THE PRACTICE TURN IN GLOBAL PHILOSOPHY OF RELIGION

O GIRO PRÁTICO EM FILOSOFIA GLOBAL DA RELIGIÃO

Kevin Schilbrack

The academic discipline of philosophy of religion is today undergoing a transformation. Traditionally, those working in this discipline focused on philosophical questions raised by theism. They investigated the logic of God's attributes, for example, along with topics such as the problem of evil, the justification for belief in God's existence, and the claim that someone who believes in God does not require shareable evidence to be justified in that belief. Today, however, philosophy of religion is expanding to include philosophical questions raised by religious forms of life in addition to theism. One might call this more inclusive version "global philosophy of religion," and José Porcher's (2025) book is an exemplary contribution to this transformation.

A crucial but sometimes overlooked aspect of this transformation to which Porcher draws our attention is the fact that expanding the discipline of philosophy of religion requires a change not only in *what* one studies, as philosophers begin to include religious traditions that had previously not been given much attention, but also in *how* philosophers study these traditions. Because the previously marginalized religions include elements that do not fit the categories that shaped the discipline in the past, philosophers need to develop the tools to understand and evaluate those elements. As Porcher sees clearly, "Taking this direction [toward a global philosophy of religion] means expanding and re-evaluating the discipline's methodology" (2025, p. 2). The re-evaluation of philosophical methodology is what I want to focus on here.

The primary methodological problem that Porcher addresses is generated by the gap between the discursive knowledge that one sees in philosophy lectures and books and the embodied knowledge that is produced in Afro-Brazilian religious practices. When a philosopher of religion expands their object of study to include religious philosophies from outside the usual list of theistic and anti-theistic thinkers – for example, when they are not studying David Hume or Alvin Plantinga, but instead Dōgen's Zen philosophy or Wang Yangming's neo-Confucian philosophy – the discursive tools used by the philosopher may still resemble the discursive arguments in the texts they study. But Afro-Brazilian religion has no religious philosophy. It does not even have religious scriptures with claims that a religious philosophy could then defend or critique. There is a difference between the forms of knowledge at play.

It is not yet clear how we should understand the relationship between embodied knowledge and discursive knowledge and, as Porcher points out, the gap between them can raise a question about the very goals of philosophy of religion. Porcher writes that when he

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first began wondering about how one might engage philosophically with Afro-Brazilian religions, he was "still very much in the frame of mind of traditional philosophy of religion" (2025, p. 58). As noted above, philosophers of religion have spent a great deal of energy on the question of how a person might be justified to hold a belief in the reality of God. Some have argued that a believer might be justified, for example, by trusting their own theistic experiences or by trusting the testimony regarding the theistic experiences of other practitioners. Porcher notes that as philosophy of religion grows to study not only beliefs in a single omnipotent God, but also beliefs in other supernatural or superempirical entities such as the *orixás* in Candomblé, one can extend the epistemological arguments that had been used to justify theism so that one can see how those who believe in multiple spirits could also be justified in their beliefs (2025, pp. 58-60). The philosophical approaches to justifying theistic belief can be extended to support the beliefs that inform Afro-Brazilian practices of sacrifice, initiation, and spirit possession. This extension is new. Nevertheless, on precisely this point, Porcher draws a caution: "As well argued and thoughtful an examination into the justificatory power of possession experiences can be, however, such epistemological interests are completely alien to and out of step with the traditions it purports to examine" (60).[1] The philosopher's interest in justification is alien to Afro-Brazilian religions, in the first place, because the practitioners themselves have not developed and may not be interested in developing a defense of their epistemic right to hold their religious beliefs. The epistemological arguments are alien, in the second place, because the form of discursive knowledge produced in philosophical texts is abstract – as Porcher says, "theoretical and scientific" (2025, p. 60) – unlike the concrete, practical knowledge gained in Afro-Brazilian religious practices.

In thinking about this issue with Porcher, I want to consider two questions: first, how might we understand the relationship between the embodied knowledge of religious practitioners and the discursive knowledge of those who study them? Second, does the difference between them mean that as the academic discipline of philosophy of religion becomes global, it should not include the question about justification? Porcher observes that "Afro-Brazilian traditions are not text-based and have not developed systematic theologies" (2025, p. 2), and Afro-Brazilian religions are not unusual in this respect. Many religious forms of life around the world are practice-centered in this way. As philosophers of religion expand the range of religious traditions they study, it will be increasingly common that they will study religious traditions to which the traditional interests of academic philosophy are alien, and so this methodological question will arise in multiple contexts.

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[1] It is worth noticing that Porcher does not refer here to "the traditions that philosophy of religion examines," but instead of the traditions that philosophy of religion purports to examine, implying that philosophers who take a disengaged stance lose sight of the embodied reality that they claim they are studying. The accusation that reflective analysis distorts the living, human reality it means to analyze – that "we murder to dissect" as William Wordsworth famously put it – is a methodological issue that philosophers of religion should address.

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First, then, what is the relationship between the embodied knowledge gained in a religious practice and the discursive knowledge produced by philosophers? To see this question more clearly, I ask: what is the relation of embodied knowledge and discursive knowledge in general? I think that a productive approach is to borrow language from phenomenology and to see the knowledge generated by embodied practice as "prereflective," and the discursive knowledge that one finds in a book, for example, as "reflective." On this account, embodied practice is logically prior, and one can create discursive knowledge by reflecting on what one has learned in one's embodied practices. Discursive knowledge seeks to put into words the knowledge gained in practice, to grasp it conceptually, and to communicate it. On this phenomenological model, there remains a real difference between what one learns by doing and how one conceptualizes it afterwards. That later discursive account may fail to do justice to what the practitioner learned in the practice. Nevertheless, the two forms of knowledge are related when discursive knowledge takes embodied knowledge as its object.

Why might someone move from engaged activity to disengaged reflection? One is unlikely to make this shift until one feels some reason to reflect discursively on one's practice. For example, one might pause one's practice and consider it discursively because, as with Martin Heidegger's broken hammer, something has gone wrong. Or one might pause one's practice and try to put one's embodied knowledge into words in order to share what one has learned with those who are not present. Or one might pause one's practice and shift to critical reflection because one has encountered others whose practices differ or conflict, one feels challenged, and one seeks to justify one's practice in this context. Those who do not see a value like one of these are unlikely to shift to a discursive, reflective mode. However, even if one sees a value in shifting to critical reflection, shifting to reflection also requires supportive material conditions. If one does not have the time to reflect, which is to say, time to step away from engaged practice, to think about it and discuss it with others, then one is unlikely to develop a discursive account of one's practice. If one's group does not have the material resources for the creation of texts – perhaps the group has no written language at all, or no members trained as scribes or as intellectual representatives, or no libraries – then one is unlikely to develop a discursive account of one's practice.

We can use this phenomenological model to understand the relationship between the embodied knowledge of religious practices and the discursive knowledge in religious philosophies. If one understands "a religion" not as a set of beliefs, a worldview, or a theology, but as a set of practices, then every religion will generate embodied knowledge.[2] However, religious participants may or may not see a value in shifting to disengaged discursive reflection on those practices. They may or may not feel that anything has gone wrong in their practice, nor a need to share the practice with others who are not present, nor challenged by alternative practices.

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[2] In Schilbrack (2020), I draw on Paul Ricoeur, Michel Foucault, and Maurice Merleau-Ponty to develop an account of a religious practitioner as not only the product of social power but also as that of a perceiving, problem-solving person.

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And even if some participants do see a value in shifting to discursive reflection, they may not have the time or resources to produce a religious philosophy. On this model, there is a difference between embodied knowledge and discursive knowledge, but this is a difference one sees within every religion. On this model, then, it is not the case that some religious traditions cannot develop a religious philosophy nor that for some religions it would be inappropriate to do so.

We can return now to the question about philosophical justification. Porcher pointed out that the traditional philosophical interest in justification question was alien to Afro-Brazilian religions. On the model introduced here, this absence is not because philosophical reflection on Afro-Brazilian religions is impossible or inappropriate but only because participants either have not felt the need or have not had the material resources (or both) to make that shift. However, a practitioner could develop an epistemological justification of this practice, or a philosopher who is not a practitioner might develop one. Porcher draws on work by Mikel Burley (2025) to argue that engaging in embodied practices can generate both "know-how" and a kind of "knowledge by acquaintance." That is, even before a religious participant reflects discursively on what they have learned, they can gain both skills in the practice and direct awareness of things related to the practice (Porcher, 2025, p. 61). Like the traditional philosophical interest in justification, this proposal about the nature of embodied cognition is also "theoretical and scientific," distant from the concerns of the Candomblé practitioners. Nevertheless, it is common that religious practices are accused of being irrational or harmful, especially by those outside the practice, and so it is easy to imagine that there will be those who want to reflect on Afro-Braizilian religious practice to grasp how participants understand the world and who want to defend their epistemic right to do so. For this reason, I think that a practice-centered philosophy of religion may revise the questions asked in traditional philosophy of religion, but it will not drop the evaluative interest in asking whether people are justified in thinking that their practices are good, their beliefs are true, their social institutions are just, and their experiences are of something real.[3]

Towards the end of his book, Porcher writes, "I have offered Afro-Brazilian traditions as examples to highlight the limited reach of the philosophy of religion" (2025, p. 62). He and I agree that traditional philosophy of religion is limited, and that it is limited in part because it has not yet developed the methodological tools to grasp and assess the knowledge generated in embodied practice. However, precisely because I see the discipline of philosophy of religion not as a fixed set of questions but rather as the ongoing and evolving set of attempts of people to reflect philosophically on the truth, goodness, justice, and reality of religion, I see those limits as temporary. Interventions like Porcher's *Afro-Brazilian Religions* are what the discipline needs to overcome them.

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[3] In Schilbrack (2023), I argue that a danger of global philosophy of religion is that it will drop this interest.

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Kevin Schilbrack is Professor of Religious Studies at Appalachian State University, North Carolina, USA (Ph.D. University of Chicago Divinity School). His research focuses on social ontology and embodied cognition in religious forms of life.

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