Debates on the relation between theology and religious studies ultimately revolve around epistemological questions: What are the respective limits of religious and academic knowledge and reasoning, and along what boundaries can they meet? This contribution argues that the “reality of religion” is the shared subject matter of these disciplines. For methodological purposes, a distinction is made between two poles: the “transcendent frame” of theology, which defines the reality of religion with reference to transcendence, and the “immanent frame” of religious studies, which defines the reality of religion with reference to the empirical or immanent and in which transcendence is “bracketed.” A qualified methodological agnosticism that considers the bounds of knowledge...
can further the dialogue between theology and religious studies on the status of transcendence. The theological apophatic method, which departs from a sense of not-knowing and the limits of human knowledge, can serve as a heuristic tool.

ONE of the main stumbling blocks in international debates on the relation between theology and religious studies or Religionswissenschaft has been how to determine the “bounds of knowledge” (Alles 2008, 5). Where do the boundaries between religious and secular knowledge and reasoning lie, and what are their respective limits? This question is pivotal in view of the meta-empirical or transcendent realm, which is invoked in most religious traditions and may count as a—if not the—core element of religion.¹

How should we approach this realm academically? Broadly speaking, there are two epistemological poles in studying religion: one a methodological atheism or naturalism² that excludes the inquiry of the meta-empirical or transcendent, the opposite a confessional theology that claims “insider” knowledge about the meta-empirical or transcendent. Both stances impede a broader interdisciplinary consideration of the meta-empirical or transcendent and hinder consensus on what (the study of) religion is actually about. Although much scholarship in religious studies is done somewhere in between, it has to position itself in view of these epistemological poles.

Our contribution aims to highlight the relation between theology and religious studies from a methodological perspective and to stimulate debates on methodology regarding the “meta-empirical.” We will argue that the apophatic method, which centers on awareness of not-knowing and the limits of human knowledge, can serve as a heuristic tool in interdisciplinary engagement by qualifying a methodological agnosticism. Although the disciplines and their respective frameworks remain distinct, apophatic agnosticism can provide an open ground for discussion on issues of religion and transcendence.

When addressing this meta-empirical realm, this article speaks of transcendence as the issue at stake. Although (or because) transcendence has been conceived in numerous ways, the term may bear less fraught

¹This description does not imply an essentialist definition of religion; it implies that this realm plays a role in many religions and religious experiences. Accordingly, the meta-empirical or divine/transcendent is central in many definitions of religion (cf. Stausberg and Gardiner 2017).

²We take methodological atheism to encompass methodological naturalism here, although the arguments in its support may differ (see Blum 2018a).
connotations than terms like god, sacred, numinous/holy, or indeed meta-empirical. We use the term here with the awareness that it is precisely such terms, including transcendence, which are contentious.

Our argument has three steps. First, we identify two epistemological frameworks in view of transcendence: the transcendent frame and the immanent frame. Second, we argue that a substantive understanding of transcendence is necessary for studying religion and that these frames do not sufficiently facilitate such an understanding. Third, we propose a methodological agnosticism, informed by the apophatic tradition, to qualify the notion of transcendence. Finally, after this theoretical and methodological exploration, we offer a practical example of engagement with methodological apophatic agnosticism in an academic setting.

TRANSCENDENT AND IMMANENT FRAMES

Although one could say that theology and religious studies share a subject matter, namely the “reality of religion” (Helmer 2012, 231), they are distinct in their ontological and epistemic commitments. Theology defines reality with reference to transcendence, and academic theologians struggle to find ways to speak adequately of transcendence and the human being in relation to it. By contrast, religious studies define reality with reference to the human/immanent, and scholars of religion struggle to find ways to speak adequately of gods, religion, and transcendence within the human world (cf. De Vries 2008, 6).

This difference is reflected in conceptions of what makes the “science” of religion. Scholars may argue for a naturalist and strictly empirical approach to religion, excluding any (Christian) “theological” influences or “extra-scientific agendas” (McCutcheon 2001; Martin and Wiebe 2016). Conversely, theological scholars may argue against attempts “to squeeze theology” into the framework of the so-called “normal science,” which is marked by the “fundamentally positivistic attitude” that science deals with an immanent “objective” reality and studies its internal and immanent structures and practices; by contrast, they consider theology as a discipline that resists this “objectifying” attitude (Round Table 2016, 211 and 223).

This distinction between the disciplines is succinctly stated by Gregory Alles:

The aim of the study of religions is knowledge about religions. The aim of theology is to formulate religious truth. [. . .] It seems inevitable that theologians will want to make religious claims that lie unmistakably outside the bounds of knowledge. As soon as they do, they leave the study of religion and engage in religious reflection. (2008, 5–6)
Such broad statements about theology and theologians prove too narrow in view of the “critical” potential of theology (Roberts 2004; Coakley 2005) and of long-standing fundamental theological discussions in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, ranging from Bultmann’s school of demythologization to Theology after Auschwitz. Still, as Alles’ statement does highlight a point of conflict between the disciplines, it is important to define the respective positions.

For heuristic purposes, we do so by distinguishing two ways of perception, the transcendent frame and the “immanent frame,” borrowing the latter term from Charles Taylor (2007, 539–93). As indicated above, in the transcendent frame, the human/immanent is defined in reference to transcendence; in the immanent frame, transcendence is defined in reference to the human/immanent. In other words, in the transcendent frame, transcendence is seen as a realm beyond its epistemic framework; in the immanent frame, transcendence is basically defined along the lines of its epistemic framework. In the immanent frame, transcendence can then be either excluded from scientific inquiry (methodological atheism) or included in the “language game” of religion (Asad 2003; King 2017, 7). This working distinction thus concerns the epistemic framework and not the possible personal conviction of a scholar; there may be theologians who operate with an immanent frame, and scholars of religion who operate with a transcendent frame.

The distinction between transcendence and immanence underlies the question of what determines the “bounds of knowledge.” On different levels, this question is essential to debates in the study of religion, among them the insider/outsider issue: can religious practitioners and communities, or indeed theologians, claim a kind of “religious” knowledge that would make them insiders as against the researcher who would be an outsider (cf. McCutcheon 1999)? Various scholars consider this a non-debate, arguing that there is no identifiable uniform “insider” (Tolstaya 2014a; Aston et al. 2015), or that the epistemological implications of a privileged “insider knowledge” are philosophically untenable (Jensen 2011; Gardiner and Engler 2011). A more fundamental question is at stake: do scholars have to engage at all with the “reality” or “truth” of the religious phenomena they study?

This latter question was present already in the heyday of Religionswissenschaft. As one of its founding figures, Cornelis Tiele, stated in his 1897 Gifford Lectures:

If it is maintained that the superhuman falls beyond the range of the perceptible, and that its existence cannot be proved by scientific or philosophical reasoning, we have our answer ready. The question whether
philosophy or metaphysics has any right to judge as to the reality of the objects of faith does not concern us here. We therefore leave the question open. The object of our science is not the superhuman itself, but religion based on belief in the superhuman; and the task of investigating religion as a historical-psychological, social, and wholly human phenomenon undoubtedly belongs to the domain of science. (1897, 4–5)

This quote shows the shift of the subject matter of academic inquiry towards an immanent frame in which religion is approached as a “wholly human phenomenon.”

Although Tiele intends to leave the question open, the stance that the “reality question” is not a matter of scientific inquiry was radicalized in the notion of methodological atheism formulated in Peter Berger’s *The Sacred Canopy* (1967). Berger posited that for methodological reasons, sociological scholarship of religion should “bracket” the question of (the truth and reality or ontological status of) transcendence, as it does not belong to the realm of the social and empirically observable; religious phenomena and experiences have to be considered as “originating in the human world” and located “within a wider spectrum of human experiences” (Berger [1967] 1990, 100 and 36).

Since then, this focus on the “wholly human” has informed various critical approaches to religion. Scholars like Russell McCutcheon take religion as a “thoroughly human doing” (2001, x). And Richard King states, “We are dealing here with human-engineered macroevents—complex networks of cultural phenomena that have been classified, for better or worse, under the rubric of ‘the religious’” (2017, 5). Methodological atheism, in various forms, can be said to be mostly “taken for granted” (Porpora 2006, 57) in the (social-) scientific study of religion.

Recent scholarship has challenged this strict bracketing, exploring ways to acknowledge the role of the “superhuman” or transcendence in relation to lived and sensorial aspects of religion. One thinks here of approaches such as lived or vernacular religion, material religion, and the ontological turn as well as of critical approaches, such as gender, post structuralist, and postcolonial studies. For all their differences, these approaches share a critical sensitivity towards methodological atheism and focus on the practiced and embodied dimensions of religion. Increasingly theological scholars also plead for including this lived dimension in their work (Coakley 2005).

Simultaneously, some are critical of supposed “crypto-theological” tendencies in the study of religion informed by Western Christian conceptions and epistemologies (Fitzgerald 2000; Meyer 2012; Blum 2018b, 8–9). This criticism is particularly directed at the phenomenological approach
and other approaches that conceive of religion as having an (transcendent or metaphysical) “essence”—such as Tiele (1897, 4–5).³

Tiele’s quote above also exemplifies that finding appropriate terms for the issues at stake, for example, superhuman, supernatural, experience, divine/transcendent, and religion, is problematic; it indicates the need for an informed, fundamental dialogue between theologians and scholars of religion or between the transcendent and immanent frames, so to speak, as there seems to be no consensus on what is actually at stake. As we will argue, a qualified methodological agnosticism can help such dialogue. Here a brief clarification may suffice: the debates would be furthered if not religion, but the transcendent itself would be claimed to have a transcendent or metaphysical “essence.”

There might seem a certain circularity in our defining the transcendent and immanent frames with reference to transcendence. However, since we consider these terms in their relation to the reality of religion, the question is: should an academic approach allow for a reality of religion that cannot be explained only in terms of “wholly human phenomena”? Thus, the content of the terms transcendent and immanent is not presupposed but posited to mark a crucial difference in approaching religion. Moreover, the question concerning the reality of religion exceeds the level of the “language game” of religion.

For now, it can be said that, in general, in religious studies transcendence is not considered the subject of scientific inquiry either because it is not empirically observable and social-scientifically interpretable, or because research focuses on what enables or mediates transcendence for a religious individual or community rather than on the transcendent as such. A key scholar in this latter school poignantly explains “bracketing” the transcendent from a disciplinary stance: “Since I am a scholar rooted in the social sciences, it is not my professional task to make statements concerning the true or imagined existence of the transcendental, or the ontological status of reality” (Meyer 2008, 712). However, confronting the “ontological status of reality” is essential to delineate transcendence and distinguish the transcendent and immanent frames, since debates also concern the possibilities of knowledge about this reality of religion. Otherwise transcendence is either obscured as a possible subject matter of academic inquiry, or equated with “wholly human phenomena,” as in functional definitions of religion that practically blur the distinction between transcendence and immanence (or between religious and secular; cf. Robbins 2012; Tolstaya 2018). Mostly invoked for methodological/heuristic reasons, the idea of bracketing also implies certain ontological commitments and in this respect is not strictly “neutral” (Lewis 2012; cf. Tweed 2016, 297; Jones 2019).

³What religion really is in its essence can only be ascertained as the result of our whole investigation” (Tiele 1897, 4–5).
TRANSCENDENCE: UNDER- OR OVERDEFINED?

How then can transcendence be included in academic inquiry into the reality of religion? How can it be methodologically delineated? We highlight three points where a substantive approach to transcendence (as opposed to a functional understanding) can further interdisciplinary inquiry and dialogue.

First, methodological atheism’s confinement within the human realm often proves at odds with religious practitioners’ professed belief in and lived experience of a transcendent source. This problem has been acknowledged, especially in studies of lived religion (Orsi 2005; MacGuire 2008). However, the urge to respect people’s religion on their own terms runs into epistemological problems, for example, when they give contradictory interpretations of supposedly the same phenomenon. This is one of the reasons the insider/outsider debate itself is not conclusive (Tolstaya 2014a; cf. Martin 2018, 60).

Second, when a substantive definition of transcendence is absent, there is no indicator for what can count as religion. Bracketing or underdefining transcendence potentially leads to “anything goes,” including such phenomena as a corporate enterprise or sport as religion (Lofton 2017). But this lack of a substantive definition is also an issue when dealing with contexts where religion conflates with ideology and is coopted for political ends. An inclusive understanding of religion potentially leaves the boundaries between religion and its politicization or ideologization unclear. This is not to argue for an exclusive or normative understanding but to highlight the implications of treating the “wholly human” as transcendent in academic discourse.

Third and most important for our discussion, there is in the broader spectrum of the humanities almost an overdefinition of transcendence, as there is of religion (Stausberg and Gardiner 2017; Schaffalitzky de Muckadell 2014). As Dalferth notes, throughout history the term transcendence has garnered different meanings that cannot form a single coherent concept (Dalferth 2012, 147). Dalferth himself offers a succinct philosophical typology of five “paradigms of transcendence” (Dalferth 2012, 148–53): ontological transcendence (the Platonic distinction between the apparent and the real world); divine transcendence (the Christian adaptation of the Platonic view into the distinction between creation and creator); epistemic transcendence (human knowledge is always incomplete in regard of the totality of what can be known); subjective transcendence (the subject making itself/its own knowledge the subject of inquiry, or the difference between knowing and being); and ethical transcendence (the relation of the subject to the O/other and the ethical appeal).

Similarly, from a modern interdisciplinary perspective, Stoker (2012, 6–9) distinguishes four “types of transcendence”: immanent transcendence
(the absolute is experienced in and through mundane reality, e.g., in Schleiermacher, Hegel, and Tillich), radical transcendence (the absolute is the wholly other and thus sharply distinguished from mundane reality, e.g., in Barth, Kierkegaard, and Marion), radical immanence (the absolute emptying itself in mundane reality \(\text{kenosis}\); e.g., in Altizer and Vattimo), and transcendence as alterity (the absolute/wholly other can appear in every other, e.g., in Levinas, Derrida, and Irigaray).

Such typologies and conceptions overlap in a certain qualified distinction between transcendence and immanence (cf. Dalferth 2012, 153). This distinction provides a basis to reconsider transcendence for methodological purposes. Christine Helmer notes that, if the reality of religion is the shared subject matter of theology and religious studies, theology is called to engage with the “lived religious practices of real men and women,” and religious studies “must be interested in the metaphysical and historical questions of the highest being in relation to thought and action” (2012, 239 and 245). Scrutiny of lived religious practices is of core importance for theology as well in order to maintain its sense of reality.

Yet, in our view, it is the reality of transcendence—rather than of religion—that should be perceived as the shared subject matter of theology and religious studies. To recap, without emphasis on the reality of transcendence, scholarly discourse on the reality of religion is vulnerable to the pitfalls of an unclear insider/outsider distinction, of “anything goes” in religion, of conflating religion and ideology, or of overemphasizing religious experience. Reflecting on the methodological atheism he himself proposed, Berger even called leaving transcendence out of account “quasi-scientific” (1974, 128). Methodology should enable interaction between disciplines rather than competition.

**Copernican Turn(s)**

The question of delineating transcendence returns us to the “bounds of knowledge.” The epistemological grounds for bracketing transcendence can be traced to philosophy’s “Copernican Turn” with Kant. This shift from ontology (ordering or theory of what is there) to epistemology (ordering or theory of how we know what is there) is roughly parallel to the shift from theology’s transcendent frame to religious studies’ immanent frame. The post-Kantian paradigm of religious studies implies a bracketing of transcendence since inquiry into the meta-empirical exceeds the bounds of knowledge.

However, subsequent adaptations of Kant’s framework contain a form of self-reference that hinders a “positive” and substantive methodological conception of transcendence. Richard King, for example, draws on Kant to critically reflect on how, in specific strands of religious studies, “the object of study is itself constructed in the act of examination itself” (2017, 5). King continues:
Just as Kant asks us to consider that the world of objects “out there” is actually framed by certain a priori categories that determine our perception of the world, we should recognize that the study of religion as a multidisciplinary field is not concerned with the examination of a stable phenomenon “out there” called “religion,” and that the object is itself constituted according to certain framing cultural assumptions. (2017, 5)

We focus on two aspects in this quote: the idea that scholarship itself constructs the research object religion (and by implication, transcendence) and the paradoxical self-reference in this idea. These aspects indicate that it is logically untenable to exclude the existence of the specific research object being “out there” or real.

King refers to theories that criticize “universalist pretensions of ‘Western theory’” in certain strands in the study of religion, a universalism that (according to the critics) reflects lingering Christian, specifically Protestant epistemologies and “cultural assumptions” (2017, 13). Since the 1970s, these critical theories have contributed to a consensus in the West that the idea of academic neutrality or scholarly objectivity in matters of transcendence and (lived) religion is misleading: there is no neutral language in view of the O/other, and scholars have to be aware of this in their own work. A succinct definition of this critique was given in the title of Jonathan Z. Smith’s inaugural lecture “Map is not Territory”: real-life religion is not the same as the mental and conceptual maps scholarship makes of it (1978).

However, the idea that scholarship may be affected by particular “framing assumptions” also applies to these critical theories. This leads to a semantic paradox. The thesis that there is no neutral or objective scholarly position (cf. King 2017, 6 and 11) seems to function itself as neutral and objective. Yet one cannot examine one’s own “conceptual lens and also look through it” (Schilbrack 2018b, 455). In terms of formal logic, the idea that one could do so is a reminder of “Russell’s paradox” in set theory, which circles on self-reference and elucidates our further argument (cf. Irvine and Deutsch 2016). Briefly summarized, set theory assumes that various subsets, in our case the framing assumptions of scholars of religion, theologians, anthropologists, sociologists etc., all belong to one defining set, in our case the set that there is no neutral language. Russell’s paradox arises by considering the specific set of “all sets that are not members of themselves.” This set can include itself only by not including itself (e.g., looking and not looking through the lens). In other words, either one’s set of framing assumptions is neutral, in which case it does not belong to the defining set; or one’s set of framing assumptions is not neutral, but then it would be a member of itself. Actually, this paradox applies to
any field where the limits and boundaries of knowledge are not observed and an overall view is claimed simultaneously with belonging to a specific set (cf. Tolstaya 2014b).

Another image to illustrate this form of self-reference is the “Aleph” as described by the Argentine writer and philosopher Jorge Luis Borges. In several short stories, including “The Aleph” (from 1945), Borges inverts Russell’s set paradox into the image of a set that includes all sets including itself, for example, the “Aleph”—a small iridescent sphere that includes the whole universe, including the Aleph. This would require simultaneously being inside and outside oneself. A similar image devised by Borges to illustrate this paradox is that of the map of an empire so large that it contains each detail of that empire on a scale of 1:1.

For getting a clearer view of the paradox at stake in scholarship, it might be helpful to apply this image—which evidently is an ad absurdum—to the idea proposed by Smith that “Map is not Territory.” The question would be: regarding transcendence, how can one distinguish the map from the territory? One could say that within an immanent frame, the territory is defined along the same terms as (or confined to) the map, namely as a “wholly human phenomenon.” Or if one follows King’s observation, one could say there is a map (as a “construct” of cultural framing assumptions) but no access to the territory.

By contrast, in a transcendent frame, the idea that “map is not territory” could be taken consistently insofar as it departs from a sense of transcendence that does not 1:1 coincide with “wholly human phenomena” and “cultural assumptions.” And to link to another well-known dictum of Smith, if there is no data for religion and the term “is solely the creation of the scholar’s study” for analytical purposes (Smith 1978, xi, cited in Arnal 2017, 422), then it can be said that transcendence per definition cannot be the creation of the scholar’s study, since it would exceed any map. But what Smith also implied is that one cannot chart territory without a map, and this confirms the need for a delineation of the term transcendence as much as of the term religion.

Russell’s paradox and Borges’ images can serve as heuristic tools to highlight a general paradox in the immanent framework of modern scholarship. Thus, they also apply to King’s argument, plausible as it is. From the observation that “religion” as an object of study often “is itself constructed in the act of examination,” one cannot conclusively infer that there is no stable phenomenon “out there” that one could study. King would have to clarify how this inference would itself belong to his own (and probably

Yet, another image is that of a library with a catalogue that includes all of the library’s books. Will such a catalogue include itself? (Cf. J. L. Borges story from 1941 “The Library of Babel”).
others’) “framing cultural assumptions.” In this case, the paradox would mean (to vary King’s phrasing) being the object constructed and the subject constructing the constructed. Nevertheless, one cannot posit a territory an sich that would be the privilege of the religious practitioner or the theological “insider” (cf. Martin 2018). Thus, while the message of critical theories is that “map is not territory,” the methodological question is how to make sure this territory is not made into a terra prohibita rather than terra incognita.

**Boundaries and the Limits of Knowledge**

If the contemporary immanent frame of religious studies implies not speaking of transcendence because doing so would exceed the bounds of knowledge, the transcendent frame of theology implies one cannot adequately speak of the transcendent because it exceeds these bounds. Ideally, theology considers the reality of transcendence and from there grapples with the “bounds” of (human) knowledge instead of positing these bounds and then excluding transcendence from consideration. Where for the study of religion inquiry ends with transcendence, for theology this is where inquiry begins. This also means the disciplines remain distinct, but there is no justification not to challenge the epistemic commitments of one’s own discipline. The methodological agnosticism we propose helps face this challenge without lapsing into the self-reference of one’s own framework.

Dalferth refers to a useful Kantian distinction in defining the bounds of knowledge, the distinction between boundaries (Grenzen) and limits (Schranken) (Dalferth 2012, 158–60). We apply this distinction to the relation between theological and religious studies and their respective “frames.” The immanent frame is concerned with boundaries of knowledge, the transcendent frame with the limits of knowledge. It is this latter sense that, in our view, qualifies transcendence as transcendence. Boundaries presuppose the possibility of transcending one’s current position or state (immanence). In epistemic terms, this implies that although we do not know everything, in principle there is nothing that could not be known. This aligns with what Dalferth calls “epistemic transcendence.”

By contrast, a limit presupposes an “absolute” transcendence that does not allow to “transcend” our current position or state, since any move would be within the realm of the immanent. In epistemic terms, this implies that there is something we cannot know by definition. This is reflected, for example, in the Christian conception of God as unknowable in essence and aligns with what Dalferth calls ontological or divine transcendence. For religious studies, transcendence is a descriptive term; for
theology it is a limit term. Descriptive suggests here that religion and transcendence are framed in terms of the social, cultural, psychological, material, or, to recap, as a “wholly human phenomenon.” This brackets the reality question and at the same time enables conceptions of transcendence that apply to the “human world” (Berger [1967] 1990, 36): self-transcendence, sport or arts as transcendent events, etc. The same goes for conceptions or theories that posit a certain transcendence within the functioning of society, like Durkheim’s sacred (Robbins 2012). By contrast, limit suggests that no terms are adequate to frame transcendence and that it evades any language.

Key for our contribution, the methodological consideration of transcendence in religious studies and theology, is to bring these two conceptions of the “bounds of knowledge” as boundaries and as limit into dialogue. In view of the above, this calls for revisiting the binary of confessional and critical/methodologically atheist or naturalist study of religion and their respective frames. The most promising mode to achieve this, in our view, is a methodological agnosticism that reflects on the inadequacy of language and speech or any other human activity in general in view of transcendence. Before turning to apophasis or negative speaking of transcendence as a source for methodology, let us briefly review some existing conceptions of methodological agnosticism.

**Methodological Agnosticism**

Although there is a significant body of literature on philosophical agnosticism, relatively little groundwork has been done on methodological agnosticism (Bell and Taylor 2014; Martin 2018, 54–55). One distinction in philosophical agnosticism, for all its variations, can be made between weak agnosticism, which entails that one confesses for oneself not to know whether God exists, and strong agnosticism, which entails that we cannot know whether God exists (Le Poidevin 2010, 9). Strong agnosticism thus has a post-Kantian ring in that it acknowledges the “bounds of knowledge,” but precisely because of these bounds it also leaves open the possibility of a realm beyond our knowledge.

The crux is whether this “not-knowing” is defined within a transcendent frame—in which case it would function as a limit term—or within an immanent frame—in which case it would be a descriptive term.

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5See King’s argument, “There is a need to think beyond the highly policed cold war between ‘theology’ and the social-scientific or ‘secular’ study of religion that has dominated the study of religion for much of the twentieth century. This opposition is built upon a binary opposition of the secular and the religious that is itself a constitutive feature of dominant Western discourses of modernity” (2017, 14f.).
As descriptive term, it would in principle not exclude the possibility of coming to know transcendence with sufficient information (evidential agnosticism; Le Poidevin 2010, 13–15). But the term transcendence (or God) implies that it can itself, as subject matter, not be known in essence. Here the position one takes determines the further argument; as with the term religion, there is no “neutral” position from which to speak about transcendence, and this includes the observation that there is no neutral position from which to speak about transcendence (positing the distinction is a “speech act”).

So how, within the confines of methodology, can academic language relate to a transcendence that by definition is unknowable, a divine or radical transcendence? This methodological question implies more than speaking of the “unsayable” (Franke 2014) or “ineffable” (Brown and Simmons 2017): ineffability is not “essential” to transcendence, but an attribute that negatively characterizes the inability of scholarly speech—or to refer again to the terms used by King, of people’s framing assumptions and constructs—to capture transcendence. Thus, we do not intend to posit transcendence in such a way that it would result from aporias within language as a sort of “God of the gaps,” since such positing would rely on an immanent frame in which transcendence is a descriptive term.

A methodological agnosticism overcomes this issue. However, currently the difference between methodological atheism and methodological agnosticism is unclear. For example, where Douglas Porpora (2006) and Jon Bialecki (2014) declare methodological atheism the “default” in the study of religion, James Cox (2003) and Frans Wijsen (2019, 38; cf. Platvoet and van Rinsum 2008, 165) suggest methodological agnosticism has been the default approach. And Ninian Smart argues that what Berger calls methodological atheism is more appropriately called methodological agnosticism (Smart 1973; cf. Martin 2018, 56). Already this unclarity and the often unintended connotations of the terms atheism and agnosticism call for elaboration of the agnostic position as an alternative.

A variety of agnostic positions is being adopted by researchers approaching religion from various angles. Emma Bell and Scott Taylor (2014, 550) propound a methodological agnosticism based on their dissatisfaction with “sacred and secular methodologies” for their fieldwork on belief, that is, with the binary of a “sacred philosophy of knowledge [which] constructs a problematic-privileged position based on insider experience and belief” and a “secular philosophy of knowledge [which] suggests an authoritative outsider position.” Their stance bears traces of the critical turn in religious studies and aims to move beyond confessional/religionist and scientific/positivist frameworks (see Helmer 2012; Platvoet and Van Rinsum 2008, 162). They summarize their considerations thus:
Research on religion does not need to accept the credibility of the sacred, but equally researchers cannot simply write belief into secular social or cultural theory, ignoring the differentiated status believers attribute to it. Agnosticism provides a way of acknowledging and respecting this differentiation without committing to it as metaphysical truth. Doubtful belief may be one of the most thought-provoking methodological positions a researcher can take. (Platvoet and Van Rinsum 2008, 554)

In his plea for a phenomenological approach, Jason Blum states that interpreting religious experience and consciousness does not require us to “posit a transcendent realm or entity” (2012, 1038); Blum adheres to an attitude of *epoche* or methodological agnosticism for methodological purposes only. J. Angelo Corlett and Josh Cangelosi approach agnosticism in terms of epistemic justification, arguing that a refutation of theism, even if cogent, does not directly imply atheism nor is itself a conclusive epistemic position (2015, 94). In this sense, agnosticism would be an intellectually and academically honest stance. Porpora, in a review of Berger’s methodological atheism, argues that it practically excludes the possibility of engaging with religious experience, since Berger’s social constructionism rests on taking human belief as projection (Porpora 2006). Methodological agnosticism would enable a more open (and less prejudiced) stance towards religious experience. Finally, in line with Porpora, Kevin Schilbrack (2018a) proposes a “two-tiered” model. In the first descriptive stage, the scholar postpones their own explanation and renders as clearly as possible how religious practitioners understand their religion. In the second explanatory phase, the scholar seeks the best explanation without privileging either naturalist or religionist explanations. In Schilbrack’s brief summary, “In stage one, both natural and supernatural causes are both [sic] excluded, but in stage two, both are included” (Schilbrack 2018a, 266).

Against such conceptions, Craig Martin argues for the “impossibility” of methodological agnosticism from a philosophical perspective: there are epistemic and ontological commitments in academic discourse that one cannot be agnostic about; if one could, scholarship would not have much to say (Martin 2018, 54 and 71). For example, he contests Schilbrack’s model as the distinction between descriptive and explanatory on which it relies does not hold: even description, Martin notes, entails explanation and thereby epistemological and ontological commitments (Martin 2018, 68–69). Martin seems to prefer a “discursive” approach to religious experience and understanding religious practitioners, taking language not as reference to or expression of a given religious meaning or experience, but as constitutive of meaning and experience. Martin endorses Tim
Murphy’s statement that instead of asking what discourses mean, we must ask what they do (Martin 2018, 63). This view, however, which holds that consciousness is “constructed by language” (Martin 2018, 63), seems to be an example of the sorts of approaches that largely leave the individual person out of account (Martin refers to Foucault and Bourdieu, among others). And that prompted Robert Orsi to note the limits of the “necessary concern” with the social and political contexts of religion, which turned into “the construction of religious actors as mindless practitioners whose interiorities and imaginations do not matter, or matter only as a function of the social” (2011, 14).

From a different perspective, Michael Cantrell (2018) states that neither methodological atheism nor methodological agnosticism can be normative for the study of religion. He argues that either way, bracketing the sacred as non-empirical precludes the possibility of inquiring the experiential and existential dimension in religious subjects’ relation to the sacred, or the truth of religious experience; as Cantrell stresses, “the sacred is empirically available to the believer in this world” and thus has to be considered a valid perspective to inquire religious claims and experiences (2018, 240). Not acknowledging this empirical dimension of the sacred hinders inquiring the real as well as the potentially delusive nature of religious experience. This stance tends towards the principle of critical trust or the “principle of charity” invoked by scholars like Richard Swinburne and Charles Taliaferro: experiences or appearances are trustworthy “unless there are positive reasons for doubting them” (Taliaferro 2012, 85; 95f.; for forceful counterarguments to this principle, see Gardiner and Engler 2011).

Strikingly, with the same objective of allowing for the reality of experience (and the experienced), Porpora argues for agnosticism whereas Cantrell opposes it. This may seem less striking once we consider how they approach the matter: focusing on experience, both can be said to argue within an immanent frame, since they conceive of the sacred (specifically Cantrell) in terms of experience. But as Bertrand Russell—a self-proclaimed agnostic—replied to theologian F. C. Copleston in an exchange on religious experience, “the whole argument from our own mental states to something outside us, is a very tricky affair” (Russell [1957] 2004, 139). It runs the risk of self-referentiality.

This leaves us with the given that experience remains an empty signifier until one looks at the specific claims and “empirically observable manifestations” of the particular experience (Sharf 1998). Then, however, these empirically observable manifestations coincide, at least partly, with (what is perceived by the believer as) the transcendent dimension of this experience. One could call this an unintended form of reductionism: in a
methodological sense, the sacred or the religious is reduced to a “wholly human phenomenon.” This same issue impinges on approaches like lived religion and material religion that equally deal with the relation between the sacred and religious experience and sensation. This is one main reason that necessitates a substantive or positive definition of transcendence for methodological purposes since religious experience (or what may so be called) involves a dynamic between transcendence and immanence. The apophatic tradition and negative theology can offer a methodological marker here in that they are skeptical of such identification or conflation of experience and transcendence (Turner 1995).

This is not to play out the human and the transcendent against each other or to consider religion as something sui generis. Rather, what the various suggestions for methodological agnosticism have in common is that they have no clear conception of transcendence as a “positive” referent one could be agnostic about. Conceptions of the link between experience and a transcendent source of experience remain dissatisfactory as long as transcendence is either defined in terms of human experience (or other “immanent” facets), posited as an insider privilege, or not defined at all. To answer our questions in this piece, we argue that understanding the “reality of religion” and of religious experience requires a methodological delineation of the notion of transcendence. And as discussed above, any positing or non-positing of transcendence inevitably implies a position towards transcendence.

In the following, we propose an apophatic approach for a renewed dialogue between theology and religious studies that seeks more clarity concerning the status of transcendence.

METHODOLOGICAL AGNOSTICISM WITH AN APOPHATIC LENS

With a qualified agnosticism, we intend to provide a conception of transcendence that does not bracket the reality of transcendence (metempirical). A methodological agnosticism can be qualified by the definition of transcendence as a limit term, that which by definition is indefinable or “wholly unknown and unknowable” (Le Poidevin 2010, xiii). When positing transcendence as a limit term, we can only speak negatively, or apophatically, of transcendence. This also means that in interdisciplinary dialogue, both (confessional) theologians and scholars of religion have to develop an ability to “bracket” themselves, that is, their specific frameworks—cataphatic/positive discourse in theology, methodological atheist discourse in religious studies—while being aware of
their “conceptual” or experience/faith “lenses.” There is no blueprint for such dialogue, precisely because it is only by engaging in it, via concrete case studies, that it can be established.

The understanding that God is unknowable in essence, and the implications of this understanding for the “bounds of knowledge” and discourse about transcendence, has been particularly developed in Orthodox Christian apophatic theology, within a wider frame of religious and philosophical discourses on transcendence and ineffability. Although apophatic theology and the apophatic tradition have been widely invoked in contemporary religious thought, philosophy, literature, and arts (Franke 2007; 2014), to our knowledge, relatively few scholars have considered it as a source for methodological reflection in debates on religion. One philosopher who has is William Franke, who draws on apophatic theology and thought to enable “uncircumscribed dialogue among religious faiths and, perhaps even more importantly, between religious faith and secular culture” (2014, 271). He demonstrates the surplus value of apodynamics for theology and philosophy of religion in facilitating substantive dialogue between postmodern “secular” theologies that reject an absolute transcendence (Altizer, Mark Taylor, John Caputo) and contemporary theologies based on a (supposedly) traditional affirmation of divine transcendence (John Milbank, Catherine Pickstock, Rowan Williams). Franke posits these theologies within two “apparently conflicting currents within contemporary philosophy of religion”: “One has often articulated a wish to terminate talk of theological ‘transcendence,’ while the other rails against the modern ‘immanentist’ reduction of religion” (2014, 275).

Franke’s characterization of these two currents fits our distinction between the immanent and transcendent frames (2014, 272–75). As a direction for dialogue, he points to “the mutual implication of transcendence and immanence, as well as of affirmation and negation, an interweaving which is thought most originally and intensely in the theological tradition of apophasis” (Franke 2014, 275). A number of scholars and philosophers are working in this direction in whose work Franke finds underpinnings of negative theology, for instance, Hent de Vries, Kevin Hart, and Catherine Keller (Franke 2014, 274).

Franke also considers the methodological role of apophaticism: “In terms of content, it has nothing particular or positive to offer, but methodologically it can play a key regulatory role, given the pluralistic situation of philosophy today, by offering a theory as to why this pluralism of discourses is necessary in the first place” (2014, 149). What Franke here calls pluralism is an outcome of consistent apophatic thought: not to fix or locate the “unconditioned Absolute” (transcendence, God), but to “keep
that position open through some discourse about why it must remain empty for us and for all our discourses” (2014, 150). We might say that in this sense, apophaticism can become a regulatory or normative principle for methodological agnosticism in that it functions as the critical referent to any scholarly discourse and to emic and etic language alike.

However, the idea of apophasis can be a corrective or reference in scholarship because it exceeds the “scientific” frame: “The attempt to delimit and define apophasis, so as to avoid promiscuous and indiscriminate use of the term, has strong scientific motivation, but apophasis remains recalcitrant to all definition and simply does not lend itself to being made a useful and well-behaved scientific term” (Franke 2014, 151).

The paradox is that this evasive character calls for some kind of delimitation, if not of the term apophasis or apophatic, then at least of scholarly use of it. In a way similar to Smith’s insistence on the use of maps, scholars have argued that awareness of the limit of language does not exclude meaningful language on how to deal with this limit (Simmons 2017; Palmquist 2017). The crucial point when considering methodology is whether one considers one’s language from within a transcendent frame or an immanent frame. Self-reference or self-refutation does not arise when one acknowledges that transcendence evades any thought and language, but it does arise when transcendence or a derived term (holy, sacred, meta-empirical, etc.) is targeting the use of language.

Take theological discourse: from the Christian basic understanding of God as absolute transcendent, the apophatic method concludes that one can speak of God only in negative terms. One speaks then of God’s negative attributes (“unknowable,” “infinite,” “incomprehensible,” “impeccable,” “non-being,” etc.). It is only from this “negative” understanding that theologians attempt to formulate a “positive” common ground of an affirmative or cataphatic theology. It is only from interchange with apophatics that cataphatic theology has taken shape in ecclesial, dogmatic, and doctrinal language.

Orthodox apophatics, especially, conceives of the divine as transcendent and immanent. Orthodox apophatic theologians like Gregory of Nyssa or Gregory Palamas, or in Western theology, for example, Meister Eckhart, are carefully and tentatively trying to articulate this experience cataphatically: “It is [. . .] not accurate to say that cataphatic theology is simply about God’s immanence while apophatic theology is simply about God’s transcendence; each, always in relation to the other, is about the simultaneity of both God’s immanence and transcendence, about God’s ever-present presence and absence” (Papanikolaou 2006, 21).

God’s “immanence” in this theological discourse is, of course, not to be confused with the immanent frame as discussed above. This Orthodox
conception allows for a more inclusive understanding of the connection between transcendence and immanence than given in current notions of methodological agnosticism that aim to conceptualize the link between experience and a (supposed) transcendent source of experience. In Orthodox theological thought, God’s immanence, conceived as creation being in God—thus not fused with God’s essence (panentheism)—remains transcendent by definition.6

Such understanding can enable open scrutiny of religious phenomena and experience while being cautious toward emic (insider) claims on transcendence, including theological claims. The point is that any religious experience, as well as any language and speech, is inadequate in view of transcendence.

Evidently cataphatic theology can become self-referential, being concerned with its own language or framework. Cataphatic theology can lapse into “theologology,” to borrow a phrase from Frans Jozef van Beeck, who identified as a problem of Christian and catholic theology “that it has elicited so much ‘theologology,’” that is, talking about theologians and theology, but not actually doing theology: “Limiting theology to insistence on, and discussions about, existing doctrinal definitions and theologies will produce only theologology” (van Beeck 2001, 47 and 49). He stresses the linguistic component at the root of such “talking about talking about God” (cf. Coakley 2009, 90), in which theology becomes basically a self-referential discourse without reference to a divine/transcendent. This would be a variation of the risk of conflating religion and ideology (as mentioned above).

SELF-REFERENCE IN THE APOPHATIC APPROACH: JEAN-LUC NANDY

Self-reference, though of a different kind, is implied also in recent philosophies that draw on apophatic thought. To show how this self-reference works out, we take one “negative” example from the philosophy of Jean-Luc Nancy. Nancy is a telling example, especially because Franke considers him “the most outstanding representative of all, indeed, the most original creator of what I call a philosophy of the unsayable” (Franke 2014, 163). We briefly discuss Nancy’s thought in view of our methodological focus to highlight a potential risk in applying apophatic thought without an agnostic stance and in confusing the immanent and transcendent frames. We thus take Nancy here to illustrate a methodological problem

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6As distinct from pantheism, which implies God being (in) creation.
that could equally be analyzed in other thinkers who relate to apophatic thought (e.g., Jacques Derrida or Jean-Luc Marion).

After his early “aggressively anti-theological” works (cf. Franke 2014, 158) Nancy makes a turn towards appreciating what he sees as the “deconstructive” force of Christianity: he suggests a state of self-transcending or “going beyond itself” might make for the deepest tradition of Christianity (Nancy 2008, 141). The heart of the matter is expressed in his rejection of the notion of transcendence as “overburdened”:

Nonetheless, “transcendence” is what is at issue, however little the uniquely dynamic nature of this term is understood: it does not designate the status of a “being” [“être”] that would be supreme to a greater or lesser degree, but rather the movement whereby an existent leaves behind its simple equality to itself. Which means: to ex-ist in the full sense of the word. (Nancy 2013, 19)

This statement contains a major problem. The movement Nancy describes matches what we call the immanent frame: transcendence is conceived as emerging from within these frameworks in what Nancy calls leaving “equality to itself.” Yet since the frame or parameters within which “an existent” would exceed equality to itself remain the same, this would mean one is by definition equal to oneself; actually leaving equality to oneself behind requires a realm or being that lies beyond oneself, and there the problem arises of how to speak of this transcendence. In other words, the kind of movement Nancy suggests here is self-referential. Factually Nancy confuses transcendence (transcendent frame) with human self-transcending (immanent frame). He thus represents a self-referential application of apophasis within an immanent frame (cf. Kate 2012, 139–41).

Indeed Nancy explicitly describes this movement as a mode of overcoming the transcendence-immanence binary in what he, referring to art, calls “transimmanence”: “Art is the transcendence of immanence as such, the transcendence of an immanence that does not go outside itself in transcending, which is not ex-static but ek-sistant. A ‘transimmanence.' Art exposes this” (Nancy 1996, 34–35). Transimmanence seems an exemplar of Borges’ Aleph: anything that could exceed it is at the same time itself.

This self-referentiality and figure of thought is part of the reason why Nancy abandons the term transcendence and instead opts for the term adoration to express this movement. “Adoration is addressed to what exceeds address [. . .] ‘Here in the open: this is henceforth the world, our world. Open to nothing other than to itself. Transcendent in its own immanence’ (Nancy 2013, 20; cf. Nancy 2008, 120).
Franke sees in Nancy’s approach to the infinite through “adoration” an exact match with the procedure of apophatic theology: “It consists in the finite negating—by exceeding and exiting—itself so as to open to, and into, the infinite” (Franke 2014, 171). Yet, in this very approach we see a misapplication of apophatic thought. In Nancy, it is the immanent that determines the transcendent, “in its own immanence.” This is reinforced in a passage from the appendix where he inverts the idea of a transcendent “elsewhere.” It cannot be named, but it can be addressed:

This “elsewhere” is not, however, a beyond; it is not a transcendence, in the sense understood by theologies, nor is it a simple immanence, in the sense understood by those theologies that have been inverted into atheisms. This “elsewhere” is in us: it forms within us the most originary and the most energetic motor of the impetus that we are. (Nancy 2013, 102)

Even if Nancy seems to argue against theologians and thinkers of “radical immanence,” his own argument relies on the primacy of immanence over transcendence, on an immanent frame that excludes the reality or ontological primacy of the transcendent.

This restriction to immanence makes a substantive link between Nancy and the apophatic tradition unlikely. He explicitly rejects the notion of a “beyond” implied in negative theology (Nancy 2008, 122). This extends to the central notion of not-knowing or unknowing in apophasis: “And yet adoration causes us to receive this ignorance as truth: not a docta ignorantia, perhaps not even a “non-knowledge,” nothing that would still attempt to regain assurance in the negative, but the simple, naked truth that there is nothing in the place of God because there is no place for God” (Nancy 2013, 62).

Such a statement suggests an opposition to apophatic thought, not only because of the statement that there “is no place for God.” In apophatic theology, divine immanence, God’s permeation of the material and immaterial world (cf. the words of Orthodox liturgy: “God is everywhere present and fillest all things”) is of a completely different order than the human world: divine immanence remains absolutely transcendent. By contrast, in Nancy’s thought human transcendence is expressly immanent or even “absolute immanence” (Raffoul and Pettigrew 2007, 5). But in his argument these expressions get to function as if they were posited within a “transcendent” frame.

Similarly, figures of speech such as “we have become entirely beings who speak: our word goes nowhere except its own elsewhere” (Nancy 2013, 6; cf. Nancy 2007; Kate 2012, 141) and “the infinite in the finite”
(Nancy 2013, 3) are self-referential in substitution of transcendent with the immanent and finite. But this substitution takes the sting out of the idea of negative theology or apophatics: apophatics presupposes the reality of transcendence in the simultaneous awareness of the problematic character of the notion “reality” or “being” in this regard. Transcendent reality may be “in” the human being or in the world; it is by definition/essentially unknowable (and hence “beyond”).

By contrast, Nancy denies such reality. Where negative theology and apophatic thought consider the limits of language and experience in view of this reality that subsequently is circumscribed as unsayable or ineffable, in Nancy’s argument the idea of the unsayability or alterity of the “elsewhere” is substituted for this reality. In other words, Nancy himself creates the image of infinity in his language, but not in reality (cf. Nancy 2013, 176), a confusion of the performative and descriptive functions of language (Austin 2001).

Franke comes to a similar observation on the prominence of language in Nancy:

And yet an apophatic God is precisely not this or any other concept of God, but rather is encountered in opening to the unconceptualizable infinity to which Nancy, too, opens thought. What this infinity is, we cannot say. But there is also nothing that it is not, not in an absolute sense. Nancy embraces rather the relation to the whole of being that is made possible by language. (Franke 2014, 176)

Whereas Franke takes this as an element in Nancy’s philosophy inspired by apophatics, we consider it a fundamental difference, since it relies on its own “naming” and “speaking” to establish this sense and even the “whole of being.” Apophatics does not rely on its own naming and speaking but on apophasis to approximate the reality of transcendence. Strikingly, elsewhere in his book, Franke convincingly argues against conceptions of apophatics that consider it to refer to language and discourse and thus to be self-referential (in the sense of self-negation of its negation; Franke 2014, 150–52). In our analysis, Nancy has a similar self-referential conception in that his “elsewhere” derives from a discursive level, whereas “real” apophatic discourse, as Franke formulates it, “beyond its necessary self-critical moment […] is all about this something other, other than itself, indeed other than discourse altogether” (Franke 2014, 152). Apophasis then becomes a “discourse about discourse” (Franke 2014, 151; cf. 2007, 2–3) not dissimilar to “theologology” as “talking about talking about God.”

This discussion of Nancy is meant to show that a sense of apophatics can be misapplied when it comes to transcendence. To avoid self-reference,
at least for methodological purposes, allowance has to be made for the reality of transcendence or a “beyond.” But whereas the immanent frame basically excludes (considering) the reality of transcendence, the transcendent frame presupposes it. Thus, both frames in a way predecide the question of the reality of religion and of transcendence. Linking back to Helmer (2012 as cited above), in methodology both the lived and the transcendent (or metaphysical) dimensions of human religiosity have to be considered.

**PRACTICAL APPLICATION OF METHODOLOGICAL AGNOSTICISM WITH AN APOPHATIC LENS**

As indicated above, there is no blueprint for how a dialogue between theology and religious studies might unfold with the help of the apophatic method. As well as theoretical and methodological exploration, it requires very practical engagement and discussion. To offer an example of how this method might work in academia, we implemented a methodological assignment in a course at the Faculty of Religion and Theology, Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam (VU FRT), where Katya Tolstaya teaches. VU FRT is perfectly suited to such a methodological curriculum development because it houses “core” staff members with and without religious belonging as well as ten seminaries (e.g., Mennonites, Eastern Orthodox, Restored Reformed, Baptists, Buddhists, and Hindus). Some staff also identify as having “no religion.” VU FRT recently underwent a profile change following a process of profound dialogue on the academic status and methodology of theology and its relation to the status and methodology of religious studies. This led to the former Faculty of Theology being renamed the Faculty of Religion and Theology. The application of the apophatic method is a continuation of this dialogue between the different denominational theologies and religions, and religious studies.

The course for which the assignment was developed was Classics 2 on Fyodor M. Dostoevsky’s *The Brothers Karamazov*, on which (research) master’s students from different religions, denominations, and subdisciplines study together. The course is provided in English and is also open to colleagues and PhD students. The assignment was completed by eight Research Masters (ReMa) students, four Divinity Master’s students, three Restored Reformed Seminary (RRS) students, one Baptist Seminary student, and two PhD students. The assignment was also discussed during a class.

Regardless of their religious belonging, students can study at VU FRT from an insider (emic) or an outsider (etic) position. The table below shows how the students of the sample group identify themselves in this regard.
Students were aware of where and how the data would be used. The assignment asked them to (1) consciously approach Classics 2 classes and assignments considering their own (a) confessional and (b) disciplinary background. Then (2) at the end of the course, the students were invited to write a short reflection on the topic of dialogue between theology and religious studies and the possible role of the apophatic method therein. Furthermore, the students were encouraged to ask themselves how they would (re)write their assignments if they were to apply the apophatic method. As was made clear to them, the main objective of this assignment was to stimulate critical reflection on religious and theological commitments: how such reflection relates to their position in academic discourse, whether they were willing to follow the apophatic method, and to what extent they found it (not) useful.

Although the students were free to creatively explore this methodological assignment with their own experiences from the course assignments, some concrete questions were offered for reflection, for example “(a) semantics and grammar: how do you formulate your faith in your assignments, and e.g. assess your religious (textual) sources? (b) conceptual: what confessional, theological or religious studies concepts do you apply, and how? (c) hermeneutical: how do you read the (textual) sources and how do you present them in your assignment (i.e. to your reader)?”

Student Reflections on the Assignment

Most importantly, the students found this experiment in extending their awareness of their emic/etic positions by considering the boundaries or limits of knowledge in regard to the divine/transcendent useful. Below is a selection of responses reflecting a variety of positions.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Students</th>
<th>(Re)Ma/Divinity Ma + Specialization</th>
<th>Religious belonging</th>
<th>Emic/etic position</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1.H.V.</td>
<td>ReMa, New Testament</td>
<td>Reformed</td>
<td>emic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.G.V.</td>
<td>ReMa, New Testament</td>
<td>Reformed</td>
<td>etic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.D.B.</td>
<td>ReMa, Old Testament</td>
<td>Reformed</td>
<td>etic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.B.B.</td>
<td>ReMa, Old Testament</td>
<td>Reformed</td>
<td>etic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.M.P.</td>
<td>ReMa, Peace, Trauma and Religion</td>
<td>Serbian Orthodox</td>
<td>emic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.T.L.</td>
<td>ReMa, Religion</td>
<td>Shin Buddhist</td>
<td>emic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7.M.L.</td>
<td>ReMa, Peace, Trauma and Religion</td>
<td>Mennonite</td>
<td>etic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8.T.Le.</td>
<td>Baptist Seminary, Homiletics</td>
<td>Baptist</td>
<td>emic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9.H.O.</td>
<td>RRS</td>
<td>Restored-Reformed</td>
<td>emic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10.R.P.</td>
<td>RRS</td>
<td>Restored-Reformed</td>
<td>emic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11.E.D.</td>
<td>RRS</td>
<td>Restored-Reformed</td>
<td>emic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12.H.S.</td>
<td>PhD, Systematic Theology</td>
<td>Reformed</td>
<td>emic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13.B.P.</td>
<td>PhD</td>
<td>Serbian Orthodox</td>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
B.B. “I consider myself as belonging to the reformed tradition, although I do not confine myself to this tradition alone. Concerning my disciplinary perspectives, I primarily see myself as a scholar in Hebrew and Aramaic studies and secondly as a theologian. While studying Hebrew and Aramaic at Leiden University, the methods of religious studies were taught and a confessional perspective was not used in research. Simultaneously, I studied theology at the VU FRT and PThU [Protestant Theological University] which taught a theological perspective, and it required me to switch between those perspectives. In the course Classics 2, I primarily looked at the texts from a religious studies perspective, thus not using a confessional perspective. Rewriting my assignments, I would try to use the theological perspective, incorporating confession and faith more in my assignments. The apophatic method, I think, provides an opportunity to be fully academic, whilst allowing [one] to remain ‘faithful’ to a theological perspective.”

R.P. “It is important, when talking to each other, to be humble, from an apophatic attitude: there are limits to my knowledge. It has also proved to be right because I have discovered that Reformed theology can be enriched from Dostoevsky. This attitude of humbleness can only be valuable if you speak from your convictions, and know where you stand theologically, only then can conversation and meeting take place. Then the thinking is sharpened.”

H.O., evaluating a class group discussion of this assignment with S.A., T.Le., H.V., and T.L.: “We particularly appreciate that this assignment offers space to mirror your own tradition to this method.”

H.O.: “In class 8 [. . .] we (S.A., T.Le., T.L., H.V., and T.Le.) discussed this methodological approach. It was fascinating to see how a downright Christian work by D[ostoevsky] gave rise to an open conversation about the human soul. If I took this method into account, I would consciously take more into cognizance how I attribute properties to God, which could hinder a possible bridge in the dialogue between theology and religious sciences. So I would try to postpone judgement on (properties of) a transcendent God for as long as possible.”

T.L.: “In reflecting upon my assignments for this class about a classic work nourished in an Orthodox Christian context, I am reminded of the fact that not all religious perspectives can be equally represented in the theology/religious studies classroom. Being conscious of my own Buddhist background, I then always ask myself: How can we create an environment in which there is room for minority perspectives on the subject-matter? To this end, methodological agnosticism informed by apophaticism provided me with refreshing insight. For one, methodological agnosticism encourages epistemic humility as everyone is asked
to bracket their methodological and confessional commitments. This would, I believe, enable especially those with an interest/background in a minority-status religion/or even those with no religion to voice their perspectives without the feeling that they have to conform to a theological norm of the majority.”

H.S.: “This last novel from Dostoevsky [. . .] includes a word that is pivotal in theology and religious studies, ‘God.’ However, it is interesting that the conversation about God in the group, which includes individuals with different beliefs and religions, leads each individual to a variety of views that enrich one another. This is useful learning, not only to increase knowledge and experience but also to celebrate that knowledge and experience for the sake of living together. To arrive at this kind of learning, each of us seems to be struggling with how to articulate the reality of transcendence without being drawn into self-reference. I myself was struggling with the tension—to borrow a term from Mark C. Taylor [. . .]—between revelation and re-veilation, between opening up talk and silencing talk about God as the Transcendent. This may be because I am a Reformed Christian theologian who realized myself through being with others of different beliefs and religions. Honestly, for me, the urge to open talk about God or do cataphatic theology is much stronger than the urge to silence talk about God or do apophatic theology. However, Job’s words continually remind me of the need to be apophatic: ‘Indeed, I am completely unworthy—how could I reply to you? I put my hand over my mouth to silence myself. I have spoken once, but I cannot answer; twice, but I will say no more’ (Job 40: 4–5). In fact, the apophatic approach led me, not only to a living together with others but also to a life of fresh and fruitful spirituality of my own. I believe this apophatic approach can make theology a dialogy (a term from Carl A. Raschke [. . .]) which is good friends with other sciences, including religious studies.”

B.P.: “I see the value of the apophatic approach in that it opens us (theology and religious studies researchers) to the phenomenon (the ‘reality of religion’), epistemologically and methodologically. It can help us un-frame ourselves from the ‘transcendent frame’ of theology and from the ‘immanent frame’ of religious studies by ‘rejecting’ whatever concept (thought, image, feeling) may emerge in our pre-framed perceptions and judgments while approaching the reality of religion. Perhaps we could reach a state of sustained forgetfulness and unknowing, thus allowing reality itself to emerge before us, so that we can witness it not from where we come from (scientifically and habitually), but from where one (unframed) is. This idea can make it look like an experimental approach, yet, I would say that it might be developed and practiced very systematically, rigorously, and cautiously with regard to the ‘object’ of the study.”
Students on the Further Application of the Apophatic Method

Students also thought about directions for the further application of this method.

B.P.: “One way of practicing an apophatic approach would be to apply concepts of the ‘opposed’ frame, and thus to transcend one’s own limits/ boundaries of knowledge. New awarenesses or perceptions could emerge just by allowing a ‘foreign’ term its power of constructing reality (for example, by using ‘socialized body’ for ‘person in image and likeness of God’). Such an epistemological exercise can be practiced methodologically, as a way of revealing and rejecting the background realities of our fixed frames, like attributing God (Church/Man. . .) with any names and qualities. Thus, the apophatic method would directly (by implication) make us aware of [the] (dogmatic and axiological) inadequacy of calling God “Father,” for example (with an apophatic formula being: God is Father → God is not Father → God is Mother → God can as equally be called Father or Mother, for both names do not qualify God Him/ Herself). By similar application of the apophatic method, one becomes aware of the inadequacy of numerical fixation of the Holy Trinity. And by applying this method, it could make it possible to unframe the dogma of Trinity from numerical approximation and its representation in language. The apophatic approach is still to be developed in disciplinary terms, yet I see its promise in ‘overcoming methodolatry’ and thus liberating the potential of our disciplines by being on and moving across the boundary.”

H.O. suggested using this method in our Scriptural Reasoning classes, whereas G.V. has indicated yet another field of study of religion where methodology similar to the one proposed in this article can be applied successfully. G.V.: “An example of where methodological agnosticism, using an apophatic approach, could be useful—and is perhaps to some extent already used by some authors—is the two interrelated fields of the religious history of Israel and Old Testament theology respectively. Old Testament theology has an implicit kerygmatic interest (what is the theological value of the OT for the Church—it is still overwhelmingly a Christian enterprise). The study of the religious history of ancient Israel has no, a priori, special interest in the beliefs on ancient Israel, except within the broader context of the history and development of religion. The two might, however, be able to engage in dialogue by referring to Israel’s faith in their history with Yahweh. For both disciplines, it is left open whether there is actual divine revelation behind this faith or not. Still, the formulation is acceptable to neither include or exclude either assumption. Von Rad
already uses this sort of language in many passages in *Theologie des Alten Testaments*.

An interesting perspective in this regard has been provided by T.L., who has pointed out the possibility of formulating this method in accordance with Shin Buddhist tradition, which can be seen as similar to the Christian apophatic and cataphatic theology.\(^7\) He finds a similar “dynamic between the apophatic and the affirmative in the concept of ūpaya, or ‘skillful means.’” What T.L. means by this is that this Buddhist concept posits that the “Buddha-dharma is inexpressible and only comes in range of unenlightened human comprehension in a transformed matter depending on individual circumstances.” He thus observes that “at the core of ūpaya lies a claim of Buddhist apophasis,” whereas “cataphatic theology, the ūpaya itself, has a pedagogical value foremost: they help the practitioner encounter the apophatic reality of the Buddha-dharma.” Hence, he believes that by “recognizing the fact that our epistemic commitments are, at best, ūpaya, skillful means that help us along the way, it is made easier to bracket them. In fact, the bracketing itself can be a form of ūpaya for it aims to build mutual understanding and thus wholesomeness.” However, T.L. recognizes the potential limitations of using ūpaya in such a way as it is a “Buddhist/emic way of making sense of methodological agnosticism.”

Furthermore, as with our attempt to go beyond the reduction of the empirical and meta-empirical to the language or any other immanent frame, the ūpaya allows us to escape the dualism of human knowledge and language. This dualism “may only be true on a relative level, in a 'language-game’” and does not apply “on the absolute level” (which heuristically would correspond to our description of transcendence). Therefore, “ūpaya may have its uses in supplying the apophatic method, or at least it can help to secure the apophatic method further in a dialogue between the disciplines.” Providing that the proposed method is applied carefully, using the advantages of a complex concept of ūpaya “can do justice to the limits of our knowledge-field as well as appreciate different epistemologies.”

These observations from a Buddhist tradition make an important connection with the core reason for using the apophatic lens in the proposed application of methodological agnosticism, namely acknowledging the evasiveness of transcendence in respect of all human knowledge or language as the shared subject matter of religious studies and theology and a way of overcoming self-reference.

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\(^7\) This is not to neglect some Buddhist traditions that reject transcendence and ground soteriology in immanence.
The Relationship between Epistemic Humility and Methodological Agnosticism

We have seen R.P. proposing epistemic humility as a description of the apophatic method. D.B. also comes very close to seeing epistemic humility as identical with methodological agnosticism: “Because this approach already includes awareness of the conditions and limitations of any knowledge, I do not yet see any additional value in the apophatic approach.”

Similarly, one of the anonymous peer reviewers of the present article asked whether we might not achieve a comparable effect if we confined ourselves to methodological agnosticism perceived as epistemic humility. The point this reviewer brings in may be expected from other readers. It therefore seems appropriate to extend our illustration by entering into dialogue with this reviewer. Let us look at their question carefully:

It seems that the author(s) do a lot of work to say something that could be said much more easily as follows: religious studies and theology are separated according to what counts as evidence. Religious studies operates according to evidence that is, in principle, available to all members of the community of inquiry (hence the stress on empirical data collection and socio-historical methodologies). Theology, alternatively, operates according to (or allows for) evidence that is specific to those who are participants within a determinate religious tradition (hence the legitimacy of appeals to revealed texts, the tradition itself, etc.). When divided in this way, there is no need to talk about transcendence as somehow distinctive to religion, but instead, as the name given to various sorts of phenomena: the object of belief and practice (religious studies) or, alternatively, actual meta-empirical objects (theology). If we approach things this way, then not only are religious studies and theology in play, but also philosophy (which would ask into the plausibility and truth-conditions of the beliefs in relation to the coherence of such objects being actual). When understood this way, the turn to apophaticism is really just another name for appropriate epistemic humility in relation to the evidential standards of one’s discursive tradition.

Indeed, there is little to no difference between epistemic humility and methodological agnosticism. The core question is: why should we focus on transcendence? Two arguments should be considered to justify our position.

First, the division between religious studies and theology in the above quote seems to assume an immanent frame and insider knowledge for both disciplines. However, theology—at least as presupposed in our method—is not confined to solely operating “according to evidence that is specific to those who are participants within a determinate religious tradition” (immanent frame) but simultaneously evades any appropriation of
“revealed texts, the tradition itself, etc.” (transcendent frame) by acknowledging the limits of knowledge regarding this “evidence.” Operating solely according to this evidence would inevitably lead to self-reference or place the religious insider in the position of Borges’ alter-ego in “The Aleph”: within and outside the Aleph. It is exactly the point of any heuristic use of the apophatic lens within methodological agnosticism: also believers or theologians cannot “claim” insiders’ knowledge of transcendence or operate according to evidence that would be specific to them.

Arguably, furthermore, for religion to be religion there should be room for that which is beyond any knowledge or evidence; otherwise, it is not religion, but ideology (cf. Tólstaya 2018). To recap, the empirically observable manifestations coincide, at least partly, with (what is perceived by the believer as) the transcendent dimension of this experience.

Therefore, the need for transcendence as shared subject matter remains. It is acknowledging the limits of knowledge that will prevent theology from becoming self-referential. Besides the risks of self-reference, and fixation of language, when, instead of transcendence, we allow evidence (immanent frame) to be the key player in the dialogue, we risk ideologization (e.g., of Lenin or Mao Zedong, or the Communist party). Another side of the same coin would be, then, the issue of “anything goes,” when phenomena such as spaghetti monsters or football or any “transcending” human qualities may be easily described as religion.

The apophatic method, instead, facilitates discussion of the consequences of being apophatic for both emic and etic stances. This has been rightly observed by H.V., who, responding to the encouragement in the assignment, tried to explore the common ground for an apophatic dialogue between theology and religious studies. H.V. describes what we have called the immanent and transcendent frames with the term “attribution”: “While our attributions may differ, we could study the structure of the attributions together provided that they can co-exist, that is, starting from an agnostic, apophatic starting point that legitimizes this interpretative pluralism. We could learn from each other by studying the elements of attribution together:

- Assumptions that play a role in the attribution [...]
- Aspects of attribution
- Process-based approach of attribution
- The context of attribution: the process of identification and its elements
- The consequences of attribution: confirming belief or unbelief.

Perhaps through such a dialogue with religious studies or literature studies, we may come up with ideas that can help us describe and evaluate the process of attribution in more detail from multiple points of view. For people without a theological perspective on transcendence, it could be
that from this dialogue, they learn to distinguish new moments in the processes of identification, interpretation, and attribution.”

In summary, our experiment shows that there is a demonstrable benefit to the methodological approach we propose for a dialogue between religious studies and theology not only in purely theoretical and conceptual ways, but also in very practical ways at different academic levels, and—which is equally important—between various denominations and religions. VU FRT will continue to develop these heuristic tools. Similar benefit can be expected in the realms of religious diplomacy and ecumenical dialogue.

CONCLUSION

An apophatic approach offers methodological building blocks for academic theology and the study of religion and enables open interaction between the transcendent and immanent frames, as it facilitates a rethinking of the truth claims and “framing cultural assumptions” in each of the frames. It makes room for a methodological agnosticism as a heuristic tool for creating an open ground for interdisciplinary dialogue. As it requires methodological caution, a constant rethinking of the scholar’s own position, it offers a way out of the paradox of self-reference, both for the risk of an “insider” knowledge of transcendence in confessional or cataphatic theology as well as for the risk of excluding transcendence altogether in a methodologically naturalist or atheist approach. Not least it can, as discussed with Nancy, make scholarship sensitive to the pitfalls of a “discourse about discourse” or “theologology.”

To sum up, in this contribution we aimed to argue three points:

First, one cannot focus on experience or mediation of transcendence and then bracket transcendence; the idea and practice of “bracketing” is possible only when one already perceives transcendence from within an immanent frame. Conversely, the (Orthodox) theological conception of transcendence derives from belief in or personal knowing of a God who cannot be known. Yet—in the proposed heuristic agnostic attitude—once in dialogue with other academic disciplines, the theologian should be alert when using the two apophatic and cataphatic “languages.”

Second, if the “reality of religion” can be seen as subject matter of both theology and religious studies, religious studies cannot bracket transcendence in advance, since this excludes the possibility of inquiring transcendence as being beyond our grasp. For this reason, we propose the reality of transcendence—rather than of religion—should be perceived as the shared subject matter of theology and religious studies. Conversely, since theology is not only about religion and belief but is also itself a part
(even a constitutive part) of religion, it equally has to beware of being self-referential, as any cataphatic theology (or equally philosophy) is liable to become self-referential.

Third, the apophatic tradition conceives of transcendence within a transcendent frame and from there grapples with how to speak about it; religious studies conceives of transcendence within an immanent frame and from there grapples with how to speak about it. Precisely because of this difference, religious studies can learn from apophatics to keep the reality question open. Similarly, theology can heuristically apply apophatics in a dialogue with humanities to keep its cataphatic language in check.

Methodological agnosticism informed by an apophatic method could thus work both ways: it can bring the “descriptive” part of religious studies to engage more substantially with the transcendent, and it can be a check on the “limit” part of theology in reminding of the “bounds of knowledge” and that any speech is insufficient in view of transcendence. Methodological agnosticism will not resolve the current “conflict of the faculties” (Kant’s Streit der Fakultäten) in academia, nor is the intention to merge the disciplines. But as soon as scholarship enters into dialogue or speaks on issues of religion and transcendence, agnosticism is the most promising and helpful way to prevent the discussion from becoming self-referential.

REFERENCES


Tolstaya and Bestebreurtje: Furthering the Dialogue


