



PROJECT MUSE®

---

## Response to Paul J. Griffiths

Ellen T. Armour

Journal of the American Academy of Religion, Volume 74, Number 1,  
March 2006 , pp. 75-76 (Article)

Published by Oxford University Press



➔ For additional information about this article

<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/196792>



RESPONSES  
AND REJOINDERS

---

## Response to Paul J. Griffiths

---

I APPRECIATE THE CARE and clarity with which Paul J. Griffiths lays out an intellectual grid through which to view contemporary dilemmas concerning the future of the academic study of religion. Griffiths' grid shows that these dilemmas are of a piece with larger epistemic issues of our day: the status of claims to truth, the difficulty of wrestling with difference. Focal to Griffiths' essay is the difference between theological and nontheological approaches to religion (a term inevitably defined variably in different registers, Griffiths rightly notes). He advocates for the theological over the nontheological, finding the latter guilty of a kind of false consciousness. Theologians are commendably open about their normative claims; practitioners of nontheological methods (Griffiths cites J. Z. Smith and Bruce Lincoln as examples) are blind to their own need for (and unacknowledged tendency to make) normative claims—a lacuna born of a misguided desire to assert their independence from theology. Griffiths predicts a bleak future for the so-called “scientific” study of religion unless it returns to “the warm embrace of Christian theology, where it properly belongs.”

I am not persuaded that the future for the scientific study of religion is “bleak” apart from theology's embrace, no matter how warm (some might say suffocatingly so) it might be. This dire prediction does not seem to follow necessarily from Griffiths' critique of the field, no matter how apt *it* might be. Let us grant, for the sake of argument that the study of religion is plagued by an unacknowledged need for normativity and

*Journal of the American Academy of Religion* March 2006, Vol. 74, No. 1, pp. 75–76  
doi:10.1093/jaarel/lfj016

© The Author 2006. Published by Oxford University Press, on behalf of the American Academy of Religion. All rights reserved. For permissions, please e-mail: [journals.permissions@oxfordjournals.org](mailto:journals.permissions@oxfordjournals.org)  
Advance Access publication January 9, 2006

would benefit from bringing that need into the light of day. Griffiths seems to suspect that such normativity would show itself to be theological or, at least, in need of the theological. Why would that be the case? And even if Griffiths proved correct, the cure (*pharmakon*) that Griffiths offers religious studies seems to be, to play off the double meaning in the Greek, more poison than remedy. If theology is by definition beholden to particular religious traditions, such an asymmetrical demand for accord between the two fields would effectively bring the scientific study of religion—understood as either an artifactual or natural entity, to use Griffiths’ grid—to an end. And, ironically (or not?), its end would lie in its beginning: Griffiths seeks to incorporate religious studies not into “the theological” in general (problematic enough) but into *Christian* theology. And a particular Christian theology, at that; one which understands religion as Griffiths does: as “human action” born of the “natural desire” for union with “the God of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and Jesus” and whose turn to the study of religions found just that “natural desire” disseminated incipiently, at least, throughout religion’s diverse forms. What justifies the privilege Griffiths claims for *Christian* theology (much less this specific version of it) over and above all others? Perhaps, supercessionism is not what Griffiths intends, but it is at least a risk run by the position he articulates. How might this risk be avoided should religious studies take Griffiths’ “cure?” What concrete gains in the understanding of religion *as* a(n irreducibly?) diverse phenomenon—the putative aim of religious studies—would offset the risk run? Furthermore, what does a Christian theology not interested in repeating its supercessionist past stand to gain by taking in its prodigal son?

*Ellen T. Armour*  
Rhodes College