and demanding, to use kindness and support to empower people to fulfill their potential. I have endured so many toxic teaching styles, and through it all Dr. Cole’s model has been my guide.

**Newton:** Where can people find you if they want to connect with you and what do you hope people connect with you about?

**Jones:** I’m most active on Twitter at @ProfChrisMJones. I use the same handle on TikTok. My official email is chris.jones1@washburn.edu. I love to talk about how we teach religion and how we strategize to be able to keep teaching religion.

**References**


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**The Conversation: What is the GCPR?**

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The Conversation puts an ear to current discussion in the field. With scholars reevaluating the legacy of every facet of Religious Studies, the team at the Bulletin thought to check in with what is happening in the world of philosophy. In so doing, we learned about an exciting endeavor known as Global Critical Philosophy of Religion. Philosophers Nathan Loewen (University of Alabama), Tim Knepper (Drake University), and Gereon Kopf (Luther College) were kind enough to answer our questions about GCPR.

**Richard Newton:** Where does the Global Critical Philosophy of Religion conversation come from?

**Nathan Loewen:** I think the Global Critical Philosophy of Religion (GCPR) can be traced to a five-year seminar hosted during the American Academy of Religion (AAR) annual meetings from 2017–2021. Conversations among dozens of scholars led to a guiding question, “Can philosophy of religion enter the globalized, 21st-century world? If so, how?” (https://globalcritical.as.ua.edu/) The question prompts a set of affiliated constructive projects aimed at changing the field’s scope of data and scholarly representation.

**Tim Knepper:** The seminar attracted scholars wanting both to globalize and diversify the content of philosophy of religion and to critically interrogate and expand the categories, methods, and perspectives used in the practice of philosophy of religion.

**Gereon Kopf:** We should also note that there were several mini-conferences and workshops, and we have
published several volumes (one monograph, 2 edited), and landed several grants. For each of these activities, the group involved scholars wishing to decenter the discipline by subverting Euro- and Anglophone-centrism.

**Loewen:** The AAR venue affected both data and representation since the participating scholars nearly all hailed from Canada and the United States. The seminar participants often did not have specializations outside philosophy of religion. The result were sessions with limited participation of scholars from the global south as well as a diversity of expertise on data and examples from around the world. Each year, the various GCPR-affiliated projects reflect an ongoing effort to address these flaws of scholarly composition and representation. Doing so leads to shifts in data, too.

The “critical” aspect of the overall project is to update scholarship in Philosophy of Religion (PoR) on the advances in theoretical circumspection happening across the humanities over the past 60 years. Otherwise, any “global” PoR project is another exercise in liberal imperialism. I think that “critical” signals an awareness of how structural and systemic forces have shaped the variety of discourses that ascribe to “philosophy of religion.” The “critical” perspective requires questions about the social dimension of PoR scholarship: how has the social formation of practices and institutional modes of reproduction, for example, resulted in the authorization and legitimation of the field’s topics and problems? While much is written about the limited scope of the field, few scholars asked questions about the conditions informing those limits. If this reflexive aspect of GCPR is fulfilled, then I think the “global” part of the overall project will make more sense.

**Newton:** Can you place the GCPR within the broader history of religion as you all understand it?

**Knepper:** I understand religious studies (or the academic study of religion) to be a field of studies, comprised of many different methods. Of those, philosophy is one such method. Traditionally (i.e., at least since its formal establishment in the 19th century and certainly prior to that), the philosophy of religion was practiced largely with respect to “western” religion, more so the “classical god of theism,” and with the methods of western philosophy. We seek to broaden both, especially (for me), the categories/topics of inquiry and the content that is inquired; this is, for me, the “critical” and “global” part of GCPR.

**Loewen:** Philosophy of religion (PR/PoR) is a subfield with an intellectual history inherited from Enlightenment Western/European religious studies and, more recently, 20th-century developments in Anglo-American philosophy. I would say that philosophy of religion is a relative stranger to religious studies, where previous representations of the sub-field discourse to certain versions of phenomenology and history of religions discourses that are entirely abandoned by Anglo-American philosophers. Moving too quickly, I would divide the last 60 years of PoR discourses into a majority, Anglo-American grouping that tracks nowhere near “phenomenology” via pragmatism and analytic philosophy (see Eugene T. Long’s tome on the history of the field [2003]), and, a minority, European discourse that deploys religious tropes to plumb methodological and cultural issues facing 20th-century Europe (e.g., Derrida and Vattimo 1998, and Crocket, Putt, and Robbins 2014).

Where does “GCPR” fit in? Despite some crossover in the early 20th century, scholars and projects affiliated with “GCPR” mostly understand philosophy of religion scholars as outsiders to late 20th century religious studies’ scholarship on secularization, liberation, narrative, deconstruction, feminist thought, postmodern thought, and post/de-colonial thought (see Wildman, 2011). “Theory” remains a novel methodology for philosophers of religion (e.g., see the work of Thomas A. Lewis (2015) for how much the status quo of PoR has to offer RS compared to vice versa).

**Kopf:** Academic philosophy, like all academic disciplines, is inherently euro-centric and has been exported in the context of colonialism. The power dynamics of colonialism and anglophone-centrism have to be critically examined and subverted.

**Loewen:** The notion of “GCPR” registers how some PoRs are contemplating how their scholarship engages with cultural critiques of social power. There is a reflexive turn happening among Anglo-American philosophers generally (see Park 2013, Ganeri 2016, van Norden 2017, Struhl 2010, Rosenlee et al. 2020, Mills 2020, and the APA’s program for diversity and inclusion). From my perspective, GCPR is useful to set the stage to challenge the horns of a (conservative) dilemma: in the 21st century, does PoR sustain a scholarly identity that retains its current (theistic) scope and (analytic) methods, or does PoR lose its pith by a methodological divestiture of disciplinary coherence at the
hands of theory? I would suggest that the emergence of “analytic theology” is a response that embraces the dilemma and offers a certain kind of constructive response. My hope is that the scholarship and projects affiliated with the notion of “GCPR” might offer several alternatives to these horns by learning how PoRs might use the resources of global data and critical humanities scholarship to place a novel emphasis on reflexivity and fallibility on their subject position and methods. I try to frame some of this in the introduction to Diversifying Philosophy of Religion: Critiques, Methods, and Case Studies (Bloomsbury, 2023).

Newton: What are some of the highlights of your project?

Loewen: A personal highlight is the ever-widening network of colleagues and friends who decide to become involved with affiliated publications and projects. There are over 100 people on the listserv, which Tim Knepper established during the AAR seminar sessions which got several publishing projects going. Those projects were developed by over three dozen scholars who have participated in five grant-funded initiatives to collaboratively develop an introductory textbook written by Tim Knepper, a conventional edited volume (see Loewen and Rostalka 2023), and a very unconventional forthcoming edited volume (eds. Gereon Kopf and Purushottama Bilimoria). All of these GCPR-affiliated projects have taken a long time to progress toward their results. There is no top-down hierarchy. The conversations are often asynchronous. Participants are spread out and span multiple time zones. Everyone has varying institutional demands, schedules, and commitments. Since nobody puts all their eggs in the “GCPR basket,” as it were, I think it is a real highlight when a grant gets awarded, a project moves ahead, or a publication makes it to press.

Knepper: I would have to say our three publications. Nathan and Agnieszka’s edited volume on critical methods and perspectives is or will be out soon. So will Gereon and Purushottama’s volume on “multi-entry philosophy.” And my own undergraduate textbook was published just a couple months ago in December 2022 (see Kopf 2022). Also, we seem now to have two publications in the works.

Loewen: A final, important, highlight for me is to have people from around the world making virtual visits with students. That virtual mobility enables both scholars and students to learn the reflexivity they need to develop cross-cultural approaches to the philosophy of religion.

Newton: Tell us about the intervention you see your project making.

Knepper: We each have different interventions to make, as I see it. My own concerns the fundamental topics, questions, and categories of inquiry for PR. Obviously (I hope), attributes and existence of God, problem of evil, immortality of soul, and so forth, will no longer work if PR is critically globalized. What replacement categories will be used? I myself have proposed ten fundamental questions/topics, each derived from aspects of the “journey metaphor,” in my textbook. But I am also very interested in other solutions to this problem such as (1) working from the ground-up to see where there is significant overlap between different religio-philosophical traditions (as we are doing with the NEH-funded project), (2) “flipping the script” such that a marginalized tradition provides the key categories of inquiry (as is also being done with the NEH-funded project), and (3) looking toward the social-sciences for “panhuman universals” from which to derive topics and questions. (4) In addition, Gereon Kopf has developed a pioneering/innovative approach and a completely new taxonomy on how to assess and envision various forms of global-critical engagement. (5) Exploring PoR in different languages and conceptual structures.

Loewen: Given the decentralized and diffuse participation in “GCPR,” I think there are only aspirational answers to this question. The most possible interventions take the shape of publications and teaching. The primary intervention for me is in teaching. I started attempting to take a “global” and “critical” approach to PoR and RS at Vanier College by creating a set of loose affiliations of college classrooms around the world called the “virtual team teaching” project (see Intercultural Twinnings: A Commitment for a Pluralistic Society, eds. Carignan, Springer, Deraîche, and Guillot 2022). My vision of GCPR still aligns with an approach to the humanities teaching that uses cross-cultural learning to develop knowledge formed by critically reflexive subjectivities who develop ideas, understood as always fallible, that may be comparatively validated through scholarly interaction with another
critically-reflexive perspective. This is not the “PoR” you find in most textbooks and syllabi. Scholarly interventions in philosophy along these lines may be found in journals such as *Sophia*, and a host of edited publications from the turn of the millennium such as Purushottama Bilimoria and Andrew Irvine’s *Post-Colonial Philosophy of Religion* (2010), or Morny Joy’s *After Appropriation: Explorations in Intercultural Philosophy and Religion* (2011), or the special issue of Studies in Religion/Sciences Religieuses in 2012 (41.1). GCPR-affiliated scholarship builds on these interventions. The challenge is to ensure that “GCPR” does not become yet one more insular academic club. The most important intervention, which remains mostly aspirational rather than actual, is for GCPR-affiliated projects to create venues whose structures and practices are formed and informed by scholars from the Global South. Otherwise, as I noted earlier, “GCPR” becomes another (re)source of imperialism.

**Newton:** What’s your vision for the project going forward?

**Knepper:** Good question! It feels to me like we are a bit transitional right now, with some new leadership being brought in. I wouldn’t be surprised, therefore, if we develop in ways that I can’t foretell. My own vision is to continue plugging away at “our problem of categories,” also perhaps engaging in a comparative study of the metaphors used to do philosophical work in religio-traditions worldwide. I also think that we will continue to diversify with regard to some neglected regions (C. and S. America, Australasia, more sub-Saharan …), as well as religio-philosophies and methods/perspectives.

**Loewen:** I think I have already indicated how scholars that choose to affiliate themselves with the idea of “GCPR” might take on the work of transforming academic structures and processes in the 21-century. The requirements to structure a productive research program creates the conditions by which there can easily emerge a “GCPR club.” Issues related to coherence and consistency of form are constantly points of discussion for each affiliated project. Academics have historically mobilized those issues to limit participation (e.g., see Dotson 2012 and Rosenlee et al. 2020). Academic institutions and their related (fiscally driven) interests surround academics within networks that feedback on these issues. My vision for “GCPR,” then, is that all who participate share a concern for and investment in critical reflexivity in relation to not only scholarly outputs but as an orientation toward their structural relations to “academia” on the local, regional, national and global levels. My vision is for “GCPR” to practice caution toward the Enlightenment and late capitalist orientations of “forward” and “progress” that so easily create research programs that exclude participation and dialogue. Creating options for scholars to participate in GCPR-related projects, I think, needs to cautiously work with the various coins of the academic realm and those who control the flows of those coins (e.g., publications). To continue with the mixing of metaphors, GCPR-related projects will carefully consider how to use “the master’s tools” within and among the various academic houses of their participants. When I think about the vision for GCPR-type work, I think “critical” entails constantly considering how to disambiguate the social dynamics of legitimation from concerns about coherence and form. For me, that’s a key condition for the participation of “global” philosophers of religion.

**Kopf:** In other words, the everyone’s vision involves at least two of the following: to contextualize the way philosophy is currently being done, expand the methodological landscape, revise what is considered philosophy, re-evaluate what is acceptable as academic/scholarly methods, and thereby subvert the colonialism and Anglophone-centrism in the field.

**Newton:** Who is contributing to the project?

**Knepper:** There’s a core group of around three dozen people, I’d say. You can see who they are by looking at our website’s “scholars” page (Scholars – Global Critical Philosophy of Religion (ua.edu)).

**Loewen:** Next to no contributors are professional philosophers of religion. Participation in GCPR is “diverse” compared to the historic demographics of the field. That’s not a useful metric for any project that includes “critical” as a goal alongside “global.” As I see it, “GCPR” is not a big tent project simply because having that specific aspiration doesn’t ask “whose tent? What structure?” In the 21st-century, the popular question among (white, male) philosophers in the early 1988 by Alasdair MacIntyre must realize that “whose justice? Which rationality?” cannot skirt questions of political economy (which Iris Marion Young, among other
feminist scholars, already did in 1990 with *Justice and the Politics of Difference*).

On the matter of a vision for “global” participation, “GCPR” has failed to deliver on that vision due to several historic and structural conditions. Anyone can see this by reviewing the “participating scholars” page of the website, which I host with the aim of publicly representing GCPR-affiliated projects. What anyone can see there is that contributors to the various projects are overwhelmingly from North American and European universities, which have programs related to philosophy of religion and the funding to support participation. Cross-checking Tim Knepper’s GCPR listserv with the member roster of the American Academy of Religion shows that the majority of participants come from among the AAR’s membership, since that organization supported the original, five-year seminar. Affiliated projects and publications are all in English, because until now the granting organizations are ultimately based in the United States. Every GCPR-affiliated project takes place in English, even though the critical issue of translation is always discussed for any GCPR project. Who contributes to GCPR projects is a critical matter.

**Newton:** Are you using any special tools, methods, etc. for your work? If so, please tell us about them.

**Loewen:** Online platforms are the pathway by which GCPR might realize the goal of global participation. That lesson came about in Spring 2020, when Gereon Kopf shifted online for his project “Teaching Philosophy of Religion Inclusively to Diverse Students.” Kopf’s plan for an in-person workshop funded by the Wabash Center was to convene a group of teachers to work out GCPR pedagogies and content with experts in religious studies and philosophy of religion. Instead of meeting for one weekend, the entire group met three times online for two-day workshops. Preparation consisted of sub-groups meetings beforehand. They used cloud-based file storage to share text, image, video, and audio. Following Kopf’s example, I used online platforms to facilitate a project on “Cross-Cultural Conceptions of Self and Persistence” (funded by the University of Birmingham). The group of 11 scholars spread across four continents collaborated asynchronously using cloud-based platforms to work out conceptions of self, according to philosophical sources from East Asia, Africa, and South Asia.

Online platforms are not a panacea. Online collaboration reduces barriers to participation largely because it does not require flights, hotels, and meeting spaces. Meeting in-person has the affordance of creating highly focused conditions for producing scholarly outcomes. The dispersed and asynchronous nature of online collaboration around the world easily results in less focus and slower production of outcomes. The online media that quickly establishes global connections are faced with conditions for working out productive collaboration never similarly encountered by in-person meetings. For example, those who can travel from the Global South to meet in person will be fluent in English-language customs of communication. The fiscal costs of in-person meetings obviously sustains and reinforces the provincialism of North American academia. The requirement of a computer with a stable internet connection does the same, but with a far lower barrier to participation. What that enables, however, is a situation where cross-cultural negotiations occur within the constraints of text and faces on screens.

**Newton:** What lessons have you learned along the way?

**Kopf:** It’s the testing process that can get, well, testy. It takes a vulnerability to criticism that I don’t always have. But I am (slowly) learning that one person cannot do this alone (whereas leaders are still needed), and that we need to draw on the expertise of one another.

**Loewen:** The goals of “global” and “critical” for a Western scholar are very, very difficult. In the past year, I have learned hard lessons related to the legal and fiscal conditions for global academic collaboration. Most importantly, I am constantly (re)learning how much and how often I uncritically partake in the insular and provincial blinders inherited by philosophers of religion, religious studies, and philosophy. I think it is an unreasonable, additional burden for so many people rendered subaltern by global capitalism to engage my efforts to actualize some critical acumen in my chosen field of study. Since I know better, I need to keep learning lessons about how to do better. That effort involves a different kind of attention to “coherence” and “form” than the practices inherited by philosophers of religion.
Knepper: That frameworks for a comprehensive re-working of (GC)PR do not rise from the ground-up. If that’s what you want (and I do), then the framework needs to be derived by one person (or at least just a small few), then tested, or culled from the work of others (as in the case of the NEH-project), then tested.

Newton: Who are your collaborators outside of the group (e.g., grant funding agencies, companies, universities, presses)?

Loewen: I think reviewing the GCPR timeline is useful to get a sense of the various people and stakeholders involved in affiliated projects (Timeline – Global Critical Philosophy of Religion (ua.edu)). Bloomsbury Academic has accepted three GCPR-affiliated proposals thus far. Each proposal involved a slightly different group of participants. Various groups of participants have participated in a variety of projects thanks to funding from the National Endowment for the Humanities, the Wabash Center, Drake University, Luther College, and the John Templeton Foundation through the Global Philosophy of Religion Project lead by Professor Yujin Nagasawa at Birmingham University. The College of Arts and Sciences at the University of Alabama has provided the web server with which I’m able to host the GCPR website and its related media.

Newton: Is there anything else you wish to tell us?

Loewen: I would be indebted to anyone who takes time to introduce GCPR to their colleagues. I will do my utmost to find people and resources to support ways to affiliate GCPR with possible project and publication proposals!

Kopf: Readers may be interested to explore the “fourth-person philosophy” I have developed as a result of involvement in the various GCRP projects (see Kopf 2022).

References


