Philosophy and the Study of Religions

A Manifesto

Kevin Schilbrack

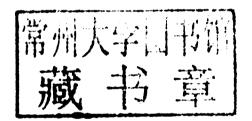**WILEY-Blackwell**

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In this series major critics make timely interventions to address important concepts and subjects, including topics as diverse as, for example: Culture, Race, Religion, History, Society, Geography, Literature, Literary Theory, Shakespeare, Cinema, and Modernism. Written accessibly and with verve and spirit, these books follow no uniform prescription but set out to engage and challenge the broadest range of readers, from undergraduates to postgraduates, university teachers and general readers – all those, in short, interested in ongoing debates and controversies in the humanities and social sciences.

Already Published

For Sasha, whom I could not love more.

Preface

This book was written to expand our understanding of the role of philosophy in the study of religions. It is in the first place a critique of the way that the discipline of philosophy of religion is practiced at present, though it is also addressed to those in the study of religions outside philosophy who look to philosophy for tools that can help them with their work.

Concisely put, this book proposes a transition from an old way of doing things, what I call "traditional philosophy of religion," to a new way that I sketch over the next seven chapters. In one sentence, what I am recommending is this: philosophy of religion ought to evolve from its primary present focus on the rationality of traditional theism to become a fully global form of critical reflection on religions in all their variety and dimensions, in conversation with other branches of philosophy and other disciplines in the academic study of religions.

The traditional view, in brief, has been that philosophy of religion pursues a set of interconnected questions concerning the evidence, logic, justifiability, or warrant for belief or lack of belief that God exists. (I describe the full range of work in traditional philosophy of religion in the first section of Chapter 1.) Although I was trained in the questions that constitute traditional philosophy of religion, and I consider them to be legitimate, live questions, my critique of the traditional view of the task of philosophy of religion is threefold. First, the traditional view is *narrow* in the sense that it does not engage more than a few of the actual religions of the world. It does not engage the religious teachings outside a classical conception of God; in fact, it often defines God in such a narrow way that it regularly excludes the theistic views of many who do believe in God. Second, it is *intellectualist* in that it engages only the doctrinal dimensions of the religions it does cover.

It is rare to find any treatment by philosophers of the ethical, political, and ritual practices in which the majority of religious people seek to learn and perfect their piety. And third, it is *insular* in the sense that traditional philosophy of religion does not play well with others: with the exception of Christian theology, and sometimes Biblical studies, traditional philosophy of religion draws very little from and contributes very little to the other disciplines in the study of religions.

Each chapter in the book addresses a distinct issue and for that reason one can read the chapters independently of each other. Nevertheless, I wrote them to trace a particular path toward a broader understanding of the roles of philosophy in the study of religions. Here is that path.

In the first chapter, I argue that the task of philosophy of religion should grow and that—to address the three problems of narrowness, intellectualism, and insularity—it should grow in three specific ways. First, the task of philosophy of religion ought to grow so that it excludes no religious traditions. At present, it is rare to find a course or a textbook in philosophy of religion that includes forms of theism other than classical theism; even rarer will such courses or textbooks include pantheistic, panentheistic, or nontheistic religious traditions; and even rarer still—almost never—will one find a philosophical treatment of polytheistic religious traditions. But all religious traditions include reason giving in some form, and so the task of philosophy of religion should grow to include the study of the philosophical aspects of all religious traditions. Developing the discipline in this direction would bring philosophy of religion into conversation with scholars of the religious traditions of east and south Asia, North and South America, Africa, Australia, and elsewhere. Second, the task of philosophy of religion ought to grow so that it takes full account of religious practices. At present, philosophers of religion focus primarily on religious teachings as they are found in the texts of religious thinkers. But not all religious communities have a class of text-writing thinkers, and even when such a class of religious thinkers exists, the concern to state and defend one's religious beliefs is a relatively small part of the lives of religious people. The discipline of philosophy of religion therefore ought to develop the tools to provide philosophical accounts of the aspects of religion other than explicit, written arguments. It ought to include the philosophical study of worship practices, sacrifices, spiritual disciplines, liturgies, rites of passage, contemplative exercises, and ceremonies. Developing the discipline in this direction would bring philosophy of religion into conversation with scholars of performance, ritual, and embodiment. And third, philosophy of religion ought to grow to be reflexive. At

present, philosophers of religion too often take the concepts operating in the study of religion unreflectively, as if "religion" and "belief" and "God" are stable concepts whose meanings have not varied from one time period or culture to another. Philosophers ought to see the study of religions as itself a practice that deserves philosophical reflection. They therefore ought to develop what one might call the philosophical study of the study of religions. Developing the discipline in this direction would bring philosophy of religion into conversation with its own institutional and conceptual history, and with poststructuralist, deconstructive, and genealogical approaches to the study of religion. My hope is that my readers will agree not only that one *could* include these three broader sets of questions in philosophy of religion but also that philosophy of religion is their proper home.

The second chapter develops the proposal that philosophy of religion should pay appropriate attention to religious practice. In this chapter, I join those who have argued that philosophers of religion should include in their purview not only the textual versions of the doctrines asserted and defended by religious intellectuals but also the performed dimensions of how ordinary people live their religious commitments. Paying greater attention to how people live religiously will lead philosophers of religion to join with anthropologists, historians, and other scholars who focus on religious practices. I don't think that religious practices will attract wide interest among philosophers, however, unless the practices can be seen not merely as *expressing* religious thoughts (as if what a religious community "really" teaches is articulated only in the texts written by their intellectuals) but also as themselves examples of thinking. The aim of this chapter therefore is to explore how religious practices themselves—prayers and pilgrimages and circumcisions, for example—can be seen as opportunities for inquiry in which religious practitioners investigate and make judgments about the nature of their environment. Toward this end, I argue first that philosophers of religion should adopt an embodiment paradigm in the sense that they see a religious body not only as a passive object on which culture operates but also as the seat of subjectivity and of religious being-in-the-world. I then recommend two theoretical tools. The first is the theory of conceptual metaphor that lets us see ways in which abstract religious thought draws on embodied knowledge learned in the physical exploration of the world. The second is the theory of extended mind that lets us approach the material aspects of religious practices as cognitive prosthetics that help the practitioners remember and process information. The two theories complement each other in that the theory of conceptual metaphor focuses on embodied knowledge that

is largely prelinguistic and to that extent common across cultures, whereas the theory of extended mind focuses on aspects of religious practices that are culturally particular. Together, they provide tools for those interested in seeing religious practices as thoughtful.

The third chapter reflects on the concept of religious belief. Given the diversity of ways of being religious around the world, coupled with the turn to practice that I recommend, one might ask whether the concept of belief should continue to have a central role in the future of philosophy of religion. Indeed, the central role given to belief in the study of religions has been increasingly criticized as misleading or distorting, if not completely illegitimate. Some argue not only that scholars of religion should give more attention to the material aspects of religion, but also, more radically, that one can and should completely explain religious behavior without the concept of beliefs. In this chapter, I consider two objections from the critics of belief. The first is that since one can observe others' religious discourse and practice, but not their beliefs, the assumption that all religious people have beliefs saddles the academic study of religions with a problem of access. The second is that in its pursuit of orthodoxy, Christianity has made the category of belief central, but other religions have not and therefore the assumption that all religious people have beliefs saddles the academic study of religions with a problem of cultural bias. I argue, however, that the critics who raise the problem of access largely assume a dualistic or Cartesian account of belief, and I draw on more recent dispositionalist and interpretationist accounts of belief in order to highlight the ways in which beliefs are embodied and social and, to that extent, public. And I argue that the critics that raise the problem of cultural bias are right to do so, although the solution is not to drop the concept of belief but to distinguish between creedal belief as an interest that only some religions share and intentional belief as an aspect of human action that is presupposed whenever we attribute agency.

In the first three chapters, then, I call on philosophers of religion to re-conceive their discipline as global, practice-centered, and reflexive; I make a proposal about how philosophers might include the study of religious practices as modes of inquiry; and I clarify the senses in which beliefs are and are not essential to religions. A serious obstacle arises for a cross-cultural philosophy of religion, however, from those who point out that the very concept of religion is not a concept that one finds throughout history or around the world. "Religion" is instead a relatively recent creation of the modern west. How can philosophers study religion globally if religion is merely a local concept? In the fourth chapter, I examine the arguments that "religion" is a

rhetorical term invented as part of an ideology that privileges modern western political arrangements and that therefore one should not assume that the concept corresponds to realities outside the western scholar's imagination. Against that view, I describe the ways in which the world in which we live is composed not only of physical facts (like molecules, gravity, and mountains) but also social facts (like politics, economics, and religion). I then make the case for a critical realist view in which one can see religion as a certain cultural pattern that exists "out there" in the world, even independently of the modern western label.

The fourth chapter's argument that one *can* speak of religion as a cross-cultural phenomenon leads naturally to the fifth chapter's argument about how one should do so. What practices, beliefs, stories, people, and institutions should be classified as the religious ones? In this chapter, I examine the two primary and often-contentious strategies for defining religion—the functional and the substantive—and I then propose that the definition that is most useful for the study of religions (and, happily, the one that also best captures how people today speak of religions) is the one where the two strategies intersect. That is, I recommend that religion is best understood *both* functionally as making promises about how participation functions to solve problems in one's life *and* substantively as putting participants in touch with what I call superempirical realities. A "mixed" definition of religion like this one is especially useful, I hold, because of what it excludes. Specifically, this definition does not count as religious (i) beliefs or feelings about superempirical realities that are not tied to participation in social practices, and so it would not include as religious a purely inner, private state. And it also excludes (ii) ultimate concerns or orientations to life and that are not tied to superempirical realities, and so it would not include secular humanism, Marxism, or fans of sports teams.

The definition of religion I recommend in the fifth chapter centers on the claim that religious practices appeal to superempirical realities, realities whose existence is said to depend on no empirical thing. To take a ready example, prayer often involves an appeal to God. For philosophers, however, to interpret religions in this way as making claims about the nature of reality raises questions about whether such religious claims could be true. And answering such questions becomes even more difficult if one holds, as I do, that some religious claims are not empirical at all but rather seek to describe metaphysical realities that cannot be known through the tools of science. Such metaphysical claims are today often seen as hopeless or discredited. And many twentieth-century philosophers have taken "overcoming

metaphysics" as their goal. In the sixth chapter, however, I seek to rehabilitate metaphysical claims by arguing, first, that philosophical opposition to metaphysics is generally based on a certain (modernist, subjectivist) picture of a gap between mind and world that must be "mediated," and therefore, second, that contemporary philosophers interested in pursuing metaphysical questions should shift to a picture of experience without that gap. I take as allies in this project Donald Davidson's Wittgenstein-inspired version of pragmatism, the critical realist movement in philosophy of science, and accounts of intelligent behavior from the emerging field of embodied cognitive science. In brief, I argue that if all experience of the world is filtered by one's concepts, and those filters differ from one religion, culture, or language—or even one individual—to another, then there is no way to adjudicate rival claims about the world and metaphysical claims become suspect. But if one's experience of the world is unmediated or direct, then it is possible to speak both of a shared world and of the possibility of rational claims about the character of that world in general.

The overarching goal of this book is to articulate and begin to develop a vision for philosophy of religion as global, practice-centered, and reflexive. The final question that I address is: how would such a vision for the discipline relate to the other parts of the academic study of religions? The last chapter of the book therefore argues for a certain map of how the evaluative questions that characterize most philosophy of religion relate to the descriptive and explanatory questions pursued in other disciplines. I see the academic study of religions as a multidisciplinary field in which there are distinct kinds of inquiry pursued, and I seek to show that the evaluative questions that philosophers of religion ask are a legitimate and, ultimately, an inevitable aspect of descriptive and explanatory approaches. The different kinds of work done in the field are not autonomous but are connected by "bridges" that I seek to identify. According to my map, the academic study of religions is constituted by three kinds of work, namely, the descriptive work presupposed by all the other questions in the field, and then the two kinds of critical work: explanatory questions about the causes of religious phenomena and evaluative questions about the reasons that can be given for them.

In the spirit of a manifesto, I have streamlined the chapters by moving most of the references to the bibliographic essay at the end of each chapter. Those looking for my sources or for additional reading on the subjects I discuss can find them there.

The goal of an academic work is often to enter into an established debate, to explain the two sides to its audience, and then to argue that one side is more persuasive than the other. That is not the kind of goal I pursue in this book. My goal in this manifesto is to move away from established debates, to go to the edge of the field of the academic study of religions where there is little or no consensus about the future of the field, and to make suggestions about how the discipline of philosophy can contribute. Although in each chapter I do argue for a position on each of the questions I raise, my primary hope is not that the book settles some debates but rather that the book illuminates new and productive ways in which philosophy can contribute to the study of religions.

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Although I wrote my dissertation at the University of Chicago with Chris Gamwell, Paul Griffiths, and Phil Devenish 20 years ago, and this book does not overlap with that project at all, I want to thank them nevertheless for their friendship and for the guidance that they have had on my work as a scholar. My views that philosophy of religion ought to develop the tools to take a global perspective, that human agents are not separated from their environments by language, and that clarity in metaphysics supports the rest of one's theoretical work are indebted to their examples.

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