

Narrativizing Theory: The Role of Ambiguity in Religious Aesthetics

A Dissertation Proposal

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“Those things about which we cannot theorize, we must narrate.”¹

—Umberto Eco

“What cannot be theorized must be narrated...but the narration itself may perhaps be theorized.”²

—Michael Caesar

“I believe I am not alone in my desire to see a religious aesthetics that does not take as its starting and ending point, Beauty, Truth, or God.”³

—S. Brent Plate

¹ Peter Bondanella, ed., *New Essays on Umberto Eco* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 99.

² Michael Caesar, *Umberto Eco: Philosophy, Semiotics, and the Work of Fiction* (Cambridge: Polity, 1999), 157.

³ S. Brent Plate, *Walter Benjamin, Religion, and Aesthetics: Rethinking Religion Through the Arts* (New York: Routledge, 2005) viii.

Thesis

The goal of this project is to expand S. Brent Plate's "invented religious aesthetics"⁴ by bringing it into conversation with Umberto Eco's theory of ambiguity. Its aim is to articulate more fully the space that ambiguity opens within the field of religious aesthetics when viewed as a liminal or interdisciplinary theory that neither privileges the starting points of transcendental aesthetics nor the "neo-arches" of theories of materiality. In this way, this project will hint at new ways of studying and describing religious worlds⁵ while also illustrating the porous borderlines between narrative and theory. *I will argue that a religious aesthetic rooted in ambiguity emphasizes both the provisionality of knowledge and the narrativization of reality.*

The Question

⁴ "Aesthetics" can be defined in two ways: one, aesthetics is sensory perception (things perceived) and is distinct from conceptual knowledge (things known). Two, aesthetics is the philosophical study of style, art, beauty, and taste. The former is *aesthetica naturalis*, while the latter is *aesthetica artificialis*. By "religious aesthetics," I am relying on Plate's definition and understanding of how religion and aesthetics are mutually informing. In one sense, aesthetics focuses on how we perceive and create our worlds through sense perception, which is then responsible for the formation of community and society. Here Plate sees the dialectic between *naturalis* and *artificialis*—between embodiment and objects/arts—as forming an originary point for the study of religion. How? Because "fundamental to this," Plate writes, "is the contention that sense perception is a central point of mediation for the reception, creation, and reproduction of social-sacred space." A religious aesthetics then is that which focuses on the liminal space between the dialectic of *naturalis* and *artificialis* and, from that vantage point, analyzes religious worlds (cf. footnote 5 below). Likewise, by an "invented religious aesthetics," Plate means that which is informed by Walter Benjamin's anti-beauty aesthetic that focuses on fragments and interconnection over transcendentals and individual contemplation. S. Brent Plate, "The Skin of Religion: Aesthetic Mediations of the Sacred," *Crosscurrents* 62, no. 2 (2012): 167–8; S. Brent Plate, "Inventing Religious Aesthetics: Word/Image/Body/Other in Walter Benjamin and Gary Hill," ed. Robert Paul, Doctor of Philosophy, Emory University, 1999: <http://du.idm.oclc.org/login?url=http://search.proquest.com/docview/304565559>.

⁵ By "religious life" or "religious worlds," I am relying on William E. Paden's description of religious worlds, which are distinct from religious beliefs. For Paden, a "world" is a "descriptive word for what a community or individual deems is the 'reality' it inhabits." It is not something "out there" that we all share. In this way, a "religious reality" is constituted through mythic language and prototypes, ritual times, the engaging of gods, and the distinction between pure and profane behavior. "These forms of religious life, the forms of the sacred," Paden suggests, "are at one and the same time the forms of world construction and world expression." Cf. William E. Paden, *Interpreting the Sacred: Ways of Viewing Religion* (Boston: Beacon, 2003), 7–9 and *Religious Worlds: The Comparative Study of Religion* (Boston: Beacon, 1994), 7.

The governing question of this project is how does Eco's theory of ambiguity expand Plate's depiction of a religious aesthetic grounded in materiality?

Plate has written that he desires "to see a religious aesthetics that does not take as its starting and ending point, Beauty, Truth, or God."⁶ For him, religious aesthetics—the latter of which is defined as both sense perception and art criticism—begins with the material world and those intuitions that are acquired through the "skinscape." In this way, religious aesthetics engages "the mediated, sensational forms that make meaning out of religious objects, sights, shapes, and sounds."⁷

Eco has explained ambiguity as that which "must be defined as a mode of violating the rules of the code."⁸ It is an important device that functions as an introduction to the aesthetic experience, which focuses attention and urges interpretation. Ambiguity produces further knowledge because it "compels one to reconsider the usual codes and their possibilities."⁹ In Eco's *Kant and the Platypus*, he describes ambiguity thusly: "The work of artists always tries to call our perceptual schemata into question, if in no other way than by inviting us to recognize that in certain circumstances things could also appear to us differently."¹⁰

Eco's ambiguity then can be seen as explicating that which Plate, perhaps, takes for granted. It reminds aesthetes that sense perceptions—once aggregated and stored in the encyclopedias of culture—are provisional, interpreted, and narrativized. Ambiguity does not eschew the aesthetic turn towards materiality, but it does qualify it. In other words, if theological

⁶ Plate, *Walter Benjamin*, viii.

⁷ Plate, "The Skin of Religion," 164.

⁸ Umberto Eco, *A Theory of Semiotics* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1979), 263.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 274.

¹⁰ Umberto Eco, *Kant and the Platypus: Essays on Language and Cognition* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 2000), 223.

aesthetics have for too long focused on the transcendentals of Beauty, Truth, and the Good, then ambiguity asks material aesthetics if it has not swapped out the transcendental for the material ground. While materiality might be far more palatable to postsecular, liberal academics, it is also guilty of lampooning the very systems that allow cultures to make meaning from concrete experiences. If Plate can suggest a material aesthetic that neither begins nor end with Beauty, Truth, or God, then ambiguity desires an aesthetic that neither begins nor ends with Beauty, Truth, the Good, God, or Materiality.

This, no doubt, prompts the question: With what then is aesthetics left? Neither transcendental nor naively material, an ambiguous aesthetic fully unlocks the potentiality of Plate's skinscape by asking aesthetes to remain in the uncomfortable positions of either non-judgment or provisionality.¹¹ In this way, ambiguity cultivates what I call, "narrativizing theories," which imply both theories that are narrativized and theories that create narrativizations. This double meaning is intentional and implies the multi-directionality of narrativizing theories. While one can never fully delineate or maintain the boundary between that

¹¹ By "provisionality," I mean something akin to that which Peirce argued for in his definition of truth, which he understood as the scientific method. In short, the truth is that which humans would eventually arrive at should they live long enough to see it come to fruition, so long as they continue to utilize something like the scientific method. Humans will not live to see that day, however, so all truths that are collected and subjected to the community via the scientific method should then be understood as *provisional* until that ideal and hypothetical day in which all meaning converges. This day, of course, will never come, but can function as a useful or pragmatic heuristic, as well as a reminder that humans have not fully grasped truth and reality. Marcelo Gleiser argues for something similar, as does Karsten Harries. Cf. Gleiser, *The Island of Knowledge: The Limits of Science and the Search for Meaning* (New York: Basic, 2014); Karsten Harries, *Infinity and Perspective* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2002); T. L. Short, *Peirce's Theory of Signs*, 1st ed. (Cambridge University Press, 2009); James Hoopes, ed. *Peirce on Signs: Writings on Semiotic by Charles Sanders Peirce*, 1st ed. (The University of North Carolina Press, 1991); Robert Burch and Charles Sanders Peirce, "Charles Sanders Peirce," *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, 2013; Albert Atkin, "Peirce's Theory of Signs," *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, 2010, 1–18; Charles Sanders Peirce, "How to Make Our Ideas Clear," *Popular Science Monthly* 12, January (1878): 286–302; Charles Sanders Peirce, "The Fixation of Belief," *Popular Science Monthly* 12, November (1877): 1–15; Bernardo Cantens, "Peirce on Science and Religion," *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 59, 2 (2006): 93–115; Richard L. Trammell, "Religion, Instinct, and Reason in Thought of Charles S. Peirce," *Journal of Religious Ethics* 8, 1 (2016): 3–25.

which is narrativized and that which is theorized, it is ambiguity that helps us to more fully understand the shuttling back-and-forth between sense perception and creation, narrative and theory, and, in the worlds of religion, that which is concretely lived “as if” it were true. Insofar as this project is concerned with both religious aesthetics and religion and literature, then perhaps another way to “get at” my focus is to state it thusly: narrativizing theory implies an ambiguous aesthetic that tends towards the “and” between that which is religion and that which is literature.

It is my contention, in the end, that Eco’s theory of ambiguity opens and furthers Plate’s materially focused religious aesthetic by emphasizing the provisionality of what we know when taken as an aggregation of sense perceptions. To put it simply, I will expand Plates’ invented or material religious aesthetic through utilizing Eco’s theory of ambiguity. *I will argue that a religious aesthetic rooted in ambiguity emphasizes both the provisionality of knowledge and the narrativization of reality.*

Scope of the Project

The bulk of my dissertation will be rooted in close readings, interpretations, and semiotic analyses. I will begin by detailing Plate’s position and clarifying his desire to have a religious aesthetic that neither begins nor ends with Beauty, Truth, or God. I will then articulate Eco’s theory of ambiguity and how I see it furthering Plate’s material aesthetic. Following from this will be a close reading of Eco’s theory to novel translation wherein the ideas of *Six Walks in the Fictional Woods* are translated into the narrative of *The Prague Cemetery*, which are then coalesced into the further theorization and critique found in *Inventing the Enemy*. I will argue that it is at the site of these textual translations or narrativizations of theory that my thesis emerges: ambiguity opens a material, religious aesthetic that is liminal or “and” in nature.

While it is important both to clearly and concisely argue my thesis, its power will be more evident if performed. I have chosen to do this, as can be seen, by allowing for three, playful excursions. Two of these excursions are place holders for what will be readings in literatures outside the orbit of Eco's sun. I would, in other words, like to think through an ambiguous religious aesthetic first, before committing to the texts that allow me to model the narrativization of my theory. What I can say, however, is that these two readings, analyses, and interpretations will be taken from the genre of "creative nonfiction." Examples of this literature are Bruno Latour's *Aramis, Or, The Love of Technology*, Arthur Phillips' *The Tragedy of Arthur*, and Emmanuel Carrère's *The Kingdom*.¹² In all three novels, the boundary between fact and fiction or narrative and theory is blurred beyond recognition. In both excursions, I am seeking to *show* an ambiguous material and religious aesthetic rather than *tell* one.¹³ If for no other reason, then the excursus of *showing* is important as it circumvents one potential, though major, hurdle. To use Eco's theory of ambiguity on his own philosophy and literature is to risk a self-referential project. The excursions allow for a creative space to see if Eco's theories work when placed in conversation with other literature. The excursions allow me to pursue an answer to the question: Do Eco's theories work on other literatures?¹⁴

¹² Arthur Phillips, *The Tragedy of Arthur: A Novel* (New York: Random House, 2011); Emmanuel Carrère, *The Kingdom*, trans. John Lambert (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2017); Bruno Latour, *Aramis, Or, The Love of Technology*, trans. Catherine Porter (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1996).

¹³ This raises the question: How can I show a material aesthetic through literary analysis? Or, in other words, how can I attempt to examine reality through literature? "The aesthetic text," Eco argues, "represents a sort of summary and laboratory model of all the aspects of sign-function: it can perform any or all productive functions (being composed of various types of judgment and acting as a meta-semiotic statement) and it can require any kind of productive labor...if aesthetic texts can modify our concrete approach to states of the world [via ambiguity] then they are of great importance to that branch of a theory of sign production that is concerned with the labor of connecting signs with the states of the world." Eco, *A Theory of Semiotics*, 261.

¹⁴ This is, obviously, difficult to justify. While I may not be utilizing Eco to read Eco, I will still be tainted by my engagement with and analysis of Eco. This is intentional. I do not see these two "blank" excursions as saying something new outside the scope of this dissertation, but rather as test cases for Eco's theory. So, yes, I am picking

The final excursus, and the last thing I will write for this project, is a short story that will perform the ambiguity of narrativizing theory. It is my hope that everything leading up to the writing of this story, “The Composer,” will spill over into the writing process. “The Composer” then will function as the apex of the “and” between religion and literature. It will be a narrativized theory and a material artifact that seeks to *show* provisionality rather than *tell* it. In summary:

To avoid interpretation, a composer agrees to a one-time performance of her newly written work. No recorders, no cameras, no media—only listeners. She performs it and, to be certain, it is the greatest, most complex piece of music that anyone has ever experienced. After the performance, however, the composer burns the only copy of her musical score. No one from that point on can interpret, repeat, thematize or perform her work. It was meant to be a once-for-all performance. The work only exists in its hearers’ minds. It only exists in the past, in memory. There will neither be a present nor a future to the score. It has been wiped away, eradicated. Fifty years later, however, music journalists begin to question the reality of this now mythic performance. Did it happen? The protagonist of “The Composer” then is a classical music journalist rooting out the truth, as the story emerges from a collage of notes, transcripts, and editorials.

Since I define “excursus” as “a digression or incidental excursion,”¹⁵ I take my three excursuses as arguing my thesis via alternate, tangential, or slanted means. I am—to belabor the point—arguing the same thesis in my excursuses that I am in the bulk of my dissertation, but through the digressive, playful, and ambiguous nature of a performed excursus. Perhaps more properly aligned with excursion, I will venture out and into the woods of semiotic chaos, fully intending to return to the academic civilization of safe, clear, and comprehensive theories. But who knows with what ambiguity I might be confronted in the forest of disorder or with what

the texts, but as entities collected in a laboratory for an ongoing experiment. While I will still be susceptible to the critique that I am only choosing texts that allow me to say what I would like to say, part of my dissertation’s point is that there is no other mode of operating within the world. We collect bits of data, narrativize them, and use them how we would like. The key, of course, is ambiguity, which functions as a reminder that all our narrativizations are provisional.

¹⁵ “Excursus,” Dictionary.com, accessed May 1, 2016, <http://goo.gl/aAzdK7>.

ignoble horror I might return to the path of least resistance? Who knows what manner of aesthetic might emerge?

Theory and Methodology

As has been seen, I will be unabashedly interdisciplinary and theoretical. I will be pulling shards of research from numerous fields to construct a mosaic of narrative possibility. If the base of my mosaic is religious theory, then the tesserae are composed of aesthetic, literary, semiotics theories. In this way, I plan to perform that which I am seeking to articulate—the role of ambiguity in religious aesthetics.

Simply put, however, Plate's desire to see a religious theory of materially grounded aesthetics is primed to be placed in conversation with Eco's semiotics. While much of Plate's work in this area has relied on his journey into the world of Walter Benjamin, I think that Eco's theories are sorely needed in the world of religious studies. Making for a fruitful dialogue partner, I see Eco's voice and theoretical framework tying together the polyvocal fields of religious studies, religion aesthetics, and religion and literature. In this way, I am seeking to place Eco in conversation with the discipline of religious studies more broadly and the subfields of religious aesthetics and religion and literature more specifically.¹⁶

Importance and Outcomes

¹⁶ There is a smattering of texts on religious aesthetics, but none that are materially grounded in the way that Plate desires. From the former category: Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Glory of the Lord*; Alejandro Garcia-Rivera, *The Community of the Beautiful*; Frank Burch Brown, *Religious Aesthetics and Good Taste, Bad Taste, and Christian Taste*; Jeremy Begbie, *Voicing Creation's Praise*; and Edward Farley, *Faith and Beauty*. From the latter, material category: S. Brent Plate, *Walter Benjamin, Religion, and Aesthetics*; Mark C. Taylor, *Disfiguring: Art, Architecture, Religion*; Daniel Gold, *Aesthetics and Analysis in Writing on Religion*; Maja Djikic and Keith Oatley, "The Art of Fiction"; Andrew Hass, *The Poetics of Critique*; and Umberto Eco, "On the Possibility of Generating Aesthetic Messages," *A Theory of Semiotics, Kant and the Platypus*, and *From the Tree to the Labyrinth*.

Scholars of religion often make an unconscious or implicit distinction between good or bad religion. Robert A. Orsi has argued this thesis at length in his *Between Heaven and Earth*. “Religions are as ambiguous and ambivalent,” he writes, “as the bonds that constitute them...thinking of religion as relationships...frees us from any notion of religious practices as *either good or bad*.”¹⁷ Following Orsi’s approach, viewing ambiguity as an essential component to religious aesthetics not only allows us to move more fully past the academic good or bad distinction, but also to critique our own personal, disciplinary, and cultural schematizations.

My work proposes to highlight the narrativization and restructuring of cultural codes. An ambiguous aesthetic validates sensual experience while also critiquing the codes that allow for cognitive understanding. In fact, this is similar to what cognitive scientists are discovering in regard to literature’s power to transform. “Literature can facilitate self-change,” Maja Djikic and Keith Oatley write, not through direct effects, but through “indirect communication” or through “empathy and the ability to understand others.”¹⁸ In an ambiguous aesthetic then, it becomes possible for a “reader” to encounter the other in a “work of fiction”¹⁹ and eclipse²⁰ his or her self and access “a multitude of potential future selves.”²¹ As the world increasingly connects and confronts the other (religious or otherwise), perhaps a way to facilitate this collision is through cultivating an ambiguous aesthetic that emphasizes provisionality.

¹⁷ Robert A. Orsi, *Between Heaven and Earth: The Religious Worlds People Make and the Scholars Who Study Them* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005), 2.

¹⁸ Maja Djikic and Keith Oatley, “The Art of Fiction: From Indirect Communication to Changes of the Self,” *Psychology of Aesthetics, Creativity, and the Arts* 8, no. 4 (2014): 498.

¹⁹ A “work of fiction” can be text, image, video, or any other kind of mixed media. The idea that art can transform one’s self is, as Djikic and Oatley describe it, enacted by the “user” setting his or her own terms. In other words, transformation is possible when and if the user thinks that he or she is encountering “art.”

²⁰ Though this has the potential to sound like it stumbles into the same trap that Plate is trying to avoid (an aesthetic rooted in Beauty, Truth, or God), the language of “eclipse” or “moving beyond” here implies neither a supreme other nor a perfected self. It, rather, seeks to describe non-linear, non-teleological movement of a human being that overcomes his or her own (self-defined, self-described) prejudices, biases, or assumptions.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 503.

Perhaps less noble, but another goal of this project is to introduce Eco's work to the field of religious studies. Eco has much to offer theories of religion, but has little, if ever, been consulted on such matters. As most of Eco's academic work has been literary, semiotic, and aesthetic, I find religious aesthetics an appropriate place to introduce Eco into the conversation. It is my hope that, moving forward, Eco will become an integral partner for all budding religious scholars interested in aesthetics.

Finally, I see my project as an essential piece to the ongoing conversation about interdisciplinarity in the academy. How so? Because I am tangentially arguing for an interdisciplinary approach to religious studies²² that accomplishes three things: one, it views all conclusions as provisional; two, it highlights the narrativization of our theories; and three, it argues that interdisciplinarity's unique offering to the academy is that of the creative nonfiction work. In other words, interdisciplinary research and its subsequent presentation is only valuable in so far as it remains "and," which is a work that is in-between or liminal. Interdisciplinarity is neither expert nor disciplined, but a borrowing from which the experts and disciplinarians can learn because—via ambiguity—it calls into question the walls that the academy has erected.

*Summary Chapter Outline (78,000)*²³

Introduction (6,000)

I introduce the project, key concepts, and provide the necessary background to begin reading the main sections. After revealing the thesis that *a religious aesthetic rooted in ambiguity emphasizes both the provisionality of knowledge and the narrativization of reality*, I will elucidate (or perhaps justify) my interdisciplinary approach.

²² Cf. Andrew W. Hass, *Poetics of Critique: The Interdisciplinarity of Textuality* (New York: Routledge, 2003) and "Intending Metaphors: Living and Working 'Religion and Literature.'" *Religion & Literature* 41, no. 2 (2009): 178–86.

²³ The numbers here are my expected word counts. If I follow this, then the dissertation should be between 218–234 pages, excluding the notes and bibliography.

Chapter One: S. Brent Plate and the Aesthetics of Religion (8,000)

I explore the relationship between religion and aesthetics through the lens of Plate's work on Walter Benjamin. Religious aesthetics is a radical way to conceptualize religious life that is rooted in process, movement, and the material world. Religious aesthetics is a "creating" and a "destructing" that is an originary point for the study of religion.²⁴ In Plate's words: "By understanding the ways humans sensually interact with the world around them we understand the ways humans create symbols, myths, rituals, and, indeed, entire religious worlds. Thus, aesthetics offers itself as a mode for analyzing and comparing religions."²⁵

Excursus One (6,000)

This is left intentionally open, to be filled by one of a few possible creative, nonfiction novels.

Chapter Two: Umberto Eco and the Matter of Texts (8,000)

I outline Eco's theoretical framework so that I can begin to engage, clarify, and expand Plate's religious aesthetics. In this chapter, I elucidate Eco's Sign-function, Theory of Sign Production, Theory of Codes, Encyclopedia, Aesthetic Texts, Ambiguity, Interpretation, and the Role of the Reader.

Chapter Three: On The Possibility of Generating Aesthetic Messages (8,000)

Having laid the foundation for much of Eco's aesthetic theory, I analyze and critique Eco's seminal essay: "On the Possibility of Generating Aesthetic Messages in an Edenic Language." After language is created in the Garden of Eden, Adam and Eve wrestle with comprehending language's aesthetic ambiguity, which ultimately leads them to bad fruit. Beginning with the Peircean concept of unlimited semiosis, Eco employs this mythical fable to show that the aesthetic use of a language generates self-contradictions within that language, and that any such contradictions at the level of its form of expression involve contradictions in the form of its content.²⁶

Excursus Two: The Composer (6,000)

To avoid interpretation, a composer agrees to a one-time performance of her newly written work. No recorders, no cameras, no media—only listeners. She performs it and, to be certain, it is the

²⁴ Plate, *Walter Benjamin*, 9. It is important to note that Plate, channeling Benjamin, uses the words "creating" and "destructing." The reasons for doing so, of course, will be analyzed in the fuller project. Suffice it say, however, "creating" emphasizes the communal project of ongoing creativity and is opposed to the originary concept of "creation." "Destructing" is in reference to Benjamin's conceptions of "art" and "allegory" that undo the traditionally stabilizing religious functions of myth, symbol, narrative, etc.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 3.

²⁶ Peter Bondanella, *Umberto Eco and the Open Text: Semiotics, Fiction, Popular Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 82.

greatest, most complex piece of music that anyone has ever experienced. After the performance, however, the composer burns the only copy of her musical score. No one from that point on can interpret, repeat, thematize or perform her work. It was meant to be a once-for-all performance. The work only exists in its hearers' minds. It only exists in the past, in memory. There will neither be a present nor a future to the score. It has been wiped away, eradicated. Fifty years later, however, music journalists begin to question the reality of this now mythic performance. Did it happen? The protagonist of "The Composer" then is a classical music journalist rooting out the truth, as the story emerges from a collage of notes, transcripts, and editorials.

Chapter Four: The Role of Ambiguity in Religious Aesthetics (8,000)

Taking the previous two chapters as a necessary contextualization, I turn to Eco's penultimate novel, *The Prague Cemetery* and examine the role that his aesthetic theories play in his narratives. I particularly look to the youthful encounters of Simonini with both his grandfather and father. It is here that he is first taught and modeled to hate and fear both the Jew and the Jesuit. It is here that the text's Model Reader must confront his or her own modern-liberal "coding" and enter the text's narrative world of objectification and violence.

Chapter Five: Narrativizing Theory in The Prague Cemetery (8,000)

Having examined the narrative of *The Prague Cemetery* (2010), I examine two philosophical writings that Eco published before and after his novel. Seventeen years before his novel, Eco philosophically muses on the aesthetics of fabrication. In his *Six Walks in the Fictional Woods* (1993), Eco recounts his research into the life of the 19th-century Italian named, Captain Simonini and those responsible for creating the anti-Semitic text, *The Protocols of the Learned Elders of Zion*. Two years after *The Prague Cemetery*, Eco publishes a collection of essays titled, *Inventing the Enemy* (2012).²⁷ In the eponymous essay, Eco explores both identity construction and the necessity of the enemy. Here, too, he retells the story of Simonini. Laying Eco's philosophy next to his fiction, I show the unique role that ambiguity plays in constructing and fulfilling the creating and destructing²⁸ so essential to Plate's religious aesthetics.

Chapter Six: Narrative, Ambiguity, and the Aesthetics of Religion (8,000)

I connect Plate's religious aesthetics to Eco's narrativizing theory, and argue that a religious aesthetic informed by Eco's ambiguity is one that emphasizes the provisionality of knowledge and the narrativization of reality. Complementing this argument, I also briefly explore some of the ways in which this newly formed perspective on aesthetics informs a new approach to interdisciplinarity.

Excursus Three (6,000)

²⁷ The dates given are the publication dates of the English editions of these works. While the Italian dates differ slightly, they do reflect a similar chronology.

²⁸ Cf. footnote 24 above.

This is left intentionally open, to be filled by one of a few possible creative, nonfiction novels.

Conclusion (6,000)

I briefly summarize the bulk of my dissertation, connect the mass to the excursions, and fully clarify the ways in which Eco's ambiguity expands Plate's notion of religious aesthetics. I then provide some conclusions and guiding thoughts for moving forward with a material, religious aesthetic that is rooted in ambiguity, provisionality, and narrativization.

Bibliographic Procedures

Referencing my previous readings and work, I will use traditional research sources to construct my project. My methodology is entirely textual, meaning that my bibliographic procedures are critical to the project. My time in the program has positioned me well for this sort of critical research, explication, and comparison. For background, I have taken exams in Religious Theories and Methods, Theories of Religion, Religion and Literature, and Religious Aesthetics. The Religious Theories and Methods and Theories of Religion exams are helpful in providing me with a useful framework for situating not only Plate within the field of Religious Studies but also for nuancing the way in which I bring him into conversation with Eco. The Religion and Literature readings will comprise much of my methodological approach to explicating Eco while bringing him into conversation with Religious Studies more broadly. Religious Aesthetics will help me in regard to expanding on the notion of ambiguity, provisionality, and narrativization.

I have searched and will continue to search Penrose and Taylor library collections, Prospector, and WorldCat to find books through the physical and digital collections of libraries all over the world (using interlibrary loan). I have also found Penrose's Research Guide collections (specifically in Religious Studies, Philosophy, Literature, and Aesthetics) helpful in keeping track of new databases as they become available. I have also found resources using WorldCat, ATLAS Religion, JSTOR, Cambridge Collection Online, Google Scholar, Google

Books, Academic Search Premier, Modern Language Association, Dissertation Abstracts, and The Philosophers Index—all available through Penrose and Taylor. I will research the following terms/themes and variations thereon: alone and together, *S. Brent Plate*, *Religious Theory*, *Religious Studies*, *Religious Worlds*, *Religious Aesthetics*, *Religious Materiality*, *Material Aesthetics*, *Philosophical Aesthetics*, and *Aesthetics*; alone and together, *Umberto Eco*, *Ambiguity*, *Narrative*, *Narrative Theory*, *Codes*, *Cultural Codes*, *Creativity*, *Religious Creativity*, *Novel*, *Philosophy*, *Literature*, *Semiotics*, and *Theory of Signs*; alone and together.

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