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Beverley Clack and Brian R. Clack *The Philosophy of Religion: A Critical Introduction*. Third Edition (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2019). Pp. ix + 273. £18.99 (Pbk). ISBN 9781509516933.

Over the decades, a veritable plethora of introductory textbooks on the philosophy of religion has been produced. Many of these are generic and unremarkable, following a formulaic blueprint that privileges standard issues concerning the rationality of theism, such as the well-worn natural theological arguments for the existence of God, questions pertaining to God's attributes and the problem of evil. *The Philosophy of Religion: A Critical Introduction* by siblings Beverley and Brian Clack is unlike those formulaic publications. First published in 1998, it immediately exhibited a more adventurous spirit, drawing upon its co-authors' combined expertise in feminist philosophy, Wittgensteinian thought and various other approaches to the study of religion in order to inject fresh life into the subject matter. While still giving substantial coverage to the standard topics, which most introductory courses on the philosophy of religion are bound to include, that first edition began to explicate alternative perspectives that shine a critical light on the conventional approaches.

The book's second edition, in 2008, built upon the first. Its opening chapter was expanded, exploring further the concept of religion from several angles (anthropological and psychoanalytical as well as philosophical) and the very practice of philosophizing about religion was critically examined. It also added a new final chapter, 'Philosophy of Religion in an Age of Terror', prompted by events that had occurred since the book's first edition, most notably the '9/11' attacks and the 'War on Terror' that ensued. This additional chapter chimed congruently with the authors' overt intention to demonstrate the relevance of philosophy of religion to contemporary human life rather than presuming its purview to be limited to rarefied questions of an exclusively theoretical and disinterested nature.

Now in its third edition, the book retains its refreshingly critical perspicacity and has been enlarged still further. While the second edition had amounted to fewer than two hundred pages, this new edition is closer to three hundred. Among the most notable enhancements is the updating of the chapter on terror – now incorporating references to the recent activities of ‘Islamic State’ (a.k.a. Daesh) – along with embellishments of the penultimate chapter, on miracles and life after death, and the extensive discussion of feminist approaches in Chapter 4. The distinctive strengths of the book are many. For a start, it is historically well-informed, citing philosophers and other authors from Greek antiquity onwards rather than assuming that everything of importance in the philosophy of religion has been written within the last fifty years or so. Secondly, the treatment of diverse theoretical viewpoints displays a fitting balance between sympathetic exposition and critical appraisal, enabling students of the discipline to see how objections can be raised without dogmatically rejecting the ideas of one’s interlocutors. One exception to this is the hasty dismissal of the ‘Reformed epistemology’ typified by Alvin Plantinga and Nicholas Wolterstorff on page 145 (which is a hangover from the second edition), but this is a rare uncharitable moment on the authors’ part.

A third strength of the book is that its structure lends itself well to constituting the framework for a one-semester introductory course. It has only six chapters, but each of them is divided into two or three sections. So, in principle, one could design a course of ten to twelve weeks in total, with each week being based on either a whole chapter or one or two sections of a chapter. The chapters all include a list of suggested further reading at the end, comprising a selection of primary and secondary sources that could be used to supplement the discussions in the book itself.

A fourth strength is the emphasis on ‘alternative approaches’, to which I have alluded already. Not only does Chapter 4 provide extensive exposition of revisionary theologies,

Wittgensteinian methods and feminist perspectives, but aspects of these alternative approaches are integrated into other chapters as well. Examples of this include the discussions of Wittgensteinian and feminist perspectives on theodicy that occur in Chapter 3 and on miracles and immortality in Chapter 5. These ‘alternative approaches’ are treated neither as homogeneous nor as immune from criticism themselves. In the case of feminist outlooks, for instance, the Clacks highlight the potential to deploy ideas from feminist theology and philosophy of religion ‘to reflect critically upon feminism itself’ (191–192). A consequence of this heterogenizing and self-reflexively critical sensibility is that readers are encouraged to think for themselves rather than resting content with the authors’ account. A further device for eliciting personal engagement on the reader’s part is the inclusion, at suitable intervals, of shaded boxes containing questions that relate to the main text. These questions are also beneficial for teachers, since many of them could be utilized to prompt classroom discussion or adapted as essay questions.

A fifth strength is the willingness of the authors to look beyond standard philosophy texts for illustrative examples of religious, nonreligious or antireligious points of view. Distributed throughout the book are references to literary or dramatic works (such as Camus’s *The Plague*, Tolstoy’s *The Death of Ivan Ilyich* or Chekhov’s *Uncle Vanya*), films (notably Woody Allen’s *Love and Death* and *Crimes and Misdemeanors*) and works by theologians (or theologians) and social scientists as well as philosophers. All of this helps to situate the investigation of religion within a broader cultural and existential milieu than would be accomplished by a narrower focus on more or less formal argumentation.

Weaknesses of the book are not easy to find, though there is, no doubt, more work to be done in order to engage with a wider range of religious traditions. For example, passing references are made to religions originating in South Asia, such as Buddhism, Jainism and Hinduism, to New Religious Movements, to concepts such as *saṃsāra* and to texts such as

the Upaniṣads and Bhagavad Gītā, and a section on reincarnation has been added to the chapter in which life after death is examined, all of which helps to broaden out the discussion. Nevertheless, the coverage of Asian religions remains minimal and any coverage of African indigenous religions, or other small-scale traditions, is absent. Of course, one cannot hope to do everything in a single volume, and what Clack and Clack have produced is a more comprehensive textbook than the majority of competing titles; they have opened up important avenues of inquiry that may otherwise have continued to be closed to students of philosophy of religion. It will perhaps be for others to extend the inquiry further in more cross-cultural and multireligious directions.

The Clacks end the book with what they term their own ‘revised’ or ‘alternative’ account of religion (259, 260). Having accentuated the extent to which religion is implicated in many acts of violence and mass murder, they wish also to acknowledge the deeply embedded place of religion in human life and the richness of this-worldly experience with which it can be associated – as opposed to being ineradicably tied to a world-denying attitude and the aspiration for a future life beyond this one. To overcome the destructive potential of religious impulses, the authors commend the subordination of religion to morality as advocated by Kant and, more recently, by Stewart Sutherland. As a guiding nostrum, they declare that ‘a religious belief cannot and should not run counter to basic moral principles’ (255, original emphasis). In this respect, they reject the privileging of religious faith over ordinary morality that is enunciated in works such as Kierkegaard’s *Fear and Trembling*. No Kierkegaardian ‘teleological suspension of the ethical’ can be justified (250), since, as Kant insists, the moral law cannot be outstripped by a purported commandment from God. This is because the moral law is apodictic whereas there is always room for doubt about the authenticity of a divine command (255). Developing this line of argument further would require reflection upon the underlying sources of morality, for if our ‘basic moral principles’ are themselves rooted in

religion (however indirectly), then the injunction to prioritize morality over religion becomes confused. At the very least, it would be inadvisable to take for granted the insinuation that there is some readily accessible set of ‘basic moral principles’ that can universally be appealed to in order to establish when a religiously motivated act has exceeded the bounds of permissibility.

To inform the affirmative dimension of their vision of religion, the authors turn for inspiration, perhaps surprisingly, to Freud and also to the dramatist Dennis Potter. In Freud, despite his notorious diagnosis of religion as the product of neurosis, they discern an appreciation both of the depth of religious dispositions in human nature and of the transience of life and experience, which itself can have a strong affinity with a certain religious point of view. Citing Freud, the Clacks endorse the contention that religion is, at least in large part, a response to the threats posed by the forces of nature. It is, they maintain, primarily driven by emotion, emerging ‘out of the turbulence and anguish of human life’ (267), a point that philosophy of religion is prone to miss when it fixates on the intellectual puzzles thrown up by religious doctrines. With regard to the theme of transience, the Clacks again detect in Freud a celebration of this feature of life, a recognition that the ephemerality of, for example, a blossoming flower need not diminish – and may indeed intensify – its beauty (265). A comparable thought is voiced by Potter, who brings out in an interview quoted by the Clacks the significance of attentiveness to present experience. This time with the blossom of a plum tree as the exemplary instance, Potter recounts how he perceives it as ‘the whitest, frothiest, blossomest blossom that there ever could be’ (quoted on p. 239). Indeed, the miraculousness of blossom becomes a leitmotif of the book, as Wittgenstein, too, is quoted as remarking: ‘(The blossom, just opening out. What is marvellous about it?) We say: “Just look at it opening out!”’ (quoted on p. 207).

By invoking these articulations of wonder in the face of natural beauty, the Clacks are not turning from religion to something other than religion ('mere' aesthetic appreciation, or suchlike). And by borrowing examples from a psychoanalyst and a dramatist, they are not turning from philosophy to something other than philosophy. Rather, they are offering reminders of moments in which a religious responsiveness can enter into our lives – moments in which life and experience are imbued with a poignancy and mystery that calls out for expression in religious terms. For those who wish to understand the phenomenon of religion in all its ramifications, those reminders can be of immense philosophical importance.

All in all, this third edition of *The Philosophy of Religion: A Critical Introduction* improves upon what, in its first two editions, was already among the most pioneering and vivifying introductions to this field of study. Affordable, accessible and capacious in its treatment of the subject, it deserves to retain its reputation as one of the first choices for use in the university classroom.

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