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# “Mountains of Flesh and Seas of Blood”: Reflecting Philosophically on Animal Sacrifice through Dramatic Fiction

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Despite recent moves among philosophers of religion to avoid undue abstraction by giving closer attention to religion’s practical dimensions, such moves commonly remain limited to a relatively narrow range of religious traditions. What D. Z. Phillips has termed the “radical plurality” of religious and nonreligious forms of life, comprising morally troubling as well as edifying varieties, thus continues to be neglected. This article promotes an expanded approach to philosophy of religion with regard to both methodology and scope. Methodologically, it explores the potential of narrative works, and of dramatic fiction in particular, not only to constitute resources for philosophical reflection but also to actively philosophize themselves. To this end, two plays, by Rabindranath Tagore and Girish Karnad respectively, are discussed. With regard to subject matter, the article examines the complex phenomenon of animal sacrifice, and opposition to it, in South Asian contexts.

# INTRODUCTION: RADICAL PLURALITY IN THE PHILOSOPHY OF RELIGION

The anthropologist Melford Spiro once wrote that “religious ideas deal with the very guts of life, not with its bland surface” (1982, 6). His point was, in part, that religious ideas are typically integrated into believers’ lives in ways that deeply inform their hopes, fears, and aspirations along with their practical responses to life’s vicissitudes, and hence that an understanding of religion cannot be arrived at if it is treated as a purely intellectual or theoretical matter. This, of course, will come as no surprise to most scholars of religion, perhaps including most of those who approach the subject from a philosophical angle. But paying lip service to religion’s messy embroilment in life’s affective, conative, and practical dimensions is relatively easy; doing conceptual justice to this embroilment in one’s philosophizing is often harder to achieve.

Among recent responses to the persistent philosophical tendency to dislocate religious ideas from the lived contexts through which they are shaped and embodied is the turn towards practice in the philosophy of religion, spearheaded by figures such as John Cottingham and Mark Wynn. Cottingham, for example, champions the view that practice (or “praxis”) has priority over theoretical reason in religious life: not merely in the sense that religious practitioners are generally initiated into certain forms of practice before participating in rational evaluation of the ideas that permeate the practices in question, but also in the “stronger” sense “that it is in the very nature of religious understanding that it characteristically stems from practical involvement rather than from intellectual analysis” (Cottingham 2005, 6). Wynn, meanwhile, has been developing a vision of religious (or “spiritual”) life that affords due attention to “the embodied, action-orienting, perception-structuring, and affect-infused character of religious understanding,” an understanding that is not detached from but is thoroughly rooted in physical locations imbued with historical and sometimes intimately personal significance (Wynn 2009, back cover).

Amid the many strengths exhibited in the work of philosophical innovators such as Cottingham and Wynn, one potential weakness consists in the limited pool of varieties of religiosity from which their discussions draw. It is understandable that these authors should refer primarily to Christian modes of religious life to illustrate the claims that they make, given that these are the modes with which they are personally most familiar. So too is it excusable that, in view of the ignorance and hostility that beclouds much contemporary debate concerning religion, these authors should accentuate the moral, emotional, and cognitive benefits to be derived from participation in religious or spiritual practices. The danger comes, however, when these Christian-centric and morally selective conceptions of religion are presented, and indeed promoted, as though they facilitated an enriched comprehension of religion in general rather than of only a modest part of it. By foregrounding such a slanted repertoire of examples, one risks obscuring the sheer variety—what D. Z. Phillips has called the "radical plurality" (2007b, 207)—of forms that religious life can take, only a small proportion of which are apt to strike readers as morally or spiritually edifying, and many of which may appear downright repugnant.

What Phillips's notion of radical plurality emphasizes is the need, if one is to do conceptual justice to the variety and internal complexity of both religious and nonreligious forms of life, to cultivate a willingness to attend to that variety and complexity without picking and choosing the bits of religion that one personally prefers while leaving aside those that one finds religiously or morally troubling (Phillips 2007b, 204–205). This aspiration to recognize differences and variegation, and to refrain from suppressing the unsettling elements of religious life, resonates with certain orientations in contemporary anthropology and sociology of religion. We see the aspiration, for example, in the work of sociologists of "lived religion" such as Meredith McGuire, who urges that care be taken not to erect "implicit boundaries that exclude from our purview the religious and spiritual practices we personally find repulsive," including those "that literally, as well as figuratively, embody violence and aggression" (2008, 116). It is the effort to refrain from facile moralizing in the face of such practices that a number of philosophers, including Phillips, have characterized as placing ethical or moral demands upon the inquirer (Phillips 2007a, 38; 2007b, 208; Winch 1996, 173). Notwithstanding these demands, the effort is necessary if we are to develop a suitably nuanced conception of religion that is not unduly distorted by the inquirer's predilections.

My purpose in this article is to contribute towards an expanded conception of how philosophy of religion might avoid the distortions that result from a one-sided diet of religious examples. My focus will be on the phenomenon of animal sacrifice in certain South Asian religious traditions and also upon opposition to such sacrifice as it manifests in that same South Asian milieu. Despite the prevalence of animal sacrifice in many cultures throughout history and across the world,[1] this aspect of religious life has received sparse attention from philosophers of religion. Substantial discussions of animal sacrifice or indeed of ritual activities more generally are absent from the major available textbooks and anthologies.[2] In other places, when Western philosophers or social theorists do refer to animal sacrifice, the subject is commonly treated at a high level of abstraction with little consideration of specific examples, especially examples from outside the Abrahamic traditions. In such treatments the assumption tends to be made that what is needed is a general theory of sacrifice as opposed to the kind of attention to particulars that is liable to disclose how diverse the phenomenon of sacrifice is.[3] In other instances blood sacrifice, whether of animals or of human beings, is rapidly dismissed by philosophers as a “primitive” aberration involving moral backwardness or confusion about causal relations.[4]

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[1] For examples, see Baumgarten (2002), Carter (2003), Petropoulou (2008).

[2] See, for example, Taliaferro and Griffiths (2003), Wainwright (2005), Taliaferro, Draper, and Quinn (2010), Meister and Copan (2013). For attempts to rectify this lacuna, see Schilbrack (2004) and Meszaros and Zachhuber (2013).

[3] For critical discussion of several general theories of sacrifice, see Hedley (2011).

This raises the question of how to engage philosophically with the topic of animal sacrifice. Care is needed in this area, lest one be tempted to slide into either censorious deprecation or gratuitous exoticization. Academic discussion of South Asian religious and cultural traditions needs, in particular, to remain alert to the tensions that persist over questions of “who speaks for” these traditions.[5] Moreover, to focus on animal sacrifice in the South Asian context without at the same time explicitly acknowledging the diversity of attitudes towards such practices that obtains within and among the traditions themselves would risk generating merely another distorted picture, which might itself tend to resuscitate rather than erode certain once-prevalent colonialist and Orientalist stereotypes about “superstitious cults” and “barbarous tribes” (cf. Stietencron 1995, 75; Wilson 1840, 195 n. 157). Without presuming it to be the best way, still less the only way, of enabling philosophical engagement with issues of animal sacrifice, I propose in this article to carry forward an approach that I have illustrated and argued for elsewhere (Burley forthcoming a), namely that of utilizing works of narrative fiction as a locus of philosophical reflection.

By “a locus of philosophical reflection,” I mean two main things. First, that the works in question can themselves be understood as exemplifying modes of philosophizing, most notably the mode that prioritizes the elucidation of “possibilities of sense,” or possible perspectives on the world, without rushing to try to reconcile or synthesize those perspectives or to evaluate them in terms of some supposedly universal and objective criterion of rationality.[6] Second, I mean that philosophers (who are not themselves typically in the business of writing narrative fiction) can deepen their own analysis of religious and nonreligious perspectives by reflecting on how these are portrayed in the narrative sources, treating the sources as instances of "thick description" and bringing them into critical and constructive dialogue both with one another and with non-narrative and nonfictional materials.[7]

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[4] See, for example, the discussion of human sacrifice in Hick (2004, 309–11). D. Z. Phillips, with reference to the scapegoat ritual in Leviticus 16:20–22, has also been rather hasty to characterize such rituals as confused; see esp. Phillips (1993, 89–91).

[5] For discussions of the question “Who Speaks for Hinduism?,” see Caldwell and Smith (2000) and the other articles in the same special issue. I am grateful to an anonymous referee for this journal for reminding me of the relevance of these discussions.

The principal works of narrative fiction to be discussed here are two plays by Indian dramatists, each of which takes animal sacrifice as its thematic core. The first of these, chronologically, is *Sacrifice* by Rabindranath Tagore (1917), which dramatizes competing conceptions of the Goddess Kālī, one of which envisages her as a granter of wishes in return for the blood of animals and the other of which regards her as the power of love and compassion, opposed to the shedding of blood. The second play, though the first that I shall discuss, is *Bali: The Sacrifice* by Girish Karnad (2004), which explores not only the tensions within and between Hindu and Jain conceptions of sacrifice but also the related entanglements between power, sexuality, and intention. It is in large part by showcasing what we might call, borrowing a phrase from Mikhail Bakhtin, "a genuine polyphony" or "plurality of independent and unmerged voices" (1984, 6; italics omitted), that works of narrative fiction in general and of theatrical drama in particular are capable of enriching our appreciation of diverse perspectives rather than reinforcing the kinds of stereotypes that I noted above.

Inevitably, a single article can hardly even begin to do justice to the abundant and intricate ramifications of the two literary works I have selected, or to their potential for deepening our thinking both about animal sacrifice and about religion more broadly. But if I can say enough to at least justify the need for further philosophical reflection upon these works in particular as well as upon the themes they illuminate, then the article will have served a useful purpose. Before coming to my examination of Karnad's and Tagore's respective plays, in the next section I contextualize that examination by offering a concise introduction to the topic of animal sacrifice in the South Asian context.

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[6] In speaking of elucidating "possibilities of sense" I am again borrowing a motif from Phillips; see, for example, Phillips (2001, 33).

[7] The term "thick description" derives from Ryle ([1968] 2009), and, as many readers will know, was popularized among ethnographers by Geertz (1973) and in the social disciplines more generally by Denzin (e.g., 2001, chap. 6). For discussion of this notion in relation to philosophy of religion, see Burley (forthcoming b) and Knepper (2014).

## ANIMAL SACRIFICE IN SOUTH ASIA

The phrase "Mountains of flesh and seas of blood" in the title of the present article derives from an account of the words sung by the men employed to carry out the sacrificial slaughter of animals during the autumn festival known as Dashain (*daśaĩ*) in Nepal (Anderson 1971, 150). Dashain is the Nepalese version of the pan-Hindu festival that in India typically goes by the name Navarātrī ("nine nights"), which is immediately followed by Daśahrā (the tenth day, from the Sanskrit *daśaharā*).[8] In Nepal, along with regions of northeast India where Goddess worship is prominent, the festival centers on the image of the goddess Durgā in her form as Mahiṣāsura-mardinī, the "slayer of the buffalo demon," and large-scale animal sacrifice has traditionally been integral to its celebration; hence the aptness of talk of seas or rivers of blood.[9] As Nanda Shrestha recounts from his childhood in the Nepalese town of Pokhara, "During this festival, most temples are littered with blood from sacrificed animals (uncastrated goats, roosters, ducks, and buffalos). The smell of blood and raw meat is everywhere" (1997, 44).

The practice of animal sacrifice has a long and convoluted history in the South Asian region. Central to the ancient Vedic religion were rituals involving the suffocation and immolation of animals that included goats, sheep, oxen, sometimes horses, and occasionally smaller animals such as doves, owls, or hares (Keith 1925, 324).[10] Almost extinct in the modern world, Vedic sacrificial rites that are probably around 3,700 years old still persist among at least one small community in contemporary southeastern India (Knipe 2015, esp. chap. 6), and despite differences between Vedic and post-Vedic modes of animal sacrifice, traces of Vedic procedures are discernible in later sacrificial practices, not least those associated with the Goddess in her various ferocious forms.[11] Preeminent among those latter forms are Durgā and Kālī, though they also include numerous village deities, such as the goddess of smallpox known most commonly as Śītalā in northern India and as Māriyammaṉ in the south (Fuller 2004, 85).

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[8] Strictly speaking, *daśaĩ* is the Parvate term for the festival; the term normally used by Nepali Newars is *mohanī* (Shrestha 2012, 269, 582).

[9] Cf. Rana 1969, 18: "So great is the slaughter of animals in the three cities of the Kathmandu Valley that rivers of blood flow in the court-yards of temples."

Animal sacrifice has been a site of tension both within the traditions that practice it and between those and other religious groups. Non-Brahmanical movements such as Jainism and Buddhism were vociferous in their opposition to the sacrificial rites rooted in the Vedic religion, rejecting them on the grounds that they violate the fundamental ethical principle of nonviolence or harmlessness (*ahiṃsā*) (Tiwari 1998, 66). The latter principle also became increasingly prevalent in Brahmanical orthodoxy from the late Vedic period onwards, apparently being appropriated from surrounding ascetic groups from as early as the time of the oldest Upaniṣads (*c*. eighth century CE) (Bodewitz 1999, 40–41).

The perceived incompatibility between an ideal of nonviolence and the institution of animal sacrifice is typified by a verse quoted in the collection of folktales known as the *Pañcatantra* (*c*. 300 CE) in which it is declared that those who sacrifice animals are immersed in darkness and that there never has been nor will be a “higher religious duty than harmlessness" (3.51, trans. Edgerton 1924, 370).[12] There is, however, an irony attached to this verse, which is that the character who recites it in the *Pañcatantra* is a cat named Dadhikarṇa, whose recitation is part of a strategy for appearing benign to a partridge and a hare; having gained their confidence, the cat seizes and kills them (3.53). Within the narrative context, therefore, the verse simultaneously condemns animal sacrifice and is implicated in a subterfuge that results in the slaying of gullible victims, a sardonic twist neglected by modern authors who cite the verse as a straightforward pronouncement of the nonviolent ideal (e.g., Preece 1999, 202).

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[10] Under certain circumstances human sacrifice (*puruṣamedha*) is also enjoined, though whether it was ever performed remains disputed. See, for example, Oldenberg (1988, 204), Bakker (2007), and Parpola (2007).

[11] For discussion of continuities and discontinuities between Vedic and post-Vedic animal sacrifice, see Hiltebeitel (2011, esp. 135–37); cf. Rodrigues (2003, 36–37, 83).

One response of the Brahmanical tradition to those who denounce animal sacrifice as a breach of nonviolence has been to draw a sharp distinction between killing for one's own benefit and killing to serve the greater good. For example, the classical law book known as the *Mānava Dharmaśāstra* (*c.* second or third century CE) maintains that domestic animals were created precisely for the purpose of sacrifice, which promotes "the prosperity of this whole world." When carried out for this reason, "killing is not killing" (5.39, trans. Olivelle 2005, 140). To avoid the appearance of paradox, we might interpret this latter contention to mean that the killing of an animal as an act of sacrifice is not the kind of killing that is prohibited by the principle of nonviolence, for the principle concerns only killing that is selfishly motivated.[13]

Over the last few centuries the sacrificial practices of goddess worshippers have diminished as a consequence of several factors. Chief among these in northwest India, for instance, has been the proliferation of a strain of Vaiṣṇavism (worship of the divine in the form of Viṣṇu, especially as personified as Kṛṣṇa or Rāma) that is opposed to the killing of animals both for dietary and for religious purposes. Also contributing to an atmosphere unconducive to animal sacrifice has been the presence of Sikhism and Hindu reform movements such as the Ārya Samāj together with increasingly pervasive Western ideas and values. A further element is the growing reliance of temples upon the generosity of pilgrims, the wealthiest of whom belong to mercantile castes that are traditionally unsympathetic to animal sacrifice (Erndl 1993, 71). In the light of the multiple factors involved, it is crucial that scholars of Hindu and of other South Asian traditions avoid operating with essentializing assumptions to the effect that animal sacrifice is somehow intrinsic to the worship of female deities.

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[12] Although the verse is presented as a quotation from the Dharma Śāstras, its precise source remains unknown (Sternback 2002, 32).

[13] Cf. *Mānava Dharmaśāstra* 5.45 (Olivelle 2005, 140): "If someone, craving his own pleasure, harms harmless creatures, he will not find happiness anywhere while he is still alive or after death."

In some areas, however, animal sacrifice has remained a prominent feature of goddess veneration, at least until very recent years. Of particular notoriety has been the weeklong festival in honor of the goddess Gaḍhīmāī that occurs in late November every five years in the Bara district of southern Nepal. Having involved animal sacrifice since its origin in the eighteenth century, the festival attracts hundreds of thousands of pilgrims from India as well as Nepal, and the number of animals sacrificed escalated to enormous figures during the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. Estimates of the number of animals decapitated at the 2009 festival range from twenty thousand (Gupto 2016, 68) to half a million (Brockman 2011, 179; Humane Society International 2015b), thousands of which were young male buffalo that were herded into a walled field where they were beheaded in front of spectators. The numbers of animals sacrificed at the 2014 festival dropped by an estimated seventy percent owing to the Supreme Court of India’s having prohibited the transport of animals from India to Nepal. And following considerable pressure from Buddhist groups and especially from animal welfare organizations both in South Asia and further afield, the temple trust of Gaḍhīmāī announced in 2015 that future festivals at the site will not include animal sacrifice (Humane Society International 2015a).

Although the discontinuation of animal sacrifice at the Gaḍhīmāī festival may be indicative of a widespread trend, for the time being the ritual killing of animals remains integral to the worship of many deities, especially goddesses, in the South Asian context. Cockerels, goats, buffalo, and other animals are still regularly sacrificed at temples throughout several eastern and northeastern states of India, most notably West Bengal and Assam (McDermott 2011, esp. chap. 8), and the Dashain festival in Nepal continues to involve the deaths of thousands of animals (Lorch 2015). As a method of exploring further the place that animal sacrifice can have in a religious system of thought and of considering how the sacrificial practices, and opposition to them, play out in intricate inter- and intrapersonal situations, I turn in the remainder of this article to an examination of two works of dramatic fiction, beginning with Karnad's *Bali: The Sacrifice*.

## INTERRELIGIOUS AND INTRAPERSONAL TENSIONS IN KARNAD'S *BALI: THE SACRIFICE*

Girish Karnad has been described as "the most important dramatist of the contemporary Indian stage" (Tandon 2006, 33; cf. Thali 1988, 1078). Having been born near Mumbai in 1938, he spent most of his childhood in the southern Indian state of Karnataka, where Kannada is the principal spoken language. Over the course of his long career he has been an actor, film director, scriptwriter, and translator as well as an eminent playwright, writing in both Kannada and English. Influenced by traditional Indian storytelling in addition to Western playwrights from Shakespeare to Brecht and Sartre, Karnad admires the way in which Indian folk theatre in particular is capable of disrupting and questioning traditional values by deploying its conventional apparatus to facilitate "the simultaneous presentation of alternative points of view, of alternative attitudes to the central problem"—a multiperspectivalism that Karnad, borrowing a term from Brecht, calls “complex seeing” (Karnad 1994, 14).

In an essay by the literary scholar R. N. Rai, the just-quoted passage in which Karnad invokes the notion of complex seeing is slightly misquoted, “alternative attitudes” being erroneously displaced by “alternative altitudes” (Rai 2006, 20). The error is felicitous, however, in view of the fact that Brecht, when originally asserting that “[c]omplex seeing must be practised,” then added that “almost more important than thinking in the flow is thinking above [or across] the flow [*das Überdenflußdenken*]” (Brecht [1928], in Schumacher 1955, 203; my translation),[14] thereby prefiguring precisely the idea of rising to a vantage point from which, by viewing the alternative perspectives *as alternatives*, the complexity of possible attitudes is appreciated. By witnessing characters in the flow of life, “constantly negotiating … with other points of view” (Roy 2006, 283), Karnad’s audiences are enabled to reflect on the often conflicting values and outlooks encapsulated on the stage.

*Bali: The Sacrifice* was written in English and first performed at the Haymarket Theatre in Leicester, England in May 2002, though it was largely adapted from an earlier play, *Hiṭṭina Hunja* (“The Dough Cockerel”), which Karnad had composed in Kannada in 1980. The term *bali* is derived from Sanskrit, meaning “tribute, offering, gift, oblation” (Monier-Williams 1899, 723), and in modern Indian languages such as Hindi it has come to be associated with blood sacrifice in particular (Storm 2013, 26). This is certainly its primary sense in the title of Karnad’s play, though the play is also exploring other conceptions of sacrifice, especially the sense in which a wife might feel that in order to fulfil social and familial expectations she has had to sacrifice the life she might otherwise have enjoyed.

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[14] Compare the respective translations in Brecht (1964, 44)—“it is perhaps more important to be able to think above the stream than to think in the stream”—and in Brecht (2015, 72): “thinking across the flow is almost more important than thinking in the flow.”

Set in the darkness of night with only four characters, *Bali* is a psychologically intense and claustrophobic play infused with mythic resonance. As Karnad acknowledges in his preface to the first published edition (2004, 70), the play inherits elements from a Jain legend featuring a king named Yaśodhara, whose story has been told in various forms by numerous authors. Karnad explicitly cites the thirteenth-century Kannada epic *Yaśodhara Carita* by Janna as well as two earlier Sanskrit renditions by Vādirāja and Somadeva respectively.[15] In fact there have been at least twenty-nine renderings of the narrative in several Indic languages, from Haribhadra's original Prakrit version in the eighth century to Lakhmīdāsa's Hindi retelling dated 1724 (see Vaidya 1931: 24–28; Hardy 1990: 133 nn. 4–5).[16] A detailed summary of the entire legend would take us very far afield, as it narrates the story of King Yaśodhara and his mother Candramatī undergoing a series of reincarnations as different animals, each lifetime involving repercussions of a karmic transgression performed in their initial human life. Eventually the pair are reborn as human twins who, after becoming Jain mendicants, ascend to a heavenly place. For our present purposes it is necessary to note only that the fateful transgression was the sacrificing to a local goddess of a cockerel made out of dough. In accordance with Jain teachings, the very thought of sacrificing a living being, even if what is actually sacrificed is a mere replica, constitutes a sin sufficient to bring upon the perpetrator several lifetimes of pain and distress.[17]

What Karnad does with the story is to jettison the convoluted succession of rebirths while retaining and embellishing the portrayal of emotionally fraught relationships between the four characters, who are identified as the King, the Queen, the Queen Mother (the mother of the

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[15] Karnad (2004, 70) assigns Somadeva's *Yaśastilaka* to the ninth century and Vādirāja's *Yaśodhara Carita* to the eleventh; Vaidya (1931, 24–25) and Hardy (1990, 133 n. 4) place them both in the tenth century.

[16] For discussion of Haribhadra's dates, see Jacobi (1926, i–iii).

[17] For a concise synopsis of the early part of the story, based on Somadeva's version, see Keith (1920, 333–34). For a summary of the portion of the story involving animal rebirths, see Chapple (2006, 243–44).

King), and the Mahout (the King's elephant keeper). The action of the play begins with the Queen and the Mahout inside an old ruined temple, in which all that remains of the statue of a deity is its feet. The Mahout is there because he was seeking somewhere quiet to sleep after a bat entered the elephant house where he normally resides; the Queen is there because she was enticed by the mellifluous sound of the Mahout's singing. It becomes evident that the two have just been engaged in an act of sexual intimacy and now the Queen is anxious to return to her husband's bedroom before he notices her absence. It is, however, too late for that: the King, having seen the Queen sneaking out of the palace, has followed her to the ruined temple; he enters and confronts the pair. In flashbacks we are informed about the relationship between the King and Queen. We learn that early on he had converted to the Jain faith to which she adheres, but that the Queen remains deeply troubled by the fact that the King's mother continues to sacrifice animals to a bloodthirsty goddess. We learn, too, that the Queen has been unable to carry a pregnancy to term; having suffered a miscarriage and feeling oppressed by public pressure to produce an heir to the throne, she has yearned for an opportunity to make love "for its own sake" rather than for the purpose of procreation (Karnad 2004, 95). Now, in the light of the Queen's adulterous tryst, the King is desperate to know how to make amends—not to his wife, but to the gods. He turns for advice to his mother, who, once her initial desire for vengeance against the daughter-in-law she loathes has subsided, prescribes the sacrificing of a cockerel made of dough—an expiatory measure supposedly compatible with the King's aversion to killing.

But the Queen objects even to this proposed mock sacrifice. To the King's insistence that ritually slicing into a mere effigy cannot constitute real violence, the Queen responds: "But … but … this sword. This plunging in of the blade. The act … it's violence" (Karnad 2004, 111; Karnad's ellipses). Her most emphatic horror is elicited, however, when the King subsequently insinuates—or, at any rate, when the Queen takes him to be insinuating—that her miscarriage might have been a consequence of their not having followed his mother's sacrificial practices. The King, having been raised in his mother's tradition, clearly still feels the allure of the sacrifice—the sense that there may be some purpose in it. "Look," he implores, "we don't know everything about this world. There may be … powers … forces we know nothing about." Then, after a pause: "Who knows, if we had listened to Mother we may not have lost our child" (2004, 113). Incredulous that her husband could stoop to such a suggestion, the Queen asks him to repeat what he said. But the King himself seems unsure of his real meaning: "I don't know—I mean—what do I—." The Queen puts the question more bluntly: "So I lost my baby because I didn't follow your mother's orders? Because I didn't kill and maim?" Though the King disavows this construal of his words, the Queen is now resolute in her interpretation; she hears in the King's hesitant intimation the disclosure of sentiments of which she has long been aware, if not emanating directly from her husband then certainly from the surrounding community, by whom she feels malignly and suffocatingly judged. That she is to blame is exactly what she takes the intimation to be: "Late in my life, I become pregnant and I have a miscarriage—and you are saying that it was a punishment meted out to me for my defiance" (113).

It is in interlocutions such as the one just outlined that we see the profound tension epitomized in the character of the King: a tension between competing familial loyalties—the loyalty to his mother versus the loyalty to his wife—which is itself inexorably entangled with the tension between alternative religious and ethical perspectives. The King feels irresistibly tempted by the air of mystery surrounding his mother's mode of religiosity, imbued as it is with the idea of a controlling yet capricious force, personified as feminine, standing behind the fluctuations of our lives. He sees, or suspects he sees, a point in the sacrificial rites performed by his mother, rites which themselves resound with the mystery of death, yet he finds himself incapable of articulating what that point might be.

Remarks pertinent to the present issue occur in an essay on mythological ways of thinking by G. K. Chesterton (1925, part 1, chap. 5), who ruminates upon the tendency in human beings to find certain images—certain ideas of connections between things—compelling in spite of their resistance to rational explanation. Inviting us to suppose that, in a story, someone says "Pluck this flower and a princess will die in a castle beyond the sea" or that it is stated that "in the hour when the king extinguished the candle his ships were wrecked far away on the coast of Hebrides," Chesterton observes that such notions are capable of stirring in us something below the level of conscious thought—an affective response that has the consequence of making what at some level we know to be impossible appear "almost inevitable" (1925, 99). The images have the capacity to entrance the imagination in ways resemblant of how poetic metaphors stimulate our emotions with the correspondences they create (100). To dismiss the imputed connections too abruptly as mere "superstition" risks overlooking what Brian Clack (1995, 114) has termed "the fascination that envelops us" when we allow ourselves to contemplate that such connections might obtain after all. It is, Clack proposes, by recognizing this imaginative potential in ourselves that we may come to see "the essentially poetic nature" of certain ritualistic acts (114).

There is, we might say, a kind of dark, tragic poetry in many acts of ritual sacrifice. Though it is rarely explicit exactly what connection is supposed to obtain between killing the animal in a ritualized manner and staving off the ill fortune that would otherwise result, it is perhaps the very absence of any explicit connection that amplifies the ritual's bewitching aura: an aura simultaneously horrifying and captivating, what Wittgenstein in his notes on James Frazer's *The Golden Bough* terms "deep and sinister" (Wittgenstein 1993, 147). When the King in Karnad's play alludes to the "powers" or "forces" that remain opaque to us, he might be regarded as acknowledging, however charily, the radical contingency of our lives, the sense of its being ultimately out of our hands what happens to us. It is the connection he then implies between his wife’s miscarriage and the eschewing of animal sacrifice that requires the kind of imaginative leap to which Chesterton and Clack refer. The imaginative leap is one that the Queen finds appalling and by which the King himself is simultaneously tempted and disconcerted. While perhaps recognizing that the suggestion of a straightforward causal relation between the two things would make no sense, the King feels the pull—the deep and sinister attraction—of some kind of association nevertheless. This is one of the principal tensions at the heart of the play, and by embedding it within the particularities of the King’s predicament, Karnad enables his audience—even an audience not themselves immersed in a culture in which animal sacrifice has a salient presence—to see how the sacrificial rites might have a place in a religious life and, moreover, how someone might be reluctant to relinquish those rites in spite of the tragic strain that this reluctance exerts on his personal relationship with his wife.

A somewhat simplistic way of understanding the tensions depicted in the play would be in terms of “the utility of rational ideas and futility of false beliefs” (Mishra 2008, 92), with the play as a whole acting “as a voice of reason against a saga of myths” (104). Even though, as we know, Karnad is himself an admirer of Mohandas K. Gandhi and a keen advocate of nonviolence, to treat the play as a forthright polemic against the purported irrationality of animal sacrifice is to diminish the subtlety of its exploration of colliding human impulses. For the countervailing forces against animal sacrifice represented in the play are not those of cool rationality uncolored by myth; rather, on the part of the Queen they are fueled by a combination of religious faith, instinctive sentiment, and long-suppressed resentment, and on the part of the King they are bound up with a loving, albeit highly compromised, allegiance to his wife. Far from a battle of reason versus myth, what we encounter in the play—as so often in real life—are clashes of values and proclivities not merely between characters but also within them.

Although there is, inevitably, much more that could be said about Karnad's *Bali: The Sacrifice*, my purpose here, rather than attempting an exhaustive analysis, has been to indicate some instances of how this dramatic work opens up pathways for thinking about animal sacrifice—pathways that may have eluded us had our inquiry remained at a level uninformed by the nuances of complex human lives and interactions. In the next section I turn to a further example of a dramatic work centered on the theme of animal sacrifice.

## COMPETING CONCEPTIONS OF THE GODDESS IN TAGORE'S *SACRIFICE*

Rabindranath Tagore (1861–1941), "the bard of Bengal" (Pobozniak 1961, 353), was born and died in Kolkata (Calcutta), though over the eighty years of his prodigiously productive life he travelled widely in Asia and in the West (Alam and Chakravarty 2011, 13, 16, 747). Eulogized by his admirers as "one of the greatest literary figures in history" (Kabir 1987, 11; Raina 1999, 617), he is generally lauded more for his poetry than for his plays. Indeed, in 2012 Girish Karnad instigated a storm in the Indian media by publicly declaring that Tagore, though admittedly a poet of greatness, was nonetheless "a mediocre and second-rate playwright" (quoted in *Times of India* 2012). Notwithstanding such detractors, defenders of Tagore's plays attest to their "highly innovative and profoundly philosophical" character and blame poor translations for their sometimes less than exuberant reception among non-Bengali audiences (Bhattacharya and Renganathan 2015, 2). Having written more than forty plays in several genres over the course of his life, it would hardly be surprising if not all of them were of the highest caliber. Fortunately, it is unnecessary to my purpose here to try to establish the worth of Tagore's dramatic oeuvre as a whole, for it is specifically his play *Sacrifice* (1917), composed by Tagore in English, with which I am concerned. Critical opinion even of this one play has been mixed, with some commentators decrying it as inferior to its Bengali forerunner *Visarjan* (Tagore [1890] 2010–2012) (Radice 2003, 65).[18] But matching the Bengali original would have been a tall order, given that it is “an acknowledged masterpiece of the verse drama form” (Chakraverty 2000, 100). In any case, the English as well as the Bengali rendition not only contains some of Tagore’s most religiously provocative interventions but also successfully presents, in the central figure of the head priest Raghupati, a compelling tragic protagonist (cf. Sanyal 1961, 234).

Both *Visarjan* and *Sacrifice* were themselves adapted from Tagore’s earlier novel *Rajarshi* ([1887] 1961).[19] Allegedly based on historical events at the royal court of Tripura in the seventeenth century (Raatan 2008, 150; cf. Chakravarty 2013, 33), all three of these works center on a dispute between a king named Govinda and his priestly nemesis Raghupati over the legitimacy of animal sacrifice. The play is set in a temple of the goddess Kālī at the time of a festival; people from the surrounding villages are bringing animals to be sacrificed in her honor. As in Karnad’s *Bali*, a central figure in Tagore’s play is a childless queen; however, in this instance the Queen, Gunavati, is herself a worshipper of the Goddess, to whom she pleads to be granted a child. While the Queen has sent for animals to be offered in order to propitiate the Goddess, her husband, King Govinda, is vehemently opposed to the blood sacrifices. His compassion having been aroused by the eloquent protests of a beggar girl, Aparna, whose own goat has been sacrificed without her consent, Govinda prohibits any further blood-shedding in the temple. He thereby raises the ire not only of his wife but of the priest Raghupati, who plots to have the King himself killed as an oblation to the Goddess. This scheme eventuates in tragedy for Raghupati, however, as his adopted son, Jaising, whom he has tried to embroil in the plot, kills himself in place of the King. Jaising's self-sacrifice shatters Raghupati's conception of the Goddess. Tossing the statue of her out of the temple, Raghupati proclaims that "The Goddess is nowhere" (Tagore 1917, 149). His final words in the play imply that Raghupati, like Govinda, has come to see the Goddess as embodied not in stone idols but in the benevolent heart of the girl Aparna, whom he now refers to as both "child" and "Mother" (150).

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[18] The Bengali term *visarjan* (“immersion”) can denote the ceremony that involves immersing a statue of a deity into a body of water, such as when statues of the goddess Durgā are immersed in the River Gaṅgā at the end of the Durgā Pūjā (Dehejia 2006, 167), though it can also imply “self-immolation” (*ātma-visarjan*) (Ayyub 1980, 19–20).

[19] *Rajarshi* (*rājarṣi*) translates as “royal seer” or “sagely king.” It is an epithet associated especially with the legendary king Viśvāmitra (White 1991, 79–81). Tagore denotes by it the character King Govinda in his novel.

Unsurprisingly, Tagore's *Sacrifice* has commonly been interpreted as a denunciation of the practice of sacrificing animals—and indeed human beings—to the goddess Kālī (e.g., Kinsley 1975, 81 fn. 1), and in view of Tagore's well-known pacifist sympathies this is an entirely credible reading of what Tagore was aiming to convey through the play. Tagore even dedicates the play "to those heroes who bravely stood for peace when human sacrifice was claimed for the Goddess of War" (1917, 84). In this respect, the play can hardly be cited as a neutral depiction of counterposed viewpoints. But neither should it be written off as crudely didactic, for there is considerable depth in its presentation of the clash between antagonistic religious perspectives and of how this clash can be interwoven with rivalries between royal and priestly authority, between siblings and between spouses (cf. Ghose 1990, 63).[20]

One way in which the complexity of the religious dispute is sometimes underestimated is by supposing that Raghupati's affirmations of both animal and human sacrifice can be readily disregarded as mere self-delusion and trickery. Referring to Raghupati's efforts to persuade his young ward to sacrifice the King, one commentator describes Raghupati as deploying "sophistry" to win Jaising over (Iyengar 1961, 56). Inspection of the purportedly sophistic passages, however, reveals poignant echoes of traditional scriptures much admired not only by Hindus favoring blood sacrifice but also by those opposed to such practices. When, for example, Raghupati asserts that "Sin has no meaning in reality" and that "To kill is but to kill, it is neither sin nor anything else” (Tagore 1917, 119), the sentiment he expresses corresponds to the doctrine most famously articulated in the *Bhagavad Gītā* (*c*. first century CE), that when perceived aright, the slaughter of human beings on a battlefield is a deed free from sin, for it is merely material bodies that are cut down: the eternal spirit, capable neither of suffering harm nor of undertaking action, cannot be sullied.[21] And when it is then added by Raghupati that “Old Time is ever writing the chronicle of the transient life of creatures in letters of blood” (Tagore 1917, 119), readers familiar with the *Gītā* may again hear resonances of Kṛṣṇa’s self-revelation to the warrior Arjuna of himself as “Time [*kāla*], the mighty cause of world destruction, | Who has come forth to annihilate the worlds.” Regardless of anything we mere humans do, Kṛṣṇa declares, everyone has in effect already been dispatched by him—devoured in his multiple “flaming mouths” like moths consumed by fire (11.28–33, trans. Sargeant 2009, 480–85).

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[20] Ghose refers directly to the Bengali version of Tagore's play (*Visarjan*), but the same rivalries are present in *Sacrifice*.

Thus, when Tagore’s Raghupati invokes the macabre image of Kālī as “the spirit of ever changing time … with her cup in hand, into which is running the red life-blood of the world” (Tagore 1917, 119), this is not at all far removed from the image of Kṛṣṇa as the destroyer of worlds in the terrifying theophany of the *Gītā*’s eleventh chapter. And when Raghupati later endeavors to enlist in his regicidal ploy the services of King Govinda’s own brother, Nakshatra, Raghupati’s words mimic those by which Kṛṣṇa seeks to persuade Arjuna to slaughter his own kin in internecine warfare. “Shaking off this vile weakness of heart, arise, O chastiser of foes!” urges Kṛṣṇa in a translation by Kisari Mohan Ganguli with which Tagore will have been familiar;[22] likewise, “Shake off your despondency, Prince,” Raghupati tells Nakshatra (Tagore 1917, 138). Shortly after this, when Raghupati's plan is discovered by the King, who then resolves to banish him, Raghupati describes the impending exile as a punishment that in fact "comes from the Goddess" to penalize him for his own hesitancy. "You are merely her instrument," he tells the King (Tagore 1917, 140), words that again echo those of Kṛṣṇa in the *Gītā*, who, having reiterated that it is he alone who strikes down the warriors on the battlefield, commands Arjuna to "Be the mere instrument" (11.33, trans. Sargeant 2009, 485).

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[21] See, for example, *Bhagavad Gītā* 2.19 (trans. Sargeant 2009, 104): “He who imagines this (the embodied Self) the slayer | And he who imagines this (the embodied Self) the slain, | Neither of them understands | This (the embodied Self) does not slay, nor is it slain.” This verse from the *Gītā* is itself a close echo of *Kaṭha Upaniṣad* 2.19 (see Olivelle 1998, 385).

[22] The translation is in *Mahābhārata* (1887, 78), which corresponds to *Bhagavad Gītā* 2.3. See also Ganguli’s rendering of the immediately preceding verse: “Whence, O Arjuna, hath come upon

It does not follow from the resemblances between Raghupati's words and certain locutions voiced by Kṛṣṇa in the *Gītā* that Tagore is offering us what he considers to be sound arguments for accepting the sacrificial and homicidal stance that Raghupati adopts throughout much of the play. But the resemblances do indicate that Raghupati's pronouncements cannot be simply discarded as instances of sophistry without at the same time placing in question certain motifs central to the *Gītā* and to the broader Vedāntic milieu within which its teachings are situated. These latter motifs include, first, the all-encompassing sublimity of divine power, a sublimity that transcends worldly conceptions of morality and views everything that happens as a providential unfolding of time; and second, the righteousness of killing when performed solely from the motive of duty—or from the impulse to pay homage to the divine—without emotional attachment to the consequences. Until Raghupati's conversion in the final moments of the play, what he sees in the figure of Kālī, "standing with her thirsty tongue hanging down from her mouth" (Tagore 1917, 119), is no doubt what innumerable worshippers of Kālī and of other ferocious deities have seen over many centuries, namely a vivid personification of the darkest aspects of the world—an acknowledgement that terror and tragedy are pervasive constituents of the fabric of life, neither more nor less real than moments of respite and tranquility.

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thee, at such a crisis, this despondency that is unbecoming a person of noble birth …" (*Mahābhārata* 1887, 78).

What Tagore's *Sacrifice* depicts, therefore, is, admittedly, the ultimate victory of the vision of divinity that he personally cherishes: a vision according to which the goddess is the spring of loving compassion residing in human hearts, which may be embodied in benign individuals but not in graven images. But it is not a victory over a mere caricature of corrupt and redundant "religious bigotry" (Chakravarty 2015, 88). Rather, the faith initially espoused by Raghupati and Queen Gunavati, as well as by myriad people from the surrounding towns and villages, has been a prominent strand among the variegated Hindu and indigenous "tribal" traditions of South Asia for millennia. In order to disclose what he views as the necessity of its overcoming, Tagore had first to show its potent attraction.

## CONCLUDING REMARKS

What I have been arguing in relation to both Karnad's *Bali* and Tagore's *Sacrifice* is that works of dramatic fiction are a vehicle by means of which deeper understandings of religious forms of life can be cultivated. Plays, along with other genres of narrative fiction, can constitute instances of thickly described religiosity in action, enabling audiences and readers to comprehend the modes of religiosity in question within lived and culturally inflected environments—amid the cut and thrust of human relationships that are frequently conflictual and compromised by tangled motivations and competing commitments. Among the features of Karnad's play to which I have drawn attention are the tensions concretized in the figure of the King, who wavers between the sacrificial faith of his mother and the Jain aversion, upheld by his wife, to even the merely figurative representation of killing.[23] By hesitantly intimating his continued attachment to the idea of hidden powers and connections, the King betrays a precarious religious sensibility that is likely to be a reality for many practitioners of animal sacrifice: not a solid confidence that the ritual killing of animals will yield beneficial returns, but a somber admission of a minacious mystery behind many aspects of life.

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[23] Cf. Saxena (2008, 119): "The king may be termed as an oscillating figure. He is like a pendulum that moves between the Queen and the Queen Mother."

With regard to Tagore's *Sacrifice*, meanwhile, I have highlighted how controversies surrounding animal offerings can be enmeshed with divergent conceptions of divinity. Tagore himself made no secret of his preference for the philosophically reflective and ethically oriented religion promoted by reformists such as Rammohun Roy (1772–1833) over the more flamboyant and emotionally driven styles of religiosity prevalent both in Śākta (Goddess-worshipping) and in Vaiṣṇava movements in Bengal and in India more widely (Anand 1961, 67; Kopf 1979, 77–78), and this preference no doubt lends a prescriptive tone to much of Tagore's literary work. Nevertheless, by pointing out how the arch defender of blood sacrifice within the play invokes phraseology reminiscent of scriptures central to Brahmanical Hinduism—most notably the *Bhagavad Gītā*—I have indicated how the assumption that this defense must be merely superficial and insincere ought to be treated with caution. While it would be hard to find explicit advocacy of animal sacrifice in the *Gītā* itself (cf. Upadhyaya 1971, 144), its morally ambivalent attitude towards killing, combined with its paradigmatic delineation of a terrifying god, typify dimensions of religious discourse that are easily adapted by the sacrificial protagonist in Tagore's play. Regardless of the author's own religious proclivities, then, a careful reading of the play brings out the extent to which blood sacrifice may be resistant to being neatly parceled off as an outdated superstition unrelated to the deepest expressions of Brahmanical thought.

It is possible that the analyses of the plays that I have offered may expedite fresh avenues for research on these and on other instances of the respective authors' ideas and literary output. Why, for example, would Tagore draw upon the *Gītā* to articulate a pro-sacrifice position? With whom among his contemporaries is he communicating by means of this adaptation of Kṛṣṇa's phraseology?[24] And in the case of Karnad's *Bali*, to what extent is the King's vacillation over the issue of sacrifice representative of broader ambivalences inscribed into and perlustrated through Karnad's work? This, however, is not the place to pursue those further questions. Indeed, as I have noted in the course of my discussion, my purpose here has not been to provide thorough or definitive interpretation and analysis but to illustrate how narrative fiction, and works of drama in particular, can contribute to an enriching of the philosophy of religion, opening up space for the apprehension of possibilities of meaning in religious forms of life that might otherwise be difficult to access. The phrase that Rai misquotes from Karnad—"alternative altitudes"—is an apt one to bear in mind; it fitly suggests the sense in which a playwright may adopt an overview of the ideological terrain, seeking not necessarily to resolve conflicts between or within characters but to expose them to light for the sake of enhancing understanding. This conception of the role of the playwright affords a model for a certain approach to philosophizing—what D. Z. Phillips terms a "contemplative conception of philosophy," according to which "philosophers are engaged in the enormously difficult task of being conceptually faithful to the world" (2007b, 207–208). Without presuming that one can ever abstract oneself entirely from one's own sociocultural situatedness, the contemplative philosopher aspires towards "a perch above the fray" (Phillips 2004, 55), an alternative altitude from which, to again put it in Bakhtinian terms, a multiplicity of heterogeneous yet interacting and mutually transforming voices may be heard.[25]

One way in which this contemplative conception of philosophy can be carried forward, I am proposing, is by means of the kind of engagement with narrative sources that I have exemplified in this article. The topic of animal sacrifice is especially contentious, with extensive ethical and political as well as religious ramifications. For philosophers of religion, no doubt, it has been hard to see how one might gain a foothold in order to pursue an inquiry into what is, for many, a deeply unsettling region of religious and cultural life, to ask how it can be that the engendering of "mountains of flesh and seas of blood" has found a place, and continues to find a place, in certain religious orientations. Engaging with dramatic fiction is far from being the only or perhaps even the best means of gaining such a foothold. It is, however, one effective means of expanding philosophy of religion both methodologically and with regard to its range of subject matter, and of thereby giving recognition to the radical plurality of human religious and nonreligious forms of life.

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[24] I am indebted to an anonymous referee for this journal for suggesting that questions of this sort may be prompted by my analysis.

[25] Cf. Sidorkin (2002, 170): "[Bakhtin's] idea that the multiple voices never merge, never come to a grand ending of a grand narrative, does not in any way mean that the voices do not change each other. Quite to the contrary, the interaction is the truest moment of their being."

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