Article:
Burley, M orcid.org/0000-0002-7446-3564 (2021) Philosophy of Religion in a Radically Pluralist Spirit: A Reply to Responses. Journal of the American Academy of Religion, 89 (2). pp. 739-748. ISSN 0002-7189

https://doi.org/10.1093/jaarel/lfab047

Philosophy of Religion in a Radically Pluralist Spirit: A Reply to Responses

Mikel Burley

University of Leeds

I am enormously indebted to my four interlocutors in this roundtable for their meticulous attention to various aspects of my book, *A Radical Pluralist Philosophy of Religion: Cross-Cultural, Multireligious, Interdisciplinary*. It is gratifying to learn that there are features of the book that they perceive to be of value as well as stimulating to hear where they consider its weaknesses to lie. In reflecting upon their criticisms, I am reminded of a passage towards the end of D. Z. Phillips's *Religion and the Hermeneutics of Contemplation*, where Phillips adverts to the frustration that accompanies philosophical work—the frustration that arises from the recognition that there is always more to be said. Whatever one writes, whether in philosophy or in other academic pursuits, will inevitably be susceptible to the questions "What about this? What about that?" (Phillips 2001, 326). I welcome these interrogations and observations, along with the opportunity to respond. Although I cannot hope, in this concise reply, to do justice to them all, I shall endeavor to touch on some of the most pressing comments from each of the contributors in turn.

ALTERNATIVE VISIONS OF PLURALISTIC PHILOSOPHIES OF RELIGION: A REPLY TO SIKKA

Sonia Sikka offers some fitting reminders of salient differences between my radically pluralist approach and the religious pluralism of John Hick. She correctly insists that Hick's

goal was contrary to mine. His work does indeed pursue a normative and revisionary objective, whereas mine prioritizes bringing the diversity of forms of religiosity more sharply into view. My project is not without critical targets, but its targets are precisely the sorts of overgeneralizing theories that Hick's pluralistic hypothesis epitomizes.

My respect for Hick's innovative accomplishments in the philosophy of religion is immense. This is why I describe him as "pioneering" and "a trailblazer" in the introduction to my book (Burley 2020, 2, 3). The objections I raise are three specific ones. I argue, first, that Hick's binary distinction between the "great traditions," on the one hand, and all the rest, on the other, hampers a discerning and comprehensive appreciation of religious diversity; second, that Hick's reduction of religious doctrine to an instrumental or pragmatic function encourages a misleading interpretation of the role of doctrine in the lives of many believers; and third, that Hick's "ethical criterion" for distinguishing purportedly authentic from inauthentic forms of religion results in both a highly selective formulation of the ethical perspectives of the "great" traditions and the obscuration of modes of religiosity that fall short, by Hick's lights, of that ethical ideal. Notwithstanding the merits of Hick's "interpretation of religion" (2004), these shortcomings remain significant.

A central feature of my approach is the foregrounding of varieties of religious life that get shunted aside when ambitious theories such as Hick's are constructed. Hick's totalizing agenda would have been subverted if he had not excluded the small-scale indigenous traditions and the other forms of religion that deviate from his normative model. My purpose is not to prohibit capacious theorizing but rather to make conceptual space in philosophy of religion for an alternative tendency. This alternative seeks, among other things, to do conceptual justice to the heteronomous and counter-normative varieties of religion—to ensure that these varieties, which rub against the grain of mainstream Western philosophical sensibilities, are not ignored by the philosophy of religion.

Sikka wonders how my methods differ from those of anthropology. I anticipate this concern at several places in the book, recognizing, for example, that my "interdisciplinary engagement may be perceived as threatening a loss of disciplinary integrity" (2020, 198–99). It is because I am doing philosophy of religion interdisciplinarily that the term "interdisciplinary" features in the book's subtitle. I draw extensively on the work of anthropologists and even carry out some fieldwork myself. My sources also include works of literature, literary criticism, histories of religion, sociology, theology, and the study of religions more broadly—and elsewhere I have written about films and poetry. To borrow a phrase from Stanley Cavell (2015, xxiv), "I do not understand such appeals as 'going outside' philosophy." My approach remains philosophical for two main reasons. First, it is driven by a distinctively philosophical motivation: more specifically, a distinctively Wittgensteinian motivation—to treat philosophy as a clarificatory activity designed to free us from the grip of certain "pictures" or unduly constrained ways of thinking (Wittgenstein 1958, §115). Yet my book does not simply repeat what Wittgenstein himself or subsequent Wittgenstein-influenced philosophers have done: it critically modulates that orientation, extending it in interdisciplinary directions.

Second—and related to the first—is the fact that the critical targets of my approach are generally philosophical presuppositions, claims, or theories: theories, for example, about all (the "great") religions possessing a common ethically inflected essence or, alternatively, having their own discrete "conceptual schemes"; theories about "compassion" being the essence of religion in general and of Buddhism in particular; and the claim that the very concept of a human being excludes the idea that human bodies may legitimately be eaten. The book decries the routine omission of ritual practices such as animal sacrifice and divine possession from philosophical treatments of religion and highlights the tendency to undervalue the significance of animistic discourse by trying to shoehorn it into readymade

categories of "literal" or "metaphorical" language. These issues are not ones that philosophers are uniquely suited to discuss. On the contrary, philosophers are frequently ill-equipped to discuss them, which is why I draw upon material from multiple fields. Finding ways of linking this material to existing debates in philosophy of religion is challenging, a fact that is itself indicative of why those debates require expansion and augmentation. My book constitutes one attempt to do this.

RESCUING "DESCRIPTION" FROM OVERSIMPLIFICATION: A REPLY TO SCHILBRACK

The disagreement between Kevin Schilbrack and me requires careful characterization. It would be misleading to view us as advancing competing prescriptions for what *all* philosophy of religion ought to consist in. Despite favoring divergent approaches, we are both too pluralistically minded to wish to preclude approaches other than our own. Schilbrack allows that there is room in philosophy of religion for the critically descriptive approach that I pursue, and I grant that there is room for his style of evaluative enterprise. Our main disagreement concerns the respective value of these two types of approach, and it hinges, in large part, upon discrepant views of what I term *critical description*.

Schilbrack regards my critically descriptive approach as being encompassed by the evaluative approach that he prefers. Hence he conceives of his approach as involving critical description *plus* evaluation. It follows from this that my approach is perceived as lacking a dimension or missing a step (or a "move") that his approach incorporates. I, however, see it differently. Mine is not merely a version of Schilbrack's approach with the evaluative task omitted; rather, the two approaches have importantly different emphases and contrasting understandings of what description can achieve. As I bring out in my discussion of his work in my book, Schilbrack assumes that describing a religious practice involves implicitly

accepting the correctness of the participants' perspective and that evaluation is necessary for going beyond this acceptance (see Schilbrack 2014, 186; Burley 2020, 53). Overlooked in Schilbrack's account are the diversity of forms that descriptions can take and the diversity of purposes they can serve.

Rather than making broad-brushed pronouncements about what description consists in—as though "describing" identified only one type of activity—my strategy in the book is to illustrate a variety of objectives that description can fulfil. Some of these are summarized in Schilbrack's introduction to this roundtable. To reiterate just one example, in describing the many ways in which "compassion" and similar concepts have been understood across Buddhist traditions, I draw attention to the multifarious forms of behavior that have been enjoined, narrated, and justified as expressions of compassion. My point in doing so is not to criticize the Buddhist traditions themselves, as somehow inconsistent or vague or ignorant of the "true" meaning of compassion. Rather, I am highlighting the superficiality of philosophical theories that declare compassion to be the "heart" or "essence" of Buddhism (or of religion more generally) in the absence of any rigorous examination of what compassion means—of its multiple ways of manifesting—in the traditions at issue. My descriptive approach, which in this instance involves not thick description but what Wittgenstein terms "assembling reminders for a particular purpose" (1958, §127), is thus designed to promote a more nuanced appreciation of what "compassion" (or comparable terms in other languages) can mean. Evaluation is not absent here, but the targets are the oversimplifying proclamations of certain philosophers and other theorists rather than Buddhist practitioners or Buddhist traditions. Of course, these categories are not mutually exclusive: Buddhists can be theorists, and some of them may be inclined to make sweeping statements about the heart or essence of Buddhism—or about religion as a whole. I am not trying to place a protective fence around the religious phenomena and groups under

investigation. The important point is the methodological one—that my procedure is descriptive and yet fulfils a critical function. And hence my objection to Schilbrack is that his "two-task model" underestimates the critical potential of description by portraying it as merely a preliminary exercise that sets the scene for the "distinctive [evaluative] contribution of philosophy of religion" to be made (Schilbrack 2014, 25).

Schilbrack is right to observe that there is no way of recommending an approach to the study of religion without thereby making—implicitly or explicitly—evaluative claims. This is as true of my approach as of any other. What my approach values is, as I say, doing "conceptual justice to the radically plural character of religious phenomena" (2020, 2). There is, however, no paradox involved. Those who do not share this value are free to do philosophy of religion differently. But I will not desist from pointing out how a critically descriptive approach effectively facilitates the recognition of plurality, which tends to be obscured by philosophical approaches that devote too little attention to particularities because they are in a hurry to find support for some overarching theory. Schilbrack suggests that I flirt with the view that religious beliefs belong to "a *sui generis* category" of their own. But this would be just another overgeneralizing theory. What is needed instead is attentiveness to particular cases: there are likely to be some religious beliefs, in some contexts, that have little or nothing in common with nonreligious beliefs but also many instances in which this is not so. There is in many quarters of philosophy, including the philosophy of religion, an impatience—a "craving for generality" (Wittgenstein 1969, 17–18)—that fructifies as theories that overreach their limits. A radical pluralist approach offers alternative options.

EXTENDING THE PLURALIST VENTURE: A REPLY TO PANCHUK

I agree with Michelle Panchuk that, in a radical pluralist philosophy of religion, there are always more voices to be listened to and that the researcher should actively seek out voices

that have been under-represented in the literature. I concur, for example, that reading Wole Soyinka's *Death and the King's Horseman* "alongside the voices of women and other marginalized individuals within Yoruba culture" would, as Panchuk suggests, be a profitable means of extending a pluralistic examination of Yorùbá worldviews. My argument in relation to Soyinka's play was that it illustrates how a dramatic work can exhibit a plurality of perspectives without necessarily privileging any one perspective as superior to the others. In this respect, such a work is at least analogous to the contemplative task of the radical pluralist approach that I pursue. I take Panchuk's point in relation to the play to be that a philosopher of religion, engaging with such a work, should look to see whether certain perspectives have been disregarded or suppressed. That strikes me as a point well made. I am in favor of listening out for voices that offer alternative narratives to those that might otherwise be accepted too uncritically.

Panchuk's own examples, including work by Theresa Tobin and Dawne Moon and by Sungmoon Kim, illustrate the point well. This is why I would be wary, in my philosophical work, of nailing my colors too hastily to any specific epistemological "standpoint." As Panchuk recognizes, certain culturally specific feminist positions can appear overly narrow when confronted by observations from different cultural vantage points, such as that afforded by Kim (2014). Provided one's "standpoint" is admitted to be provisional and defeasible, little harm will be done. But when I am told that my "vision is not radical enough" (Panchuk; see also Ogunnaike) because I have failed to embrace some particular standpoint, it sounds as though my interlocutor has already decided which standpoint is definitive and inerrant.

Panchuk underscores two main points on which she considers there to be disagreement between us. Again, these points need to be treated carefully. One apparent disagreement concerns the degree to which it can be helpful for the researcher to adopt, or strive to adopt, a disinterested attitude towards the subject matter of the inquiry. Panchuk maintains that I am

"wrong to encourage detached engagement" because such an approach risks obscuring or inhibiting the responses of one's "whole self" and it is precisely these responses that may facilitate deeper appreciation of the ways of life under investigation. My view on this is that observing one's own moral and affective reactions—whether to ethnographic, literary, or real-life encounters—can, in certain instances, enhance the inquiry. But we need to differentiate between cases in which one's reactions are likely to be illuminating and cases in which they are not. An instance from my book in which I consider affective reactions to be important is that of studying the place of divine possession and animal sacrifice in certain religious festivals. In chapter 6, I describe in some detail the visceral impact of the sustained drumming, the serial decapitations of goats and pigeons, and the drinking of blood by "divinely possessed" ritual participants in the context of a festival in Assam. The description is pertinent because acknowledging the mood and emotions engendered—both in me and in others—by the ritual activities is part of what coming to "more fully appreciate" the form of life at issue requires. But observing and doing descriptive justice to these reactions demands a degree of *moral* detachment, lest one's moral proclivities distort the description. Panchuk's characterization of my approach in terms of "detached engagement" captures what I am aiming for, at least in this case. But there is no simple formula for this; judgment must be deployed in deciding how best to describe each situation.

What Panchuk means by bringing one's "whole self to the table" evidently involves more than attentiveness to one's own moral and affective reactions to literary depictions or other encounters with diverse forms of life. She suggests that one ought also to allow oneself to be transformed, "epistemically and personally," by the phenomena one experiences. And this relates to the second apparent disagreement between us. Panchuk affirms that philosophers of religion have "epistemic and moral reasons" for seeking out the voices of those who, because of their own socially disadvantaged position, have "a privileged perspective" on particular

religious ways of life. By this, I presume Panchuk means that the philosophers of religion themselves would benefit from being transformed epistemically and morally by heeding these voices. I have no objection in principle to philosophers opening themselves up to these modes of transformation. I should add, however, that there are many ways of being epistemically and morally transformed, not all of which will involve coming to espouse the epistemic and moral views expressed by the voices one hears. Learning more about a given outlook on the world is just as likely to reveal that it is not an outlook that one can share as it is to inspire one's empathetic acceptance. This is why detachment—detached engagement—is called for if one wishes to prevent one's own religious and moral preferences from restricting the range of perspectives one investigates. One can perfectly well study animal sacrifice or mortuary cannibalism, for example, without thereby becoming more sympathetic towards these practices, still less becoming a practitioner of them oneself. And yet it would be difficult to study them, and the forms of life into which they are integrated, without one's appreciation of cultural and religious diversity—of human possibilities—being enlarged. That is a kind of transformation that I have experienced and which I hope will rub off on my readers.

WELCOMING MORE SEATS AT THE TABLE: A REPLY TO OGUNNAIKE

I share with Oludamini Ogunnaike a desire to see more seats filled around the table of the philosophy of religion as well as more items for discussion on the table (or under the tree). And unlike in the case of a meal, those who are at one time on the table may at other times take a seat around it. Edited collections—and, indeed, roundtables such as this one—are appropriate places to showcase a plurality of methods. It is less easy to see how it might be done successfully in a single-authored monograph without compromising the coherence and integrity of the work. I do have a particular philosophical approach and I seek to defend its merits, both in the book and here, but not to the exclusion of other approaches. It is

disconcerting to hear that Ogunnaike finds in my work a danger of reinforcing "narrow biases and colonial dynamics," despite my efforts to counter them. Developing a philosophical method is an ongoing task and Ogunnaike's animadversions are a productive provocation.

Ogunnaike's questioning of the distinction between the religious and cultural phenomena (or forms of life) being studied, on the one hand, and the theories in which generalizations are made about those phenomena, on the other, is well taken. The distinction is indeed not sharp, but there remains a rough distinction nonetheless. Part of my concern with the theories of religious pluralism that I criticize is precisely the way in which they encourage inattentiveness to the details of particular cases. In connection with Hick's would-be "pluralistic hypothesis" in particular, I am also troubled by the binary demarcation that it sets up between "great" traditions and small-scale indigenous ones, with the latter being perfunctorily excluded from the main inquiry. Challenging such demarcations raises many questions in its wake. As Sikka has observed, these questions include the one that haunts any inquiry into religion, namely that of what is and what is not "religious" in any case. My book implicitly opens up that question but does not attempt to pin down the concept of religion by dint of philosophical stipulation.

Borrowing the term that I utilize from Bakhtin, Ogunnaike deems my pluralistic approach "grotesque" because he views it as analogous to an act of consumption—an attempt to nourish and revitalize the philosophy of religion by devouring rather than "engaging with" the philosophies of indigenous peoples. This was certainly not my intention, and I invite readers of my book to determine for themselves whether this is what I have inadvertently done. Beyond the phrase that Ogunnaike quotes, my remark about bringing indigenous religions "within the purview of philosophy of religion" continues as follows: "as opposed to ignoring or marginalizing them as has habitually been done in much philosophy of religion hitherto. But philosophizing is never an easy matter" (2020, 188). I do not perceive this to be

an imperialistic venture on my part. Nor were my descriptions of the perspectives of Vine Deloria Jr. or Wole Soyinka intended to be dismissive: they were meant to acknowledge how those perspectives diverge—or, in the case of Soyinka's play, probably or possibly diverge—from the "contemplative" philosophical approach that I am pursuing.

While recognizing that my "method works," Ogunnaike would like me to take a firmer stand on certain ethical issues. He is right to question whether conceptual justice can "really be separated from ethical justice." The relationship between the two is complicated. When D. Z. Phillips proposes that "one's own values may get in the way of the moral demands of philosophical enquiry" (2007, 208; quoted in Burley 2020, 75), he is emphasizing the fact that the very aspiration to avoid imposing one's values upon the phenomena being studied has an ethical dimension. Hence there is a sense in which doing—or trying to do—conceptual justice is itself an ethical task. I do not deny this and I do not myself talk of leaving "everything as it is" (Wittgenstein 1958, §124). Clearly, philosophy (including my descriptive and pluralist approach) does not leave things as they are, for understanding the world differently is a way of changing the world as well as oneself. Interpersonal exchange—including, where appropriate, robust argument—is central to philosophical discovery. There is always more to be said and the contributors to this roundtable have given me both encouragement and much food for thought. I am deeply grateful for that.

REFERENCES

Burley, Mikel. 2020. *A Radical Pluralist Philosophy of Religion: Cross-Cultural, Multireligious, Interdisciplinary*. London: Bloomsbury.

Cavell, Stanley. 2015. *Must We Mean What We Say? A Book of Essays*, updated ed. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Hick, John. 2004. *An Interpretation of Religion: Human Responses to the Transcendent*, 2nd ed. Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave Macmillan.

Kim, Sungmoon. 2014. "The Way to Become a Female Sage: Im Yunjidang's Confucian Feminism." *Journal of the History of Ideas* 75 (3): 395–416.

Phillips, D. Z. 2001. *Religion and the Hermeneutics of Contemplation*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Phillips, D. Z. 2007. "Philosophy's Radical Pluralism in the House of Intellect—A Reply to Henk Vroom." In *D. Z. Phillips' Contemplative Philosophy of Religion: Questions and Responses*, edited by Andy F. Sanders, 197–211. Aldershot, UK: Ashgate.

Schilbrack, Kevin. 2014. *Philosophy and the Study of Religions: A Manifesto*. Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell.

Wittgenstein, Ludwig. 1958. *Philosophical Investigations*, translated by G. E. M. Anscombe, 2nd ed. Oxford: Blackwell.

Wittgenstein, Ludwig. 1969. *The Blue and Brown Books*, 2nd ed. Oxford: Blackwell.