sort of philosophy of religion dominating discussions in Anglo-American settings does not deserve to be called "traditional philosophy of religion," if it even deserves to be called philosophy of religion. One thing I want to highlight here is that in the politics of orthodoxy, women's voices seem to drop out. We can see that so-called "traditional philosophy of religion" is far from reflexive about the dynamics of traditions. Yet showing what traditional philosophy of religions is not does not help us see what it could be. We need, I think, to develop a regulative ideal for philosophy of religions. What I want to turn to now are ways that feminisms can show women have been relevant to both tradition formation and ways of doing philosophy of religions.

### 3. Vignettes of Traditional Philosophy of Religions Renewed through Feminisms

In this final section, I examine four examples of women harnessing resources of tradition to challenge institutions. My hope is that these will shed light on new possibilities for philosophy of religions, a philosophy of religions that is both feminist *and* traditional. I intend this as a contribution to the discussion among Religious Studies scholars about philosophy of religions. I want to graft both feminism and tradition to Schilbrack's regulative ideal for philosophy of religions as expansive, embodied, and interdisciplinary with Religious Studies.

The first case I want us to look at is controversies concerning *mae chis* in Theravadin Buddhism in Thailand. For a number of decades, some women have sought to become nuns (fully ordained *bhiksuni*), but the official path for ordination includes the rule that at least one current nun must be present. This is impossible, however, because the order of Theravadin nuns died out centuries before Theravada entered Thailand, in large part because nuns have to follow much more stringent precepts than monks do. At the same time, this vacuum opened a space for a new form of religious practice, *mae chis* or female renunciates who abide by the eight novice precepts yet who do not have and do not seek full ordination (see Battaglia 2015). The global movement for full ordination is perceived by *mae chis* as pretentious, reaching beyond women's station to try to position themselves equal with or even above monks (Battaglia 2015, p. 40). The institution of nuns harkens back to the historical Buddha's legendary founding of the order of nuns in the first place. The legend is that Mahaprajapati Gautama, Siddhartha's step-mother, led or was among the leaders of over two hundred women followers of the

<sup>18</sup> Altizer, for example, has described himself as a "Christian Buddhist."

<sup>19</sup> What is particularly problematic about Craig is that he publicly denounces other Christian scholars, such as Crossan, as "atheists" (Craig 2010). This is the essence of theism policing.

<sup>20</sup> As if America were not founded on genocide of indigenous American peoples, the enslavement of Africans, the subjugation of women, and the persecution of LGBTQIA individuals.

Buddha (see [Murcott 1991](#), p. 18). Many of these women sought similar initiation and ordination to that which many men had received, and so as an appointed leader of the group (and as the Buddha's caretaker no less!), she asked him numerous times if he could allow women's ordination as nuns. The Buddha is said to have refused three times, and each time led to the women despairing of their exclusion. However, Ananda—the Buddha's sidekick (who, by the way, never was ordained during the Buddha's life, but only upon the need of the Sangha in creating the canon)—interceded, and pointed out the Buddha's hypocrisy to him. Because the Buddha felt trapped, that he might cause Ananda to suffer if he continued to refuse, he seems to have begrudgingly consented to allow there to be an order of nuns—emphasizing that his Dharma's effect will be cut in half. He also added that nuns must take up additional precepts, one in particular is that the most senior nun will always be junior to the most junior monk (see [Strong 1994](#), pp. 51–55).

There are numerous ways this legend is read in Buddhist scholarship (whether academic or confessional). The surface reading suggests that the Buddha is as misogynistic as other ancient (and contemporary) male figures of absolute authority, and that his hand was forced by Ananda. An alternative reading is that these additional precepts were necessary for equalizing the institutional power of Mahaprajapati—who was like a queen of her region. That is, if she were to become ordained, not only would she have supreme political power, she would then also have supreme spiritual power (see, for example, [Senauke and Moon 1994](#)). On this reading, the Buddha's additional rules are contextual, and beneficial for preserving harmonious power distributions. I highlight this legend of Mahaprajapati (and Ananda) as well as interpretive possibilities because they are relevant background for clarifying different dynamics the global movement for women's ordination confront. There are some Thai women who have turned to Mahayana and Vajrayana Sanghas where nuns have not died out, and have received ordination from those nuns. Can this count for Theravadin institutions? Or, alternatively, are mae chis challenging gendered norms of precepts altogether, seeing full ordination as the attempt to be equal to monks? This is particularly significant in Thailand because there are cases where mae chis have been physically assaulted because they are perceived as cross-dressing, as women who are dressing up like men (see [Pipat 2007](#)). These are challenges to institutions, and many involved bring to bear both feminist and traditional resources. As Rita Gross points out, "Buddhist feminist strategies ... contain a built-in assumption; Buddhism is not a closed, finished, and unchangeable system, but like any living religious symbol system, changes and incorporates non-traditional elements into itself. For an insider to a symbol system that takes impermanence as a basic fact of existence, to assert otherwise would be rather inconsistent" ([Gross 1999](#), p. 79). I want to alter the wording here slightly: Buddhism changes and incorporates non-institutionally sanctioned elements into itself, an aspect of innovation within the dynamics of tradition.

I want us to see how mae chis represent a crucial topic for a genuinely traditional and a genuinely feminist philosophy of religions. This is not about arguments for or against the existence of some god. Instead, it is about controversies of how religiousness is even embodied—do gendered binaries even apply to mae chis or do they provide leverage to deconstruct oppressive gendered institutions? Moreover, this is not just about the meaning of rituals, but about activist commitment despite obstacle after obstacle (perhaps even from the beginning with the Buddha's discouragement and implementation of additional precepts). I am particularly interested in ways this might prove fruitful for philosophical interrogation of dynamics between institutions and traditions in general or ways comparison with this might shed light on other religious institutions. When we consider principles for organizing, say, a textbook or course on philosophy of religions, could an entire text or course consider questions solely stemming from dynamics surrounding mae chis? Yet we tolerate texts and courses solely concerned with the existence of, the properties of, and the justifications for belief in a god. We might imagine a critic here arguing that questions about the god of "traditional theism" are

richer and deeper metaphysically, epistemologically, ethically, and logically.<sup>21</sup> In light of the above, I want to point out that this inclination is a function of institutional policing, specifically as this affects our imaginative possibilities and capabilities for symbolic projections. In our current institutional arrangement and distribution of symbols where “gods” are emphasized, it would be no surprise for questions about a god to *seem* richer.

In connection with this challenge to institutional authority, I want to turn to a different religious history to bring out the topic more clearly. As King elaborates in her close study of the Gospel of Mary, early Christianity was shaped by numerous contestations, particularly the contestation over the criterion for appropriate authority and leadership (see King 2003). Who can best take over leadership of a nascent religious community after the founder has died? How can we even determine the fitting criteria for this? These questions should not be a surprise to committed Christians because they are the very ones addressed in, say, Paul’s discourses about “Judaizers” in Jerusalem, such as James and Peter (see Galatians 2:14). Paul is celebrated as appropriately challenging their authority and domination (and purported distortion) of burgeoning Christianity. Paul asserts that appropriate criteria for institutional credibility are: (a) one must have met Christ in person (whether physically or through a vision); and (b) one must include Gentiles.

What we see with the discovery of non-canonical writings is that there were many more voices vying for institutional recognition or even domination. What is particularly interesting for this current project about the Gospel of Mary is that the narrative hero, Mary, not only is characterized as appropriate for leadership but also criticizes Peter and other disciples. I am not concerned here with which text is more historically accurate to what occurred among Jesus’ followers, though this is itself an interesting investigation. I am interested more in King’s use of and development of the Gospel of Mary as a criticism of institutionalized authority, aligned with Pagels’s criticism of taking the resurrection as a literal historical fact (see Pagels 1989, pp. 6–8). Pagels does not argue that physical resurrections do not occur (which of course they do not), but instead traces out the way in which a physical or literalist approach to resurrection is complicit with men’s institutional hegemony, emphasizing that such an approach legitimizes the (predominantly male) witnesses, those present to the purported historical fact, as the proper inheritors of authority no matter what their character. Mary is seen as the appropriate inheritor of leadership due to her superiority of insight, not due to being present to a physical resurrection (King 2003, pp. 171–74). This makes her a more fitting leader in contrast to Peter who comes off as an emotional hothead. This suggests an additional way for philosophy of religions to interrogate the relation(s) between “institutions” and “traditions,” particularly with regard to the issue of leadership and authority.

In this negotiation of institutional authority, the most fundamental authority concerns one’s ability to speak for oneself. As the #MeToo movement unfolds, we can recognize a key issue is a generalized feeling of inability of many women to speak up—whether it is in the moment of sexual aggression and violation, or in latter recollections in which one tries to narrate and share her traumatic experiences of real and perceived violations. This is why I want to turn to amplify spaces in which women have created communities of separation for dialogue (see Burrow 2010, pp. 256–58). A collection of self-identifying Muslim women contributed to a publication titled *I Speak for Myself: American Women on Being Muslim* (Ebrahimji and Suratwala 2011). Imagined and created by Maria M. Ebrahimji and Zahra T. Suratwala, this space is for first-person narratives written by American women negotiating the perceived dichotomy between Islamic and Western values (Ebrahimji and Suratwala 2011, p. xv). They recognize growing interest in such projects, supporting others to create their own contributions to the “I speak for myself” series, such as one for Muslim athletes. Ebrahimji and Suratwala recognize the need for Muslims, and Muslim women in particular, to speak for themselves in the hostile climate of religious prejudice in the US, but also recognize the need to bring together a diverse set of voices

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<sup>21</sup> I want to thank one of my reviewers for raising this possibility.

representing the plurality of Muslim identities—from environmentalists to fashionistas, from coaches to engineers, and from anthropologists to Facebook friends.

I want to highlight in particular here Hebah Ahmed's discussion about Muhammad's feminism in her contribution titled "The Muslim Feminist." She describes how digging into her religious materials with more critical rigor in college actually helped her see feminist values in her religion. She highlights not only Khadija's virtues as mentor and partner to Muhammad, but also Muhammad's own compassionate and giving manner with which he interacted with women (Ebrahimji and Suratwala 2011, p. 34). We also know that Muhammad listened to, argued with, and was even chastised by Aisha (see Aslan 2011, p. 123). Muhammad was a feminist, and—for Ahmed—the proper role model for men in her life. Her criticism of the men is that they distort or do not know the real history of their own religion, and instead allow institutional norms to dictate their reception of tradition. Perhaps surprising to some, Ahmed chooses to don the niqab, and has defended this choice in public on CNN against dismissive criticisms by purportedly liberal secular feminists (Ahmed 2011). Ahmed definitely speaks for herself. A further way of inquiry, then, for philosophy of religions is to focus on voice, the relation(s) between who speaks for and in institutions or traditions.

I think each of these dynamics are significant in their own right as topics for a genuine philosophy of religions. I want to tie them together in a progressive way to make one final critical operation on so-called "traditional philosophy of religion." I want to do this in honor of the late Pamela Sue Anderson, and her major work challenging models of rationality institutionalized in professional philosophy in general and philosophy of religion in particular. I want to bring out the particular potency of Anderson's work by seeing it in light of speaking for oneself like Muslim women, in light of challenging criteria for authority like the author of Mary's gospel, and in creating new institutional spaces like the *mae chis*. In a radical statement, Anderson underscores that the theistic framework that dominates institutionalized philosophy of religion fails to notice the uncritical (and thus the unphilosophical) nature of the privileged concept of a god (see Anderson 2001, p. 191). As Anderson writes,

a new starting point for philosophy of religion is now necessary. At least a more inclusive focus for philosophy of religion in the twenty-first century would seem to be crucial to the future of the field in a world with ever-interesting diversity, including diverse practices of religion. Both the particularity of beliefs as embodied in religious practices and the generality of religious yearning must be addressed. (Anderson 2001, p. 192)

At issue is not just the institutions and practices of religions themselves, but the very institution of philosophy of religion as a discipline or field.

Anderson challenges institutionalized philosophy of religion in numerous ways. She points out that theistic arguments are male-neutral and immoral since they assume oppressive gender hierarchy as the status quo (Anderson 1998, p. 16). The arguments are both circular and include oppressive pernicious beliefs. The role of feminist critique is to transform the overall framework of belief, a "framework biased according to sex/gender, race, ethnicity, and class" (Anderson 1998, p. 33). Anderson urges that the task, then, is to supplement and reform philosophy of religions with less biased methods, ones developed from feminist insights (*ibid.*). In light of our development of the differences between institutions and traditions, we need not reform traditional philosophy of religions but we do need to confront and dismantle institutionalized philosophy of religion. Key to this transformation of the overall framework is "to use knowledge of one's historicity and social situatedness as a resource for generating less partial and less false beliefs" (Anderson 1998, p. 44). Theodicies, for example, are generally callous toward women's inordinate suffering throughout history because they typically fail to acknowledge "material and mental conditions of inequality and injustice . . ." (Anderson 1998, p. 17). Why has such an unjust and unwarranted framework dominated two thousand years of western history (see Anderson 1998, p. 48)? We need, instead, a theory and acknowledgment of difference without oppressive hierarchies structuring our conceptual framework. This is not really even about equality, but, as Irigaray often stresses, "respect for differences" (Irigaray 2007, p. 4). Through this

transformation of the overall framework of rationality, Anderson develops and expresses yearning or desire for justice beyond institutionalized philosophy of religion, to what I urge we recognize as both feminist *and* traditional philosophy of religions. Instituting this includes, Anderson points out, “men who are feminists too” (Anderson 1998, p. 213).

Anderson disrupts the patriarchal structure of institutionalized rationality and theisms (see Anderson 1998, p. 213). The kind of rationality exploited in such oppressive institutions is instrumental reason, coordinated merely by utility or by the logic of means and ends (see Anderson 1998, p. 217). While opening up advances in technology, it also makes possible ever more efficient and effective and subtle oppressive hierarchies in institutions. This is partially captured in Bell’s theory of ritualization, where expedient hierarchical oppositions are exploited for the usurpation or preservation of material powers (see Bell 2009). Instrumental reason denies that an alternative model of reasoning even exists. Anderson, like Tillich and Adorno before her, calls this alternative “substantive reason” (Anderson 1998, p. 217). Instrumentalized reason purports to begin from a neutral standpoint, as if a disembodied position were possible. Substantive reason engages in critical and self-reflective thinking on one’s own embodied standpoint (see Anderson 1998, p. 217). In this way, thinkers can recognize histories of injustice toward women and marginalized others.

The implications for conceiving of divine beings starts to look radical in light of this transformation of the framework. Does a divine being exist? As Anderson writes,

Due to the serious nature and significant function played by a deity who exists ideally and/or mythically, it is not likely that I should accept any trivial or any naïve realist [read: instrumental] sense of existence.<sup>22</sup> (Anderson 1998, p. 230)

The issue here is not about a god, but about how we even conceive of existence—on the basis of instrumental or substantive reason? Gods and Goddesses, divine beings, are regulative ideals—neither mere fiction nor purportedly empirical realities. Schilbrack coins the term “superempirical realities” to denote this dimension of being (Schilbrack 2014), and Tillich argues that only symbolic and mythical discourse (not directly literal and descriptive discourse) can open up these dimensions (Tillich 2001). Anderson emphasizes that we can qualify this kind of existence as “regulative existence” (Anderson 1998, p. 229). It involves understanding what myths and symbols mean in contrast to contingent knowledge of empirical material. The practical function of regulative ideals contrasts with explanatory accounts of events or facts. They regulate futural projections and actions. They do not explain things. There really are only two ways, then, in which a deity can be said to exist, according to Anderson: as an illusory idea or as an historical and changing regulative principle (see Anderson 1998, p. 230). As more and more male-centered discourse is discarded over time, the concept of “regulative ideals” notes what endures on the human horizon for guiding spiritual cultivation and maturation. By using multiple meanings of existence, Anderson thinks we can “construct belief in non-oppressive ideals and possibly deities female or male” (ibid.). Life in the full sense of the term involves our embodied pursuit of material and spiritual freedom (traditions), not mere prolonging or enduring through time (institutions). Because regulative ideals have been executed within institutions with patriarchal interests, women have not been able to become fully themselves or to speak for themselves (see Anderson 1998, p. 236). Through female dissent from institutional authoritarianism, we are enabled to blossom differently than we have come to so far.

#### 4. Concluding Considerations

I hope to have amplified some feminist voices who should be seen as contributing to the push for philosophy of religions to overcome its institutionalized narrowness, intellectualism, and insularity. Anderson is particularly significant in challenging the hegemony and subtlety of masculine constraints

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<sup>22</sup> Compare this to Tillich’s claim that no divine being exists (see Tillich 2001).

on what counts, what is legitimized institutionally, as rational or irrational. The goal has not been to try to liberate women from patriarchal surroundings, but to provide a more nuanced account of philosophy of religions throughout history to the present-day. I want us to see that an increasingly less patriarchal future can be enframed and performed, even in how we may be trained to approach “tradition.” I have sought to uncover untold stories without creating a monolithic picture of “woman.” What might be our regulative ideal for philosophy of religions? I think it requires grafting feminist contributions and a rehabilitation of tradition to Schilbrack’s model of an inclusive, embodied, and interdisciplinary philosophy of religions.

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