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**Author(s):** Clayton Crockett

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## Crockett - Economies of Studying Religion - JCRT 1.3

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Clayton Crockett

College of William and Mary

*Religion is about a certain about. What religion is about, however, remains obscure for it is never quite there—nor is it exactly not there. Religion is about what is always slipping away. It is, therefore, impossible to grasp what religion is about—unless, perhaps, what we grasp is the impossibility of grasping... This strange slipping away is no mere disappearance but a withdrawal that allows appearances to appear.*

-- Mark C. Taylor, *About Religion*

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\_One of the significant problems for both understanding and living today involves the unrestrained proliferation of capital. In traditional Christianity, the prohibition against usury means that charging money for time is sinful because humans presume to buy and sell time, which is deemed God's possession. Of course, we could not conceive of modern society and economy without the practice of charging interest. One possibility for religious studies then, is to use economic concepts to understand religious phenomena, broadly following Marx. Here I am thinking of Mark Taylor's essay 'Discrediting God,' as well as some of Derrida's philosophical reflections in 'White Mythology' and *Specters of Marx*. The other side of this agenda would involve using religious and theological terms to critique and understand the workings of our economy. Here one could think of the market as God, and grapple with notions of investment, speculation and faith. It is intriguing to explore the multivalent resonance of words such as interest, speculation and credit in both philosophical-religious and economic contexts.

1. the experience of \_belief\_, on the one hand (believing or credit, the fiduciary or the tr
2. the experience of the unscathed, of \_sacredness\_ or \_holiness\_, on the other.[^2]

the gap between the opening of this possibility (as a universal structure) and the determinat

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3. On the other hand, any discussions of financial economy must be supplemented with the notion of a psychic economy. Here a psychic economy, following the work of Freud, involves a repetition of a financial economy, but it is far less evidently rational or objective in its workings. One can read Deleuze and Guattari's *Anti-Oedipus* and Lyotard's *Libidinal Economy* as efforts to articulate a relation between Marx and Freud, as well as attempts to intervene into the workings of both economies.
  4. Unfortunately, it is increasingly difficult, if not impossible, to justify religious studies in relation to any notion of financial economy. One does not engage in the study of religion in the hopes that it will 'pay off' in the literal sense of the word, and even if graduate students desire to pursue religious studies they are warned stridently by publications such as the *New York Times* that such a field is not in their best interests, that is, if they want a job or profession that supports their livelihood.

5. So the only reasonable way to explain an interest in religious studies is by reference to psychic investments and desires, which are necessarily less rational than financial ones. These may be desires for knowledge, thinking, self-exploration and growth, recognition, and faith, and these may compensate or overcompensate for other desires and other economic considerations. We should not disavow the awareness that at some level the choice of religious studies is contingent and arbitrary, depending on personal experiences, inclinations, and constraints. At some point we make a choice for religious studies rather than history, philosophy, biochemistry, nursing, seminary, etc., and we dig in and build a trench which we defend (perhaps even to the death). From a broader perspective, though, the situation of religious studies in its vulnerability is an extreme one and can function as a metonym for the humanities, liberal arts, the academy, higher education as a whole, etc. Here religious studies represents a paradigm of crisis in our culture which generally that of education. Religion/education/cultural knowledge is recognized as crucial for our society, and yet, at the same time, the fact that it does not pay off in an immediate short-term sense leaves it desolate and forlorn, cut off from the immense wealth generated by our businesses. What is the relationship of so-called useless knowledge'theoretical religious studies—to useful knowledge'business or practical pursuits?
6. Here at the crux of an aporia we could elaborate two strategies, taken from two major ethical theories, utilitarianism and deontology. Given an investment in religious studies, liberal arts, or theoretical knowledge as a whole, one may choose to assert broadly utilitarian arguments, which take a rational and logical form, as to the long-term payoff of such studies, such as promoting a better and more educated society, a more responsible and moral citizen, a more intelligent, critical and efficient businessperson, etc. Arguments from utility usually can be cast in terms of value, broadly speaking. The alternative deontological approach, is to articulate a demand intrinsic to the subject matter itself. Unfortunately, many of our arguments for studying religion appear deontological in relation to the broader society, which only recognizes a logic of financial economy, however utilitarian such reasons may appear from the standpoint of a psychic economy. Despite Kant's Herculean efforts, and in some way because of them, any extreme position of deontology appears necessarily irrational because reason follows upon utility in any economic model. Of course, the advantage of the deontological approach is that it allows the possibility of an outside of economy, or at least a critical approach towards economy/utility/rationality and every value which is set in those ironclad terms. Can deontology rupture or transcend economy, broadly speaking? Or does its implicit idealism merely serve to reinforce the status quo economic situation by wishing it away? Should we rather pursue a strategy of acknowledging the ubiquity of economic situations or power, materiality and utility and then attempt to intervene realistically from within that economy?
7. Here I have tried to trace two strands, which in their entanglement form a knot, which defines a locus for religious studies. In order to render some specificity to this duality, I want to turn briefly to Socrates/Plato, a dizzying entanglement if ever there was one. In the *Euthyphro*, Socrates questions Euthyphro concerning holiness, or piety. As is generally well known, Socrates asks what a quality or characteristic is in itself, apart from any particular instance or example. Euthyphro initially replies that his particular situation, prosecuting his father for murder despite familial ties, is holy, which does not answer Socrates' question. 'I asked you for that special feature through which all things are holy. For you were in agreement, surely, that it was by virtue of a single standard that all unholy things are unholy and all holy things are holy' (6d). When Euthyphro replies that what is holy is what is agreeable to the

gods, Socrates asks whether something is approved by the gods because it is holy, or holy because approved by the gods (10a). This is akin to the famous medieval dispute whether God is constrained to do what is good (Thomistic), or whether whatever God desires thereby becomes good (Scotist). The former restricts God's omnipotence, while the latter introduces the terrifying possibility of a malevolent God. Both Socrates and Euthyphro affirm that what is holy is approved by the gods by virtue of its possessing the quality of holiness. This move displaces the centrality of the gods from the determination of what holiness is, and Socrates further restricts holiness to a species of justice. Holiness becomes 'that part of the just which is' concerned with looking after the gods' (12e). Looking after the gods concerns commerce or exchange with the gods, a 'science of sacrifice [donation] and prayer [request].' Socrates draws the relentless conclusion that 'holiness would be a kind of skill in trading between gods and men' (14e). This is of course a circular argument, which does not escape the logic of exchange, because then holiness is generated through and by approval of the gods (and humans), which is precisely the standpoint rejected earlier in the dialogue. This disturbing conclusion is what prompts Socrates to try to begin again to discover what holiness is, despite his impending trial, and Euthyphro to think of somewhere else he urgently needs to be and take off.

8. Besides an interesting (I hope) interlude, this reading of Plato's *Euthyphro* intends to illustrate what I mean by studying religion as studying economies. In an objective sense, studying religion is the study of various economies—psychic, financial, ideological and theological. It deals with interchange or commerce between gods and human beings. Here one can grapple with the materialities and idealities of faith, investments, speculation, sacrifice, prayer, risk, credit and debt, obligation, contracts, in sum, business! Such economies may be alternately general or restricted, but at some level must be investigated and understood in terms of utility, at least presumed or implied. The profound difficulty of studying *religion* in this sense as opposed to studying anything else, is how to delimit holiness or the sacred from justice, or whether one can separate commerce between humans and gods from commerce solely among human beings. This may or may not be possible, and depending on the solution there may or may not be a special object or phenomenon called religion.
9. The other strand, which does *not* correspond to what I have loosely called deontology, is the subjective side of studying religion. The subjective aspect of the study of religion, which supplements and pressures the objective side above, must understand the economic investments and motivations of scholars themselves, and their implications in their object of study also in utilitarian terms. The subjective side of studying religion can be referenced with the term desire, although Socrates calls it prayer, which is a more explicitly religious term. What are our desires in studying religion? Do we want truth, God, money, security, information, recognition, the satisfaction of proving other people wrong, the intensity of the conflict and the clash of ideas in conferences and journals? The subjective side forms the other strand.
10. Now, what I call deontology, is not actually a strand or an other thing, but rather the form of study itself, that is, the logic of classification, marking, or signification. This 'logic' appears in both material and ideal forms, psychic and financial economies. This logic of form has no rational justification that grounds it, it is *Ungrund*, in Heidegger's sense. What is grounding has itself no ground, and thus appears as abyss, *Abgrund*. In the case of the Socratic dialogue, the structure of the dialogue itself, what Plato elsewhere calls the dialectic, or in a specific sense the intensive searching questioning called the *elenchus*, refers to the back and forth play which generates the argument and its presuppositions. Another example would be what

Kant calls form abstracted from all content. The form generates the meaning, and here I am assimilating form to the Greek *logos*, but we should also bear in mind the Polynesian *tabu*, which means marked thoroughly. In a more anthropological sense, something which is marked out is sacred, set apart, and this marking of necessity will have economic motivations and consequences, but the issue here is the process of marking out and setting apart, the system or principle of classification in a L'vi-Straussian sense.

11. In this specific deontological sense the study of religion would be what I call a secular theology. A secular theology examines and interrogates the economic form or law of religious phenomena, but not solely in order to understand it. Here the theoretical component of the study of religion generates form itself, or creates theological concepts. Keep in mind that such concepts need not be confessional in relation to any church or creed, and that the term secular, or what Gabriel Vahanian calls the *saeculum*, is by no means the opposite of sacred, but rather refers to a shared world of human experience. The creation of theological concepts is analogous to Deleuze and Guattari's definition of philosophy as the creation of concepts in *What is Philosophy?* The study of religion, or secular theology, involves at least the creation of concepts of religion. More explicitly, and more demanding, it involves the creation of *religious* concepts of religion. Here most proponents of the sociological study of religion back away in horror and cling desperately to the ropes themselves. However, if religion is to be a viable or significant field, warranting investment or demanding respect, it requires the generation of theoretical concepts specific to the field. These concepts are not found but must be created (*ex nihilo?*). Who has the time these days to create concepts of God? Who has the courage or the audacity to create *divine* concepts of God? And anyway, what would that even mean, despite Augustine's definition of theology as God's thinking of God? The stakes are even higher, if not more absurd, given fact that we live in a time in which God is dead. Deleuze's famous quote from the *Logic of Sense* deserves careful study in this context:

It is our epoch which has discovered theology. One no longer needs to believe in God. We seek rather the 'structure,' that is, the form which may be filled with beliefs, but the structure has no need to be filled in order to be called 'theological.' Theology is now the science of nonexistent entities, the manner in which these entities' divine or anti-divine, Christ or Antichrist' animate language and make for it this glorious body which is divided into disjunctions.<sup>1</sup>

12. In his essay on "Faith and Knowledge," Derrida distinguishes two experiences which he claims are equally and primordially religious: the experience of *belief*, on the one hand (believing or credit, the fiduciary or the trustworthy in the act of faith, fidelity, the appeal to blind confidence, the testimonial that is always beyond proof, demonstrative reason, intuition); and the experience of the unscathed, of *sacredness* or *holiness*, on the other.[if !supportFootnotes][2][endif]
13. Towards the end of the essay, Derrida contrasts 'a double postulation: on the one hand, the absolute respect of life'; and on the other, the no less universal sacrificial vocation.<sup>2</sup> The latter is called mechanics, because its technique, the reproduction of sacrifice, produces 'the instance of the non-living' of the dead in the living.<sup>3</sup> These two experiences must be distinguished but cannot be separated. Derrida refers to Kantian dignity, the end in itself of a rational being,

<sup>1</sup>Gilles Deleuze, *The Logic of Sense*, translated by Mark Lester (New York: Columbia University Press, 1990), p.281.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p.50.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid., p.50.

which is 'absolute value beyond all comparative market-price. This dignity of life can only subsist beyond the present living being.' The absolute value of life creates an excess beyond present life which is the space of and for death. The fact that (present) life can be sacrificed for its ideal in an absolute sense allows for a justification of killing what must not be killed. 'This excess above and beyond the living,' Derrida writes, 'whose life only has absolute value by being worth more than life, more than itself' this, in short, is what opens the space of death that is linked to the automaton, to technics, the machine'.<sup>4</sup> What Derrida calls the religious bond occurs within the knot of the two economic strands—belief and the unscathed, prayer and holiness, life and death. 'It is there that the possibility of religion persists: the religious bond between the value of life, its absolute 'dignity', and the theological machine, the machine for making gods.'<sup>5</sup> This bond, along with our response, is both ambiguous and ambivalent, twisting together what we know as morality and sacrality, in both positive and negative terms, beyond the possibility of pulling the strands apart.

14. These two strands of life and death, belief and holiness, or the distinction between the subjective and objective aspects of the study of religion, are intertwined in a knot which must be explained, if it can be explained, in terms of utility broadly conceived. That is, utility exceeds and explains deontology, which it imbricates and overlays. On the other hand, what I have called the form in itself must be abstracted in thinking as an invisible locus or *chora* which has no reality apart from the knot. This form is always *quasi-deontological* in the sense that it does not adhere to any utilitarian logic, and it is also theological in the sense that I am describing here.<sup>6</sup> In Derrida's essay, after maintaining religion as an ellipsis of sacrifice and prayer, he creates a formal (not a spatial) distance from this knot, when he contends that
15. Derrida affirms as formal possibility, that 'thought in general' would 'retain the *same* resource as religion in general.' What Derrida calls thought in general is what I am calling the possibility of a secular theology, or the form as locus for the process of creating religious concept(ion)s. This form is both encapsulated within and excessive in relation to all considerations of economy. Studying religion economically situates and contextualizes a discipline, and yet that very study itself is excessive and theological, at least formally or residually. We study religion in order to learn the economic relationships of prayer and sacrifice, to intervene into the economies of gods and humans, and above all to create new possibilities for thinking.

## Notes

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**Clayton Crockett** is Visiting Assistant Professor of Religion at the College of William and Mary. He is the author of *A Theology of the Sublime* and editor of *Secular Theology: American Radical Theological Thought*, both forthcoming from Routledge, and is the Managing Editor of the JCRT.

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<sup>4</sup>Ibid., p51.

<sup>5</sup>Ibid., p.51.

<sup>6</sup>Here we could ask, in a Heideggerian/Derridean vein, what is de-onto-theo-logy?

