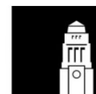

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Prioritizing practice in the study of religion: normative and descriptive orientations

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ABSTRACT

Calls to prioritize practice in the study of religion typically claim that attention to lived practices rather than merely to 'belief' is needed if a given religious tradition or instance of religiosity is to be understood. Within that broad ambit, certain empirical researchers, as well as some Wittgenstein-influenced philosophers of religion, investigate the diversity of religious practices without passing judgement, whereas certain other philosophers foreground a narrower selection of examples while deploying moral criteria to distinguish acceptable from unacceptable religion. Characterizing this methodological divergence in terms of descriptive versus normative orientations, the present article argues that while attention to practice is indeed vital, the imposition of normative evaluation is liable to inhibit an appreciation of the radical plurality of religious phenomena.

KEYWORDS

practice; praxis; lived religion; John Cottingham; Pierre Hadot; humane philosophy of religion

Though it is surely the case that no single key unlocks the door to lived religion, one term—"practice"—does have particular importance. (David D. Hall)[1]

[A]ny true understanding of the place of religion in human life [has] to acknowledge what might be called the primacy of praxis … (John Cottingham)[2]

Introduction

Affirmations of the primacy of practice (or praxis) have a vital place in the contemporary study of religion, yet what such affirmations amount to varies enormously. At the most basic level they affirm the need for attention to embodied activities, as opposed to an exclusive fixation on 'beliefs' abstracted from their lived contexts, if religious forms of life are to be well comprehended. Beyond this basic level, however, divergences emerge. Certain philosophers of religion, inspired in part by the work of Pierre Hadot, have emphasized the centrality of particular practices—'spiritual exercises'—both in early western philosophy and in various religions, with Christianity being a paradigm case. These philosophers of religion have not merely proposed, as a descriptive claim, that practice takes priority over theory in matters of religion, but have contended that the conception of philosophy as an activity of spiritual improvement ought to be revived. In this spirit some maintain that philosophy of religion should be reformulated as 'religious philosophy'—a confessional endeavour that reflects on religion from an explicit faith perspective.[3] Others have been less forthright and polemical, arguing merely that there are aspects of religion that can best be understood, or perhaps only be understood, 'in an involved and experiential way'—by entering into the form of religious life in question.[4] Even from this ostensibly more moderate perspective, however, disinterested contemplation of religion is viewed as insufficient: a deep understanding comes, allegedly, only from committed participation. But not any religious path will do: in

establishing which path to pursue, it is claimed, one must consult one's moral 'intuitions' and ensure that the path displays 'some discernible link with goodness'.[5] There is thus a decidedly normative, evaluative, dimension to this approach: religious practices are deemed better or worse—more or less 'spiritual'—by reference to moral criteria.

Meanwhile, in other disciplines involved in the study of religion, such as the history, sociology and anthropology of religion, the turn towards practice has taken a different form. Here, although engaging in religious activities as a participant observer is often integral to the methodology, one is not expected to determine which practices to observe by examining one's moral intuitions. Rather, in these social and historical disciplines, but also in certain strands of philosophy influenced by Wittgenstein, the emphasis is on developing an increasingly nuanced understanding of a wide variety of religious phenomena by carefully observing what goes on in the lives of practitioners. By attending to the 'densely textured level of everyday practice',[6] the researcher aims to elucidate 'what it means to be "religious"' in ways that are alert to the interconnections between religion and 'the other practices of everyday life',[7] but without any expectation of appropriating the religious activities or values for oneself or advocating them to anyone else.

My principal purpose in this article is to elaborate the distinction I have just briefly sketched between, broadly speaking, normative and descriptive orientations to the prioritizing of practice in the study of religion. While it would be unrealistic to suppose that normative and descriptive vocabularies can be sharply demarcated, it nevertheless remains important not to conflate the two orientations I have identified; to do so would risk misunderstanding not only the orientations themselves but also much about contemporary religion. I shall argue that the tendency of the normative approach, especially as typified in John Cottingham's 'humane' or 'humanistic' model of philosophy, to portray itself as primarily an exercise in understanding religion has potentially distorting implications, since the approach is operating

with a particular set of normative assumptions about what religion ought to be. Those assumptions generate an unduly sanitized picture of religion that foregrounds examples of religious life of which it morally approves while downplaying or ignoring modes of religiosity that do not conform to its normative ideal.

Part of my argument will involve analysing a different criticism of the normative approach from the one for which I am principally arguing. That other criticism accuses both Hadot and Cottingham of detaching the spiritual practices of which they approve from their original religious or philosophical contexts and thereby depriving the practices of the very meaning and efficacy they would have had for the practitioners who devised them. While concurring that neither Hadot nor Cottingham has done enough to show how the practices at issue can be transposed into novel modern-day conceptual environments, I am doubtful whether the criticism usefully targets what is most problematic about Cottingham's position in particular, namely the propensity to privilege only those varieties and facets of religion that conform to his own moral predilections. If a less one-sided account of religious possibilities is desired, then it is to more disinterested modes of inquiry, with their deliberately descriptive orientation, that we must look.

Normative visions of praxis in the philosophy of religion

The phrases 'primacy of praxis' and 'priority of practice' have been conspicuous in work by John Cottingham since 2003.[8] Although he has a penchant for 'praxis', with its Greek pedigree, Cottingham uses the terms 'praxis' and 'practice' interchangeably to denote the aspect both of religious and of philosophical life that complements, but is distinguishable from, theory, doctrine or belief. There is, Cottingham acknowledges, an ambiguity in 'the notion of the primacy, or priority, of praxis'.[9] The phrase might, for instance, denote mere 'causal or temporal priority', indicating that for most religious practitioners induction into the

practical observances of the religion precedes rational appraisal of its doctrines. What Cottingham wishes to propose, however, is the stronger thesis that, more than being merely chronologically prior to intellectual evaluation, practical participation in religious life is what typically gives rise to religious understanding.[10] Causing concern for Cottingham is what he perceives as a cognitive bias in the philosophical study of religion and moreover within contemporary philosophy more generally. It is a bias that exaggerates the role of theorizing in human life and fails to do justice to the practical life-transformative impulse that lies behind not only religion but also philosophy, at least as it was conceived in the ancient and Hellenistic periods of European cultural history.

A source of inspiration, both for Cottingham and for others who share his dissatisfaction with the direction in which philosophy has gone in the modern era, is the work of Pierre Hadot (1922–2010), who sought to revive interest in the conception of philosophy as 'a way of life' as opposed to a merely academic pursuit.[11] Hadot draws attention to the centrality in the formation of the discipline of philosophy of the performance of 'spiritual exercises' designed to progressively educate the philosophical practitioner in the 'art of living'.[12] Far from being preoccupied with abstract theorizing or textual exegesis, certain Greek and Roman philosophical schools, such as the Stoics, held the purpose of philosophy to be the transformation of a person's life from a state of inauthenticity, blighted by ignorance and anxiety, to one of authentic self-knowledge in which one sees the world aright and enjoys a sense of equanimity and freedom.

Cottingham picks up from Hadot the notion of spiritual exercises, which Hadot connects with the term askesis as it was understood in early Hellenistic Greek philosophy. There it means not 'asceticism' in the sense of some extreme form of abstinence, but rather 'inner activities of the thought and the will.'[13] Despite their being 'inner', these activities were designed to elicit experiential and behavioural effects, involving a gradual movement from

egocentric modes of living to the cultivation of higher values embodied in 'virtue, contemplation, a simple life-style, and the simple happiness of existing.'[14] Citing both Hadot and Blaise Pascal with approval, Cottingham underscores the view that 'the goal of beneficial internal transformation … is the aim of any sound system of spiritual praxis',[15] thereby disclosing a certain normative assumption at work in his own analysis of the philosophical or religious life: for a system of spiritual praxis to be 'sound', the transformations that it fosters must be 'beneficial', where 'beneficial' implies promoting particular values and patterns of living.

The inquiry that Cottingham undertakes into the 'spiritual dimension' of religious and philosophical life is thus intended to do more than merely bring to light a range of practices in which one might engage. He also wishes to address the question of which practices ought to be pursued. To this end, Cottingham advises that we turn to 'our intuitions' in order 'to assess the moral credentials of the systems of praxis on offer (and indeed the moral credibility of those who offer them), as well as the moral fruits of those systems.'[16] If a religion is to be acceptable, Cottingham maintains, it must, among other things, 'respect our human dignity' and foster such qualities as 'self-awareness, self-purification and moral growth';[17] any 'form of spirituality would have to be rejected if it involved unjust or abusive power structures'.[18]

Cottingham's own intuitions evidently chime harmoniously with certain injunctions of Christian ethics, the Christian tradition being the one with which he has the deepest affinity. We must be willing, he proposes, to reach out to other people 'in trust … if we are to continue growing towards the knowledge and love that are the most precious of human goods', by which Cottingham means to reiterate that there is no pre-cultural, purely intellectual standpoint from which we can choose the right moral and spiritual path to take, for we are, from the outset, 'immersed in a community'.[19] What Cottingham does not draw

attention to are alternative conceptions of the study of religion according to which one of the principal benefits of such study, as well as of the investigation of cultures more generally, is the light it sheds on the multifariousness of human systems of value and ways of sense-making. These alternative conceptions approach religions not with a view to measuring their worth against the barometer of one's own (implicitly Christian) moral intuitions, but rather in order to describe the enormously variegated nature of religious forms of life. It is to such descriptive approaches that I now turn.

Descriptive orientations to the study of religious practices

In a variety of disciplines or fields of inquiry involved in the study of religion—most notably religious studies and the history, sociology and anthropology of religion—an emphasis on the priority of practice has come to be associated with the notion of 'lived religion' or 'living religion', which terms are largely interchangeable in contemporary academic discourse. The term la religion vécue has been in use among French historians and sociologists of religion since the mid-twentieth century,[20] though it was principally in the 1990s that its English equivalent, 'lived religion', gained currency among Anglophone scholars of religion. The term 'living religion', meanwhile, has long had the sense of a religion that is currently practised, as opposed to a 'past religion' or 'dead religion' that no longer has any adherents.[21] More recently, however, it has acquired the same sense as 'lived religion', denoting how religion is actually 'performed in everyday lives' as contrasted with how it has commonly been 'reported' in textbooks or 'represented' by official organs of the traditions themselves.[22]

Describing the term 'lived religion' as 'an awkward neologism', Robert Orsi remarks that he nevertheless likes its resonance with the similar term 'lived experience' as used by existentialist philosophers such as Jean-Paul Sartre (and, we might add, Simone de Beauvoir).[23] 'Lived religion' prompts us to notice, Orsi observes, that it is in the ordinary

environments of homes, workplaces and streets, as much as in designated places of worship, that events of meaning-making, including religious meaning-making, occur. '"Religion" is best approached', he writes, by engaging with people in these everyday scenarios, 'in all the spaces of their experience.'[24]

By focusing on the lived experience and everyday activities of ordinary religious practitioners, as distinct from the self-representations of the tradition by official spokespersons and doctrinal authorities, scholars and students of lived religion are able to highlight the complexity of religiosity as it is 'embedded' in and ramified through the 'life-worlds' of individuals and communities.[25] When religion is studied in these contexts, a descriptive vocabulary is required that calls attention to the fluidity, vibrancy and porosity of the phenomena at issue. Orsi speaks of a 'hermeneutics of hybridity' that utilizes metaphors of lability and ambivalence to capture the ways in which lived religion subverts the rigid analytical dichotomies typical of much religious studies—dichotomies such as 'sacred' versus 'profane', 'religious' versus 'secular' and between membership of one religion and another: 'the central methodological commitment' of the turn towards lived religion 'is to avoid conclusions that impose univocality on practices that are multifarious.'[26]

Among those to whom these reconceptualizations of what it means to be a religious practitioner will come as no surprise are philosophers of religion sympathetic to the thought of Wittgenstein, whose later philosophy not only has a close affinity with these innovations but has in some instances influenced them via the work of philosophically minded social theorists and anthropologists.[27] Wittgenstein's notion of 'family resemblance concepts', for example, aids us in relinquishing the assumption that everything legitimately designated 'religious' must have some essential property or properties in common;[28] and his term 'language-games' explicitly accentuates the extent to which the application of words and concepts is integrated into particular activities or forms of life:[29] 'Practice gives the words

their sense.'[30] When these ideas are brought into play, along with the Wittgensteinian injunction to 'look and see' the particularities of the phenomena under investigation rather than being driven by a 'craving for generality',[31] then opportunities are created for philosophers as well as others engaged in the study of religion to avoid precisely the imposition of univocality upon a multifarious range of phenomena that Orsi warns us against.

Developing Wittgenstein's ideas specifically in relation to religion, D. Z. Phillips emphasizes the interconnectedness between religion and 'other modes of social life', its being these very connections that enable religion to 'have the importance it has' for the people who participate in it.[32] Although both Wittgenstein and Phillips were keen to maintain a clear distinction between empirical methods of inquiry on the one hand and their own conceptual or 'grammatical' philosophical methods on the other, Wittgensteinian ways of thinking have filtered into the work of many researchers in the empirical study of religion.[33] What empirical research in general and ethnography in particular help us to see is how the interconnections to which Phillips refers manifest in the intricacies of people's lives, thereby affording a richer picture of the phenomena than is available in the relatively austere environment of philosophers' thought experiments.

A further commonality between Wittgensteinian philosophy of religion and many empirical studies of lived religion is a willingness to acknowledge the radical plurality and moral ambivalence exhibited in religious aspects of life. Phillips differentiates his own conception of 'radical pluralism' from what he terms the 'theological pluralism' advocated by others, such as John Hick.[34] The project of theological pluralism is largely a homogenizing one, striving to promote irenic reconciliation between major religious traditions by selectively identifying certain features, especially moral teachings, which constitute a common core that can then be deployed as a criterion for any religion's genuineness or authenticity.[35] Radical pluralism, by contrast, seeks to recognize the heterogeneity of religious phenomena,

including those aspects that, from the perspective of the researcher herself, are liable to appear morally troubling or even repellent. Rather than applying a moral criterion in order to place in question the religious authenticity of such aspects, the radical pluralist prioritizes description and elucidation over evaluation and authentication. We see a similarly heterogenizing sensibility at work in the writings of historians and sociologists of lived religion such as Robert Orsi and Meredith McGuire respectively. As Orsi points out, lived religion has as much to do with 'dissent, subversion, and resistance' to the norms of traditional religious authorities as it does with 'harmony, consensus, and social legitimation.'[36] To assume that religion is exclusively or even primarily a force for moral edification and the promotion of human wellbeing would be to allow rose-tinted spectacles to becloud one's perception of the phenomena.

McGuire cautions against erecting 'implicit boundaries that exclude from our purview the religious and spiritual practices we personally find repulsive'—practices that, for example, 'literally, as well as figuratively, embody violence and aggression.'[37] If our understanding of religion is not to be distorted by what Wittgenstein would call 'a one-sided diet' of examples, then morally censorious attitudes should not be allowed to obscure what McGuire (albeit with some reservations) terms the 'darker elements' of 'ordinary people's religious lives.'[38] Typifying this attentiveness to the darker dimensions of lived religion is McGuire's treatment of a Ku Klux Klan initiation ritual, which she describes in terms of the physicality of the group marching, the impressive symbolism of the flaming cross and the experiential significance of taking on a new identity as a member of the Klan.[39] Recognizing the potent aura of mystery exuded by such rituals need have nothing to do with morally approving of the values held by those who enact them. By the same token, when Phillips invites us to see rites of human sacrifice as expressions of a sense of awe and wonder at the terrifying aspects of life, he is prompting us to notice a religious possibility, not condoning acts of killing.[40]

Admittedly, by coming to see the religious sense that a ritual might have, one is apt to be less quick to dismiss it as an aberration. Indeed, one might even make connections with other manifestations of religion in such a way that much more than human sacrifice comes to be viewed as resonant 'with something in us that is "deep and sinister".'[41] But this, again, is likely to constitute an enrichment of our appreciation of the multifaceted nature of religious phenomena, steering us away from simplistic conceptions and contributing towards an understanding of human life 'in all its variety', including those elements 'of which the enquirer will not approve morally or religiously'.[42]

From the standpoint of the normative approach to the study of religious practice that I summarized above, there is a sense in which these descriptive approaches go too far and another sense in which they do not go far enough. They will be perceived as going too far in that they allow too much to fall within their scope: by adopting an open-ended and flexible conception of religion, they permit ostensibly harmful and destructive practices—practices that may involve both psychological and physical violence—as well as 'beneficial' ones to be counted among the modalities of human religious life. At the same time, they will be perceived as not going far enough inasmuch as they decline to move from description to advocacy or condemnation. While it would be naïve to assume that a precise and stable boundary obtains between descriptive and normative vocabularies in this area, there can nevertheless be distinct methodological orientations. What I have been highlighting are the differences between, on the one hand, a methodology oriented towards defending religion as a means of moral elevation and epistemic insight, and on the other hand methodologies that analyse religion in all its roughness and moral complexity.

Provided we are clear about the differences between these two orientations, we may be inclined to regard each as having a legitimate place in the contemporary study of religion. What I wish to argue, however, is that insofar as purveyors of the normative approach claim

also to be offering an accurate description of religion, they are in danger of misleading their readers, as what their apologetic motivations spur them to construct is really a picture of religion that, because it is based on highly selective and sanitized examples, is also severely one-sided. In beginning to formulate this argument it will be helpful to relate it to other critical responses to the work of Hadot and Cottingham.

Maria Antonaccio's critical intervention

Criticisms of the approach taken to spiritual exercises by both Hadot and Cottingham have been advanced in recent publications by Maria Antonaccio.[43] Central among these criticisms is the contention that Hadot and Cottingham mistakenly assume that the exercises in question can be appropriated from their original doctrinal and theoretical contexts and incorporated into modern-day forms of life without significant dilution or reconfiguration. We see this assumption displayed in Hadot's work when he states, for instance, that in his view 'the spiritual exercises of antiquity' can be detached 'from the philosophical or mythic discourse which came along with them.' After all, he proposes, these forms of discourse are 'nothing but clumsy attempts, coming after the fact, to describe and justify inner experiences whose existential density is not, in the last analysis, susceptible to any attempt at theorization or systematization.'[44] Thus, for Hadot, the primacy of practice does not amount to the claim that it is by looking to the practices that we come to see the meaning that particular doctrines and beliefs have in the practitioners' lives; it amounts rather to the view that practices, being logically prior to their traditional conceptual or cognitive accompaniments, are in fact dissociable from those accompaniments: they can be imported into ostensibly alien conceptual environments for the purpose of enhancing our own spiritual lives.

In the light of assertions such as these, Antonaccio characterizes Hadot's stance as a form of 'noncognitivism', according to which 'practices are prior to or separable from their

philosophical or theoretical justification.'[45] Citing similar objections raised by John Haldane,[46] Antonaccio accuses Hadot of replicating precisely the error that Hadot himself attributes to Michel Foucault, namely that of supposing that the worldviews or visions of the cosmos associated with the spiritual practices of antiquity are not in fact essential to the transformative potential of those practices. As Hadot puts it in responding to Foucault, 'the feeling of belonging to a whole is an essential element: belonging, that is, both to the whole constituted by the human community, and to that constituted by the cosmic whole.'[47] This conception of a unified whole to which the self belongs is the metaphysical vision without which the practices associated with it would be evacuated of efficacy. At any rate, that appears to be Hadot's position when engaging with Foucault; and yet, as we have seen, he elsewhere departs from it dramatically when championing the transposition of traditional spiritual exercises into the modern era. Concurring with Hadot's critique of Foucault, Antonaccio targets the very same criticism both at Hadot himself and, by extension, at Cottingham, who, she maintains, uncritically inherits the assumption that the spiritual exercises of former ages can be unproblematically revived and implemented in modern contexts whose conceptual frameworks, even if still in some ways religiously imbued, bear only a distant resemblance to those of the practices' origins.

Antonaccio's critique is well taken insofar as it emphasizes the need on any researcher's part to attend to the historical, cultural and conceptual situatedness of particular practices if one is to understand the practices' meanings and efficacy. It is, however, questionable whether Antonaccio is being fair to Cottingham by tying his viewpoint so closely to that of Hadot. Notwithstanding his favourable citations of Hadot's work[48] and his endorsements of the idea that philosophy should be a vehicle for self-improvement rather than for mere intellectual gymnastics, Cottingham does not obviously share Hadot's assumption concerning the feasibility of dislocating traditional spiritual exercises from the conceptual milieus in

which they developed. Instead, Cottingham's principal emphasis is on the need for philosophers of religion to recognize, in their analyses of religious systems, precisely the inseparability of ideas, theories and ethical values from the practices through which they are behaviourally materialized. As Cottingham puts it (albeit in a book that was published subsequent to Antonaccio's criticisms):

> The central idea here is that the religious outlook is by no means simply a matter of intellectual assent, nor even of moral orientation, but is something that is to be enacted and embodied in an intimate intermingling of belief and praxis that is in principle capable of infusing the entire tenor of a lived human life.[49]

Thus, however pertinent Antonaccio's criticism may be in relation to Hadot's position, if Cottingham's work is to be faulted it is not on the grounds that he borrows from Hadot an implausibly dichotomized model of the relation between the practical and theoretical dimensions of a spiritually or philosophically directed life. Rather, as I shall argue in the next section, the problem is the imposition of a constraining normative agenda upon what is ostensibly presented as an inquiry into religion in general.

A one-sided diet?

My principal objection to the normative orientation to the prioritizing of practice in recent philosophy of religion is not merely that it does bring a normative agenda to the study of religion, but that this agenda generates a distorted picture of the variety of forms that religion takes both in the modern period and at other times. What readers are offered is, in effect, a one-sided conception of religion dressed up as something more broad-ranging.

As others have noted, Cottingham is among those philosophers who slide between speaking of a 'religious' outlook or perspective on the one hand and 'theism' on the other,[50] and who, when speaking of 'theism', have primarily Christianity in mind. Thus, for example, when 'looking for attitudes that are distinctive of a religious outlook, it makes sense', Cottingham remarks, 'to start with the classic Christian virtue of humility.'[51] Of course, there is no reason why one should not begin one's analysis with this virtue, but the fact that it is the specifically Christian version of a virtue that comes most readily to Cottingham's mind when considering attitudes 'distinctive of a religious outlook' (my emphasis) is symptomatic of the normative assumptions with which he is operating.[52]

Similarly symptomatic is a distinction that runs through Cottingham's thinking on 'spirituality' between what he regards as a 'popular' use and a 'richer' use of this term. The former, which Cottingham sometimes equates with 'new age spirituality', 'tends to be invoked by those purveying a heterogeneous range of products and services, from magic crystals, scented candles and astrology, to alternative medicine, tai chi, and meditation courses.'[53] Cottingham evidently has little time or respect for these relatively commodified forms of modern spirituality, even if some of them have roots that extend back even further than Christianity. Meanwhile, 'at the richer end of the spectrum, we find the term used in connection with activities and attitudes which command widespread appeal, irrespective of metaphysical commitment or doctrinal allegiance.'[54] In this category Cottingham places 'activities which aim to fill the creative and meditative space left over when science and technology have satisfied our material needs.'[55] Despite implying here that this 'spiritual dimension' of life is available to nonreligious as well as religious people, when Cottingham reaches for examples it is, as in the case of 'humility' above, generally to 'theism' and implicitly to Christianity that his 'humane turn' leads him. It is to distinctively Christian imagery, such as that of the Trinity, that Cottingham has recourse when discussing

‘connections between religious, theological, and moral thought’ and the reciprocal responsiveness between self and other that, on Cottingham’s view, religion ought to promote.[56]

None of this would be problematic were it not for the fact that this ‘humane turn’ is recommended as a way forward for the understanding of religion tout court—‘a model that prioritizes understanding over verification.’[57] In reality, however, what it does is privilege a particular subsection of the category of religion that corresponds to a specific vision of what is good for human beings. Invoking particular culturally and historically inflected values, it presumes their universality by identifying them with ‘some of our deepest and most valuable human impulses’.[58] The project of this prioritizing of praxis is therefore a normative one that adduces a one-sided diet of examples in order to celebrate a specific spiritual vision. While professing to overcome the fixation of many analytic philosophers of religion upon doctrine and belief, it recapitulates those philosophers’ narrow focus on a pared-down ‘theism’, which wavers between acknowledging its implicitly Christian assumptions on the one hand and trying to present itself as a universal essence of religion on the other. This normative project is thus to be contrasted with descriptive orientations to practice that seek a broader and deeper comprehension of the diversity of forms that religiosity can take in human life, including those that diverge from the inquirer’s own moral and religious values.

Concluding remarks

It has not been my intention in this article merely to raise objections to recent work by John Cottingham in the philosophy of religion, but rather to cite Cottingham as an exemplar of how an attempt to expand the purview of philosophy of religion in one respect can remain unhelpfully constrained in other respects. Acknowledgements of the need for philosophers and other scholars of religion to devote attention to religion’s multiple dimensions—

including what Mark Wynn has dubbed ‘the embodied, action-orienting, perception-structuring, and affect-infused character of religious understanding’[59]—are undoubtedly to be welcomed. Both Cottingham and Wynn, and indeed others who have been inspired by ideas from Hadot, are at the forefront of fruitful developments in philosophy of religion that shift the focus away from worn-out arguments that presume questions concerning the truth or rationality of religious (normally ‘theistic’) beliefs can be settled in abstraction from consideration of the beliefs’ rootedness in lived practices. But embracing the turn towards practice while continuing, as Cottingham does, to try to dictate, in largely moral terms, what religions ‘must’ do if they are to qualify as being worthy of adherence is not going to facilitate an enriched comprehension of religion in all its messiness and multiplicity.

The sorts of approaches typified in the philosophy of religion by Cottingham, and in philosophy more generally by Hadot and his admirers, amount to modes of religious advocacy concerned with advancing particular ideals of the spiritual life, informed by first-hand experience of morally sanctioned practices. When viewed in this light, the ideals can themselves become objects of inquiry for more disinterested, descriptive and elucidatory approaches in the study of religion, including those that are overtly philosophical and others whose methodologies are primarily historical, anthropological or sociological. It is in these approaches that, as I have indicated in this article, we see an orientation that recognizes such qualities as the plurality, ambivalence, fluidity and hybridity exhibited in everyday religious practices. So too, then, is it these latter approaches that we should be seeking to pursue and to develop further if the study of religion, with philosophy of religion as an important strand, is to do conceptual justice to living religion in all its variety.

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Notes

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[1] Hall, "Introduction," xi.

[2] Cottingham, The Spiritual Dimension, 5.

[3] Smith, "Philosophy of Religion Takes Practice," 133 et passim; idem, Thinking in Tongues, ch. 5.

[4] Cottingham, Philosophy of Religion, 171.

[5] Cottingham, The Spiritual Dimension, 16, 152.

[6] Schmidt, "Practices of Exchange," 70.

[7] Orsi, "Everyday Miracles," 7, 6.

[8] See, for example, Cottingham, On the Meaning of Life, 96; The Spiritual Dimension, 5, 151, 153; Philosophy of Religion, 155.

[9] Cottingham, The Spiritual Dimension, 5.

[10] Ibid., 6.

[11] Aside from Cottingham, others who cite Hadot's work favourably include: Wynn, Emotional Experience and Religious Understanding, 134–138; Smith, "Philosophy of Religion Takes Practice," 138, Thinking in Tongues, 114; and the various contributors to Chase et al., Philosophy as a Way of Life.

[12] Hadot, Philosophy as a Way of Life, 82–83.

[13] Ibid., 128.

[14] Ibid., 104.

[15] Cottingham, The Spiritual Dimension, 8.

[16] Ibid., 16. See also idem, Philosophy of Religion, 154–155.

[17] Cottingham, The Spiritual Dimension, 151, 152.

[18] Ibid., 154.

[19] Ibid., 17.

[20] See Davie, "The Evolution of the Sociology of Religion," 67; Arnold, "Histories and Historiographies of Medieval Christianity," 30–31.

[21] Cf. Cheng, "Chinese Religions," 40; Platvoet, "To Define or Not to Define," 245.

[22] Gregg and Scholefield, Engaging with Living Religion, 7, 14.

[23] Orsi, "Everyday Miracles," 7. Cf. McBride, "Sartre and Lived Experience"; Holveck, Simone de *Beauvoir's Philosophy of Lived Experience*.

[24] Orsi, "Everyday Miracles," 7.

[25] Streib, Dinter and Söderblom, "Introduction," x. Cf. McGuire, Lived Religion, 12.

[26] Orsi, "Everyday Miracles," 11.

[27] See, for example, acknowledgements of Wittgenstein in Bourdieu, Outline of a Theory of Practice, 29–30; Needham, Belief, Language, and Experience; Geertz, Available Light, xi–xiii; and Das, Life and Words.

[28] For discussion of 'family resemblance' in relation to the concept of religion, see Saler, Conceptualizing Religion, ch. 5.

[29] Wittgenstein, Philosophical Investigation, §23.

[30] Wittgenstein, Culture and Value, 97e.

[31] See Wittgenstein, Philosophical Investigation, §66; The Blue and Brown Books, 17–18.

[32] Phillips, "Religious Beliefs and Language-Games," 37.

[33] For discussion and further references, see Burley, "'Being Near Enough to Listen'."

[34] See Phillips, "Philosophy's Radical Pluralism in the House of Intellect," 204–205.

[35] See Hick, An Interpretation of Religion, esp. ch. 18, "The Ethical Criterion."

[36] Orsi, "Everyday Miracles," 15.

[37] McGuire, Lived Religion, 116.

[38] Ibid., 117. For McGuire's reservations, see ibid., 237 n. 65. For the phrase 'one-sided diet', see Wittgenstein, Philosophical Investigations, §593.

[39] McGuire, Lived Religion, 117.

[40] See, for example, Phillips, "Philosophy's Radical Pluralism in the House of Intellect," 205.

[41] Here I am quoting John Churchill, "Something Deep and Sinister," 18, who is himself borrowing the phrase 'deep and sinister' from Wittgenstein, *Remarks on Frazer's 'Golden Bough'*, 16e. See also Kerr, Theology after Wittgenstein, 160–162.

[42] Phillips, Religion and Friendly Fire, 88.

[43] See Antonaccio, A Philosophy to Live By, esp. 127–128, and "Spirituality and the 'Humane Turn'."

[44] Hadot, Philosophy as a Way of Life, 212; cf. Antonaccio, A Philosophy to Live By, 135, and "Spirituality and the 'Humane Turn'," 51.

[45] Antonaccio, "Spirituality and the 'Humane Turn'," 52.

[46] Haldane, "On the Very Idea of Spiritual Values," esp. 68–69.

[47] Hadot, Philosophy as a Way of Life, 208; cf. Antonaccio, "Spirituality and the 'Humane Turn'," 53.

[48] Cottingham, On the Meaning of Life, 79; The Spiritual Dimension, 4–5, 7–8; Philosophy of Religion, 149–150.

[49] Cottingham, How to Believe, 66.

[50] This point is noted, for example, by Proudfoot, "Review of John Cottingham," 550. For instances of such sliding, see Cottingham, How to Believe, 61, 69, 70.

[51] Cottingham, Why Believe?, 152.

[52] Objections to Cottingham's approach similar to those I make in this paragraph are presented in Oppy, "Review of John Cottingham." I am grateful to an anonymous referee for this journal for bringing Oppy's review to my attention.

[53] Cottingham, The Spiritual Dimension, 3. For mention of 'new age spirituality', see idem, Philosophy of Religion, 154.

[54] Cottingham, The Spiritual Dimension, 3.

[55] Ibid.

[56] Ibid., 168–170.

[57] Cottingham, Philosophy of Religion, 171; Cottingham's italics.

[58] Cottingham, Why Believe?, 165.

[59] Wynn, Faith and Place, back cover.