Methodological Agnosticism and Charitable Interpretation
How to Bracket Religious Truth Claims in the Study of Religions

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Abstract – The article discusses the apparently conflictual relationship between two heuristic principles both of which are relevant to the study of religions: the principle of methodological agnosticism on the one hand, and the principle of charitable interpretation on the other. Methodological agnosticism recommends the religious studies researcher to bracket the question of the truth (or lack thereof) of religious beliefs, whereas the principle of charity states that to gain an adequate understanding of the contents of religious beliefs the religious studies researcher must start out from the assumption that those contents are true. *Prima facie*, the two methodological principles pull in opposite directions. The article argues that, despite appearances to the contrary, they can be reconciled.

Keywords: methodological agnosticism – principle of charity – bracketing – phenomenology – inference

1. Introduction

Should researchers in the field of religious studies take an etic or an emic perspective on religions? Should they restrict themselves to detached observation and explanation or rather seek to reconstruct and understand the experiences and points of view of religious believers and practitioners? Should they approach their objects of inquiry from an insider's or rather from an outsider's point of view? These questions have played center stage in early debates on the methodology of religious studies, and interest in them remains constant today[1]. In what follows, I will dis-

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[1] To substantiate the latter claim: the overarching theme of the 2023 conference of the European Academy of Religion (EUARE), for instance, was «Religion from the Inside», and among the questions the conference organizers suggested for keynotes and panels were the following: «What are the differences between the external (etic) and internal (emic) point of view on a doctrine, sacred text, practice, or tradition?»; «What are the gains or opportunities of an emic perspective? What are its

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cuss the apparently conflictual relationship between two heuristic principles both of which seem to be relevant to the study of religions: the principle of methodological agnosticism on the one hand, and the principle of charitable interpretation (principle of charity, for short) on the other. Very roughly, methodological agnosticism recommends the religious studies researcher to bracket the question of the truth (or lack thereof) of religious beliefs, whereas the principle of charity states that to gain an adequate understanding of the contents of religious beliefs the researcher must start out from the assumption that those contents are true. To anticipate: I will argue that, despite appearances to the contrary, the two methodological principles can be reconciled.

Section 2 introduces the idea of methodological agnosticism with regard to religious studies. By way of contextualization, the section begins with a brief presentation of Peter Berger's views on methodological atheism. It then proceeds with a critical discussion of Ninian Smart's conception of methodological agnosticism and Jason Blum's more recent contributions to the relevant debates. The selection of views and arguments taken into consideration is inevitably limited. Nonetheless, the critical discussion of the presented views is sufficient, or so I submit, for motivating what I take to be a reasonable and plausible conception of methodological agnosticism. Section 3 turns to the principle of charitable interpretation and proposes three possible formulations in terms of consistency, epistemic justification, and truth, respectively. Section 4 presents what may *prima facie* seem to be a rather evident tension or incompatibility between the principle of methodological agnosticism and the principle of charity couched in terms of truth. I argue that, even though it is *prima facie* plausible to see an incompatibility here, the tension between charity and agnosticism turns out to be merely apparent if one adopts a suitably weak reading of 'assuming truth'. Section 5 briefly expands on the claim that charity and agnosticism are compatible and clarifies what I take to be the limited, albeit legitimate, scope of the two principles as guidelines for research in religious studies.

2. Methodological Agnosticism

One of the few sustained treatments and defenses of methodological agnosticism in the study of religion can be found in Ninian Smart's *The*

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distinctive risks?»; «How do different disciplines interact with emic and etic perspectives and with each other, including theology, philosophy, law, political science, anthropology, sociology, and cultural studies?» (see https://www.europeanacademyofreligion.org/keynote-lectures-2023).

Science of Religion and the Sociology of Knowledge, published in 1973[2]. Smart develops his conception of methodological agnosticism largely out of a critique of Peter Berger's idea of methodological atheism in the sociology of religion, as presented in Berger's 1967 book *The Sacred Canopy*. Before turning to the discussion of methodological agnosticism proper, let me begin with a brief look at Berger's methodological atheism. Berger introduces the idea as follows:

«In all its manifestations, religion constitutes an immense projection of human meanings into the empty vastness of the universe – a projection, to be sure, which comes back as an alien reality to haunt its producers. Needless to say, it is impossible within the frame of reference of scientific theorizing to make any affirmations, positive or negative, about the ultimate ontological status of this alleged reality. Within this frame of reference, the religious projections can be dealt with only as such, as products of human activity and human consciousness, and rigorous brackets have to be placed around the question as to whether these projections may not also be something else than that (or, more accurately refer to something else than the human world in which they empirically originate). In other words, every inquiry into religious matters that limits itself to the empirically available must necessarily be based on a 'methodological atheism'»[3].

The qualification «methodological» is to be understood in contrast to «ontological». Berger's idea is that, even though the sociologist of religion has no choice but to limit herself «to the empirically available», by adopting a methodologically atheist stance she can steer clear of ontological commitments regarding the existence or non-existence of supernatural (or transcendent) entities, processes or structures, i.e., she can avoid both accepting and rejecting the truth claims entailing such commitments which are implicit in the beliefs and practices under investigation. She can – and has to – do so, according to Berger, by putting «rigorous brackets» around questions about the ontological status of transcendent realities and setting them aside[4]: «Questions raised by sociological theory must be answered in terms falling within the latter's universe of discourse»[5]. Ontological questions regarding transcendent realities are outside sociology's domain of discourse. *A fortiori*, they are outside the purview of the

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2 N. Smart, *The Science of Religion and the Sociology of Knowledge: Some Methodological Questions*, Princeton NJ, Princeton University Press, 1973.

3 P. Berger, *The Sacred Canopy: Elements of a Sociological Theory of Religion*, New York, Anchor Books, 1967, p. 100.

4 See D.V. Porpora, *Methodological Atheism, Methodological Agnosticism and Religious Experience*, in «Journal for the Theory of Social Behaviour», 36, 2006, 1, pp. 57-75, for observations on how Berger's methodological atheism in the sociology of religion related to his religious views outside sociology.

5 P. Berger, *The Sacred Canopy*, p. 179, also see p. 180.

sociology of religion. What remains inside, of course, are questions about whether and, if so, which and why ontological commitments are embedded in a given religious belief-system or practice[6].

According to Smart, Berger's construal of bracketing in terms of a methodological atheism is unstable. It ultimately collapses because it is «effectively indistinguishable from atheism *tout court*»[7]. Rather than atheism it is agnosticism that should be adopted as a methodological stance in the study of religions. To delineate this methodological stance, Smart introduces a conceptual (and metaphysical) distinction between existence and reality, between what exists and what is real:

> «In order to get over the cumbrous inelegancies that we are likely to run into in trying to maintain this methodological posture, I shall distinguish between objects which are *real* and objects which *exist*. In this usage, God is real for Christians whether or not he exists. The methodological agnosticism here being used is, then, agnosticism about the existence or otherwise [not about the reality or otherwise, B.R.] of the main foci of the belief system in question»[8].

The distinction between reality and existence allows Smart to state, for instance, that a «description of a society with its gods will include the gods [as real, B.R.]. But by the principle of the bracket we neither affirm nor deny the existence of the gods»[9]. He wants to «open the possibility of treating the gods as real members of the community»[10] without claiming that the gods exist.

However, one may wonder: why adopt a cumbersome and heavy-weight conceptual distinction between an entity's reality and an entity's existence if the conceptual work that Smart intends this distinction to do can arguably just as well be done by the simple distinction between a proposition that is taken to be true and a proposition that is true? Smart's response is that religions must not be equated with sets of propositional beliefs-*that*, with truth-takings[11], and «that it is wrong to analyze religious

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6 As to the why-question, Berger proposes a sociological response in terms of projection and social construction. The present context does not require a discussion of Berger's projectionism and social constructivism.

7 N. Smart, *The Phenomenon of Religion*, London - Basingstoke, Macmillan, 1973, p. 59.

8 N. Smart, *The Science of Religion*, p. 54, emphasis in orig.

9 *Ibidem.*

10 *Ibidem*, p. 53.

11 See *ibidem*, pp. 49-52.

objects in terms simply of religious beliefs»[12]. According to Smart, to understand religions the researcher has to consider those objects «as objects of religious experience»[13]. But a simple distinction analogous to the one between a proposition taken to be true and a proposition that is true is readily at hand with regard to experience as well: taking oneself to be experiencing an X *versus* experiencing an X. The point of this distinction is, roughly, the following. A sentence like «Takeshi experiences an earthquake» expresses a true proposition only if there is an earthquake. As opposed to this, «Takeshi takes himself to be experiencing an earthquake» may express a true proposition even when there is no earthquake. With regard to the latter sentence, an advocate of Smart's distinction between reality and existence would presumably want to say that if it expresses a true proposition, then the earthquake is real for Takeshi independently of whether it exists. But this, one might object, obfuscates a perfectly unproblematic distinction with unnecessary and misleading talk of a real, albeit non-existent, earthquake.

Let me now turn to one notable voice in more recent debates on methodological agnosticism, atheism and naturalism in religious studies, Jason Blum's[14]. Blum sets out to defend what he takes to be important insights of the tradition of phenomenology of religion against «trenchant critiques» voiced by advocates of «social scientific approaches that construe religion in historical and/or socio-cultural terms, and seek to explain it as a naturalistic phenomenon»[15]. At the same time he concedes that, given «the manner in which phenomenology of religion has been described and deployed by many of its defenders, much of this criticism is warranted»[16]. Blum's goal, then, is to arrive at a revised conceptualization of the phenomenological method in religious studies that retains what he takes to be the strengths of the phenomenological tradition while being free of its weaknesses.

To this end, Blum distinguishes between the tasks of *interpreting* and *explaining* religions. He takes the interpretive task to be prior to the explan-

12 *Ibidem*, p. 54.

13 *Ibidem*, p. 49.

14 See, for instance, J. Blum, *Retrieving Phenomenology of Religion as a Method for Religious Studies*, in «Journal of the American Academy of Religion», 80, 2012, 4, pp. 1025-1048; J. Blum, *The Question of Methodological Naturalism*, in J. Blum (ed.), *The Question of Methodological Naturalism*, Leiden, Brill, 2018, pp. 1-19; J. Blum, *Beyond Methodological Axioms*, in «Journal of the American Academy of Religion», 89, 2021, 2, pp. 437-468.

15 J. Blum, *Retrieving Phenomenology*, p. 1026.

16 *Ibidem*.

atory one[17]. It is through interpretation, more precisely through phenomenological «interpretation of the meaning of religion from the perspective of religious experience and consciousness»[18], that religious studies researchers have to obtain part of the data which then, in a second step, may be explained in various and competing ways, including reductive and ontologically naturalist ways. It is important to stress that Blum does not claim that the phenomenological interpretation of religious experience suffices to collect all the data that would be necessary for providing a complete description of a given religious context. Nor does he claim that phenomenological interpretation of religious beliefs and practices somehow precludes explanation of those practices and beliefs in exclusively naturalistic terms. On the contrary:

> «Explanations in terms of the categories of the social sciences are a necessary aspect of a full analysis of religion. Understanding – pursued through a phenomenological-interpretive method … – is no less necessary an aspect of analysis»[19].

There is much with which I am sympathetic in what Blum says about the importance of phenomenological interpretation for religious studies research, not least because he emphasizes that both the process and the results of such interpretation must be answerable to publicly available evidence[20]. However, at some points in Blum's reasoning a problem closely connected to the one discussed above with regard to Smart's distinction between reality and existence would seem to recur. Blum writes: «The interpretive endeavor to disclose the meaning of religion as experienced by religious consciousness … requires reference to supernatural or theological entities»[21]. Taken together with Blum's thesis that «phenomenology of religion … need not posit any transcendent realm or entity»[22], the claim that the interpretive endeavor of religious studies inevitably involves reference to supernatural entities is less than clear. Reference requires a referent, and the intention to refer requires the belief that there is a referent. If it were inevitable for the phenomenologist of religion to refer to the supernatural entities that the interpreted religious individu-

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17 J. Blum, *Interpreting vs. Explaining: A Rejoinder to Robert Segal*, in «Journal of the American Academy of Religion», 82, 2014, 4, pp. 1152-1154.

18 J. Blum, *Retrieving Phenomenology*, p. 1026.

19 *Ibidem*, p. 1045.

20 See J. Blum, *Beyond Methodological Axioms*, pp. 457-463.

21 J. Blum, *Retrieving Phenomenology*, p. 1031.

22 *Ibidem*, p. 1026.

als or groups take themselves to experience, then she would after all incur all the ontological commitments of her *interpretandum*. Against this criticism it might, perhaps, be held that Blum here simply uses the verb 'to refer' in a non-technical and generic sense, and that the objection is therefore overstated. But the same problem resurfaces in a different wording elsewhere:

«Protecting the integrity of the data and ensuring the accuracy of one's interpretation will often require acknowledging supernatural metaphysical claims or assumptions. Such assumptions are, as previously noted, often inextricably interwoven into religion and therefore must be acknowledged in analysis … With regard to the interpretive phase of analysis, the metaphysical assumptions embedded in the religious discourse or text clearly cannot be bracketed, and should not be bracketed even if it were possible to do so»[23].

This formulation would seem to run the risk of equivocating on the verbs 'acknowledge' and 'bracket'. At any rate, it uses these verbs in an ambiguous way because it does not state clearly what it is that Blum thinks has to be acknowledged by the researcher and what it is that, according to him, cannot and should not be bracketed. What the researcher who tries to interpret and understand religious contexts certainly has to acknowledge is that the members of the groups she studies make claims to the truth of metaphysical propositions that entail the existence of some form of supernatural transcendence. However, she is under no pressure to acknowledge those claims themselves, i.e., she does not have to accept those claims. The relevant difference here is the one between accepting or acknowledging that a claim is being made and accepting or acknowledging the propositional content of the claim (as true). Methodological agnosticism concerns the latter, not the former.

My claim, at this point, boils down to the following: all that is needed to formulate a coherent and stable methodological agnosticism is the simple distinction between a proposition that is taken to be true and a proposition that is true, together with the equally simple distinction between taking oneself to be experiencing an X and experiencing an X.

3. Charitable Interpretation

In a generic formulation, the principle of charitable interpretation states that when interpreting and trying to understand the beliefs and actions of others we should strive to minimize the ascription of obvious absurdity,

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[23] J. Blum, *Beyond Methodological Axioms*, p. 455.

obvious falsity (error), obvious irrationality and implausibility to the *interpretandum*[24]. If we end up with an interpretation according to which our *interpretandum* contains obvious inconsistencies (contradictions), irrationality, falsehood or absurdity, then this is to be taken as casting doubt not so much on the *interpretandum* as on the proposed interpretation.

Much would have to be said about the divergent *statūs* that different philosophers have ascribed to various versions of the principle of charity and about the different arguments respectively provided to support them. The spectrum ranges from a heuristic rule of thumb to a constitutive condition of all linguistic communication and understanding, and versions of the principle have even been used in ambitious arguments against epistemological skepticism, for instance by Donald Davidson[25]. I will have to leave discussion of these philosophical issues to one side.

We can think of principles of charitable interpretation along a spectrum that ranges from weak to strong. Perhaps the weakest formulation of a principle of charity regarding the interpretation of religious beliefs amounts to the requirement of anticipating or presuming the consistency of the *interpretandum*, i.e., the absence of logico-conceptual contradictions.

> (A) If you wish to understand the religious beliefs of a person (or the shared religious beliefs of a group of persons) S, then interpret S's beliefs in such a way as to avoid the ascription of inconsistency to their propositional contents.

A considerably stronger version of the principle can be formulated in terms of epistemic justification or epistemic rationality.

> (B) If you wish to understand the religious beliefs of a person (or the shared religious beliefs of a group of persons) S, then interpret S's beliefs under the assumption that S takes herself to be epistemically justified/rational in taking what she asserts to be true.

An arguably even more demanding version of the principle of charity can be couched in terms of truth.

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24 The name «principle of charity» was coined by N. Wilson, *Substances without Substrata*, in «Review of Metaphysics», 12, 1959, 4, pp. 521-539, here p. 532.

25 For an excellent exposition and discussion of the principle of charity in D. Davidson see K. Glüer, *Donald Davidson. A Short Introduction*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2011, ch. 3, pp. 112-152. For an instructive discussion of the relation between Davidson's and Gadamer's conceptions of interpretation and understanding, see B. Ramberg, *Illuminating Language: Interpretation and Understanding in Gadamer and Davidson*, in C.G. Prado (ed.), *A House Divided. Comparing Analytic and Continental Philosophy*, New York, Prometheus, 2003, pp. 213-234.

(C) If you wish to understand the religious beliefs of a person (or the shared religious beliefs of a group of persons) S, then interpret S's beliefs under the assumption that what S believes is true.

It is important to stress that the various versions of the principle of charity expressed by formulations (A)-(C) can be thought of as *defeasible* maxims of interpretation. Obviously, sometimes people believe things that are inconsistent or false (sometimes both), or for which they lack epistemic justification. The point of (A)-(C), then, is not that only beliefs with consistent, epistemically justified and true propositional contents can be understood or comprehended in the first place. Their point is rather that if you want to understand S's beliefs, then you should not start out from the assumption that what S believes is inconsistent, unjustified, or fails to be true. In the present context, the truth-formulation (C) is of particular interest. In the next section I will address the question of how «assuming the truth of a belief» should be construed.

Unless charity in interpreting the words, actions and beliefs of others is thought of as a practice that we have no choice but to engage in[26], being charitable (in the relevant sense) can be described as a virtue. One might, for instance, say that it is an ethical virtue, one that guides those who possess it towards interpreting the actions and utterances of others in a fair, open-minded and respectful manner. Moreover, it is plausible to characterize charity as an intellectual or epistemic virtue, one that is closely connected to what is sometimes called «epistemic» or «intellectual humility», or to a fallibilistic attitude in contexts of interpretation[27]. If you reach an interpretation that ascribes obvious falsehood or irrationality to your *interpretandum*, then chances are that you have made mistakes in your interpretive effort – or at least that is what you should presume for as long as this is feasible. Finally, charity in interpretation can be characterized as a virtue in terms of instrumental rationality, as an instrumental virtue, as it were: if your goal is to understand and maybe learn from your *interpretandum*, then you should strive to make as much sense of it as possible. Thus understood, charity is a means to a goal: understanding and/or learning. In my view, these different characterizations of charity in interpretation as a virtue do not exclude but rather complement each other.

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26 One advocate of this strong reading of charity is D. Davidson, *Radical Interpretation*, in D. Davidson, *Inquiries into Truth and Interpretation*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1984, pp. 125-139, here p. 137.

27 See, for instance, K. Dormandy, *Intellectual Humility and Epistemic Trust*, in M. Alfano - M.P. Lynch - A. Tanesini (eds.), *The Routledge Handbook of Philosophy of Humility*, Abingdon - New York, Routledge, 2021, pp. 292-302.

Is charity in interpretation a virtue in religious studies as well? Maybe an epistemic or an instrumental virtue, or one grounded in research ethics? Perhaps it is, in at least one of these senses. But there seems to be a problem for the religious studies researcher who wants to gain understanding of religious persons or groups through charitable interpretation and at the same time adhere to methodological agnosticism, i.e., methodologically suspend judgment with regard to the religious truth claims explicitly or implicitly raised by the relevant groups or persons.

4. An apparent Problem: Is Methodological Agnosticism Incompatible with Charitable Interpretation?

It may seem obvious that the principle of methodological agnosticism and the principle of charitable interpretation formulated in terms of truth (formulation (C) above), pull in opposite directions. If both were accepted as expressing valid heuristic guidelines regarding the interpretive stage of the implementation of religious studies research, would not the researcher be placed in a double-bind situation? After all, adhering to methodological agnosticism would require her to suspend judgment regarding all truth claims that state or entail or presuppose the existence of transcendent or supernatural beings, processes or structures[28]. Of course, the same would hold with regard to anything that states or entails or presupposes the negation of any such transcendence claim. At the same time, adhering to the principle of charity couched in terms of the presumption of truth would require her to interpret the beliefs of the religious person or group S that her research respectively focuses on under the assumption that what S believes is true – or at least to make a sustained effort to do so for as long as this is feasible. But it is hard to see how the researcher could pull off the trick. Adherence to the principle of methodological agnosticism precludes adherence to the principle of charitable interpretation couched in terms of truth and *vice versa*. You can either adhere to the former or you can adhere to the latter, but you cannot adhere to both simultaneously. In this practical or pragmatic sense, the two principles are incompatible with each other. Or so it would seem.

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28 Such paradigmatically religious truth claims can be distinguished from claims which, while not by themselves presupposing or implying commitment to some form of religious transcendence, are based on or grounded in paradigmatically religious commitments. The latter are one variety of what I have elsewhere called *religiously relevant* commitments. See B. Rähme, *Religious Disagreement and Religious Relevance: A Perspective from Contemporary Philosophical Epistemology*, in «ET-Studies», 11, 2020, 1, pp. 25-46.

But is this argument sound? Suppose for a moment that it is. Then one of the two methodological principles will have to be jettisoned – or reformulated and modified in such a way as to restore practical compatibility. For instance, one might argue that the gist of the principle of charitable interpretation is to be understood in terms of a presumption weaker than truth, perhaps in terms of epistemic justification (which is non-factive) or in terms of coherence or, weaker still, in terms of mere consistency (formulation (A) above).

However, this is not the path I want to follow here. Rather, I think that there is a natural way of understanding the principle of charity couched in terms of the assumption or presumption of truth in a way that allows one to hold that the tension between charity and agnosticism is a merely apparent one. An analogy with the role of assumptions in deductive argumentation is useful to illustrate the point I want to make here.

In deductive reasoning one may introduce an assumption at any stage of an argument in order to draw inferences *under that assumption*. To assume a proposition to be true is not equivalent to asserting it to be true or to presenting it as something that one believes to be true. One may, for instance, introduce the assumption that the earth is flat and draw inferences from it without committing oneself to the truth of the proposition that the earth is flat or of any proposition conditional upon the undischarged assumption that the earth is flat. In fact, one may be convinced that what one assumes is not true and still draw inferences from it. My claim is that to interpret the religious beliefs of a given individual, or the shared religious beliefs of a group, in a charitable way requires nothing more than something along the lines of this weak sense of 'assuming truth'.

While admittedly pulled out of context, a quotation from Wittgenstein's *Tractatus* can serve to further elucidate the point: «To understand a proposition means to know what is the case if it is true (One can understand it, therefore, without knowing whether it is true)»[29]. If one does not take oneself to know whether a given proposition is true, then – assuming that assertions can be understood as knowledge claims[30] – it

[29] L. Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* (4.024), London - New York, Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1961, p. 25. Propositions expressed by analytic sentences are usually taken to be an exception to this rule. With regard to sentences like «all bachelors are unmarried», lack of assent to the expressed proposition can be taken to indicate lack of understanding.

[30] See, for instance, R. Brandom, *Making it Explicit. Reasoning, Representing and Discursive Commitment*, Cambridge MA - London, Harvard University Press, 1994, p. 201: «assertions have the default status and significance of implicit knowledge claims … Making an assertion … is making a knowledge claim».

is epistemically incorrect for one to assert that proposition. And if one wants to bracket knowledge that one takes oneself to have for the sake of better understanding the potentially incompatible views of others through charitable interpretation, then the epistemically adequate attitude is a deliberate suspension of judgment for the sake of understanding, methodological agnosticism.

By employing the analogy with assumptions in deductive reasoning I do not mean to suggest that the practice of interpretation is nothing but the practice of drawing deductive inferences from assumed propositions. Even though deductive inference certainly has a role to play in the interpretation of beliefs and practices, interpretation is not restricted to this kind of reasoning.

As noted above, the principle of charity has been assigned different strengths and *statūs* by different philosophers. The reading of charitable interpretation proposed here is, arguably, at odds with philosophically ambitious conceptions of charity like the one advocated by Donald Davidson[31]. According to Davidson, «charity is not an option … Charity is forced on us; whether we like it or not, if we want to understand others, we must count them right in most matters»[32]. This clearly goes beyond the weak reading of charity in terms of assuming truth for sake of better understanding, which I have outlined in analogy to assuming the truth of a proposition for the sake of drawing out its deductive consequences. Elsewhere, Davidson expresses his version of the principle of charity in even stronger terms:

> «If we cannot find a way to interpret the utterances and other behavior of a creature as revealing a set of beliefs largely consistent and true by our own standards, we have no reason to count that creature as rational, as having beliefs, or as saying anything»[33].

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31 It may also be at odds with Hans-Georg Gadamer's idea of a *Vorgriff der Vollkommenheit* (anticipation of perfection) as formulated with regard to the interpretation of texts. See H.-G. Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, London - New York, Continuum, 2004, p. 294. Gadamer's expression *Vorgriff der Vollkommenheit* is usually translated into English as «anticipation of completeness». This translation is misleading. «Completeness» is *Vollständigkeit*, *Vollkommenheit* is «perfection».

32 D. Davidson, *On the Very Idea of a Conceptual Scheme*, in D. Davidson, *Inquiries into Truth*, pp. 183-198., here p. 197.

33 D. Davidson, *Radical Interpretation*, in D. Davidson, *Inquiries into Truth*, pp. 125-139, here p. 137. For an attempt to argue from a Davidsonian view of interpretation and understanding to the conclusion that «there simply is no I/O [insider/outsider, B.R.] problem, in the absolute sense in which this is often discussed in the academic study of religion», see M.Q. Gardiner - S. Engler, *Semantic Holism and the Insider–Outsider Problem*, in «Religious Studies», 48, 2012, 2, pp. 239-255, here p. 251.

If Davidson's philosophical arguments for this ambitious version of the principle of charity were sound, would the justification they provide carry over to a more ambitious conception of charity as a methodological guideline for interpretation in religious studies? I can only report, for the record, that I think it would not, at least not in a straightforward way. Discussion of this question is beyond the scope of the present article.

Conclusion

If the considerations presented above are on the right track, then the gist of the principles of charitable interpretation and methodological agnosticism can, respectively, be construed in terms that are independent of substantive philosophical theories[34]. In particular, these principles can be couched in terms that do not presuppose the correctness of Smart's version of phenomenology, Gadamer's philosophical hermeneutics or Davidson's semantic holism and theory of radical interpretation. As for the principle of charity, it suffices to appeal to a notion of assuming truth for the sake of better understanding modeled in analogy to the familiar and noncommittal practice of assuming the truth of a proposition for the sake of learning what it – perhaps together with other assumed propositions – implies. And the principle of methodological agnosticism can do with a simple appeal to the familiar distinctions between what is true and what is taken to be true, and between what is experienced and what is taken to be experienced. I take these distinctions to be familiar in the sense that we employ them all the time in our everyday linguistic, communicative and interpretive practices.

That the two principles can be disentangled from the substantive philosophical theories in the context of which they were originally formulated may be taken to speak in their favor. It should be stressed, however, that this does (next to) nothing by way of justifying methodological agnosticism or the principle of charitable interpretation – either as philosophical claims or as methodological guidelines for religious studies. My goal here was the modest one of arguing that charity and agnosticism are not necessarily incompatible with each other, and that researchers in religious studies can coherently adopt both of them at the same time. But do they have to? Always?

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[34] I do not claim that they can be formulated in terms that presuppose no theoretical assumptions whatsoever. The formulations proposed above rely on minimal theoretical assumptions regarding truth and propositions, for instance.

In my view, these two questions are rather idle. Craig Martin, a recent critic of methodological agnosticism based on phenomenological theory, is right in pointing out that, rather than employing methodological agnosticism or adopting a charitable attitude of interpretation, «much interesting and apparently legitimate work» in religion research starts out from the assumption that the ontological commitments embedded in the religious contexts under study are false[35]. This alone casts doubt on inevitability, necessity or even just heuristic priority claims regarding the principles of charity and agnosticism.

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[35] C. Martin, *Incapacitating Scholarship: Or, Why Methodological Agnosticism Is Impossible*, in J. Blum (ed.), *The Question of Methodological Naturalism*, pp. 53-73, here p. 67.