in this section is helpful to get a sense of the length and ordering of each incipit but it would have been beneficial to include a few plates with pictures of the actual artifacts.

Since Sanzo stresses the ritual context of these texts, it would have made sense to include some visual data. The inclusion of plates, for example, would allow the reader to have a better grasp of paleographic style and text arrangement. Given that the book employs critical linguistic theory and is geared towards specialists, this would be a reasonable inclusion. Sanzo’s theory regarding the specific use of pericopae is compelling yet at times appears circumstantial. The claim that a ritual specialist is invoking a particular curative pericope from a Gospel incipit is difficult to substantiate without specific use of that pericope, even though it makes sense in terms of other evidence and the atmosphere of ritual prophylactics. These minor criticisms aside, Sanzo makes a compelling and meaningful contribution to an otherwise neglected area of textual study.

Patrick Stange
Department for the Study of Religion
University of Toronto


It is curious for a book about the field of religious studies, often methodologically defined in opposition to theology, to begin with a discussion of a theological text. Tyler Roberts opens his book, Encountering Religion, with a reference to Rowan Williams’ short reflective text on September 11th. Thinking critically about the movement of the field into more social-scientific and ‘secular’ methodologies, Roberts asks whether these current paradigms limit the depth of the field’s potential engagement with a reflection like Williams’. Can a text like Williams’ be engaged as anything other than simply an object of study? And does Williams’ text itself, which seeks to inhabit the impossibility of “living in the presence of the void,” (1, cf. Weil) take scholars beyond the expected terrain of what religion is? A work of quietly provocative transgression, Encountering Religion challenges the boundaries of academia and religion by beginning with its own “crossing,” (235, cf. Tweed) demonstrating one of the key tenets of his book: that religious texts and practices can and should be engaged not just as objects of study, but also as “potential methodological resources for the study of religion and for cultural criticism” (20). It is not just the book’s vast and visionary critique and proposal that makes this work stand out; it is the way that the book itself calmly embodies so many of the proposals being made. Roberts’ work here practices a kind of “pious attention” (232, cf. Santner) to the field of religious studies that allows the field to appear strange again, simultaneously revealing the inadequacies of our current maps and also the sagacity of Robert’s critically humanistic proposal.

Roberts builds his argument through three relatively discrete sections: the first describing and critiquing the current predominantly social-scientific map of the field, the second offering his own proposal for the humanistic study of religion, and the third considering the potential pathways for such a humanistic discipline through conversation with several scholars who themselves cross methodologically-assumed boundaries between religious studies and religion. In Part 1, Roberts offers a genealogical account of the field that identifies three key movements: the late 19th century’s “academically restrained version of the hermeneutics of suspicion (Marx, Nietzsche, Freud)” (13), through the counter-suspicion of the mid-20th century
directed at modernity’s liberating but sometimes obfuscating focus on rationalism and historicism (Corbin, Schloem, Eliade), to the more recent wave of scholarship reacting against this Eliadan influence (Braun, McCutcheon, among others). With a sense of balance that typifies the whole of this work, Roberts argues that this current wave of scholarship has advanced the field through its emphases on non-textual sources, through the development of rigorous cognitivist and structuralist theories of religion, and through its ability to “analyze religious forms of power that are not beholden to the claims of religious actors and ideologies” (12). However, making good use of overlooked aspects of J. Z. Smith’s work, Roberts also argues that by placing such a strong emphasis on the “locative” nature of religion (as that which wards off chaos and orders worlds), such an approach is unable to productively engage with forms of religious practice and thought – such as Williams’ reflection – that don’t just encounter incongruity in an attempt to overcome it, but seek to remain with it. For Roberts, this is not just a descriptive limitation, but is equally an ethical one: not only can this current approach not fully speak of the breadth of religious expression, but, through a fear of veiled motivations, it has lost its ability to be affirmatively engaged with questions about how to live.

As a response to this problem, in Part 2 Roberts re-situates the study of religion in a humanistic setting: one characterized by encounter and response. Drawing on the work of social historian Robert Orsi, and anthropologists Saba Mahmood and Michael Jackson, Roberts shows that scholastic work on religion can be thoughtfully “inflected in a humanistic direction” without the world of the scholar collapsing into that of the religious subject (17). In place of a bracketing of the scholar’s world, Roberts uses Orsi’s work to speak instead of a “‘disciplined suspension’… of one’s own locative impulses:” a practice of openness and of self-awareness that allows the differences between the scholar and the religious other to “emerge in as much detail as possible” (16).

In Part 3, Roberts engages thinkers including Hent de Vries, Eric Santner, and Stanley Cavell, finding ways of articulating the necessity of both dispossession and also self-assertion in the kind of humanistic (indeed, human) responsiveness that does not just speak from a place of encounter, but also from a place of responsibility. Distinguishing between an approach to the study of religion that is driven by critique and one that is guided by affirmative criticism, Roberts challenges scholars of religion to be interested in more than just “knowledge for knowledge’s sake,” (236) and to practice not just thinking about religion, but also thinking with religion. This thinking with religion, for Roberts, does not require assent to some form of religious authority, but does require an openness to encountering differences with the goal of working and writing in a way that is descriptively more accurate and ethically more engaged.

Throughout this work Roberts engages an impressive line-up of scholars in repeated acts of boundary crossing, but also of academic hospitality that demonstrate in form as well as in content what it looks like for a scholar of religion to work humanistically. This work is not beyond the reach of an engaged undergraduate and offers abundant and profound insight for studied members of the field. Rather unusually (and very appropriately), it is also an account of the field of religious studies that offers hospitality to theologians and religiously-affiliated scholars of religion. This is yet another mark of the coherence of Roberts’ work, further demonstrating both its integrity and its insight.

Gillian C. Breckenridge
University of Virginia