"A Shuddering Awareness of Death and Life Together": Doing Justice to Ambivalence in the Philosophy of Religion[*]

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ABSTRACT

Ambivalence is a prominent feature of religious traditions, with respect both to the attitudes exhibited in the faith of many religious practitioners and to the qualities embodied in conceptions of the divine. Yet these ambivalences have received little scrutiny from philosophy of religion, especially in its analytic mode. Helping to address this lacuna, the present article comprises critical and constructive components. In a critical vein it challenges the tendencies of intellectualism and moralism that encourage an overemphasis on intellectual or cognitive dimensions of religion and a privileging of religious forms that accord with the investigator's moral predilections. Constructively, the article looks to Wittgenstein-inspired philosophy and to aspects of the anthropology and phenomenology of religion for conceptual resources to deploy in relation to ambivalent, awesome, or even terrifying conceptions of divinity. In aid of enlarging the scope of (Western, principally analytic) philosophy of religion beyond the confines of standard Christian-centric or "theistic" strictures, examples of ambivalent deities are drawn from Hindu sources, most notably the *Bhagavad Gītā* and Śākta (Goddess-revering) traditions. The guiding purpose of the article is to promote a radically pluralist approach that seeks to do conceptual justice to the variety of forms that religion takes without imposing an over-intellectualized or moralistic picture upon them.

"All is ambivalence, multivalence even." So wrote the poet R. S. Thomas in a letter to the philosopher D. Z. Phillips. Elaborating the point, Thomas continues: "The same natural background, which, from one standpoint has facilitated my belief in God, has from another raised enormous problems."[1] The theme of ambivalence is prominent in many religious

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[*] I am grateful to three anonymous reviewers for this journal whose incisive observations and constructive suggestions enabled me to improve the article.

[1] R. S. Thomas, quoted in D. Z. Phillips, *R. S. Thomas: Poet of the Hidden God* (Allison Park, PA: Pickwick, 1986), ix. For expatiation on the theme of ambivalence in Thomas's poetry, see Mikel Burley, "Reproaching the Divine: Poetic Theologies of Protest as a Resource for Expanding the Philosophy of Religion," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* (forthcoming).

traditions: not merely the coexistence in the believer of contrasting feelings or attitudes,[2] but the equivocalness or double-sidedness of life and of the world—and, importantly, the apparent ambivalence of the divine. In the Jewish and Christian traditions, this latter ambivalence is pithily encapsulated in Job's affirmation that "the LORD gave, and the LORD hath taken away; blessed be the name of the LORD."[3] We might read this affirmation as a laconic acknowledgment that everything comes ultimately from God, whether perceived by us as good or ill; the enjoined attitude to adopt is one of reverence. Yet in the case of many worshippers, their attitude will reflect the ambivalence that they perceive in the divine: reverence and acceptance may be tempered by hesitance and even anger or reproach.[4]

Ambivalence is, however, rarely acknowledged in Western philosophy of religion, especially in the "analytic" tradition.[5] Despite some recent efforts to expand the range of conceptions of divinity to which philosophical attention is given,[6] the majority of contributions to this branch of philosophy remain preoccupied with what one critic has termed "an ahistorically rarified theism," which fails to attend to "the historical religions of the world in their localized complexity and comparative diversity."[7] There are various reasons for this, most of which are related to disciplinary inertia: since a narrow range of conceptions of God and of faith have predominated in the philosophy of religion hitherto, ongoing debates inevitably gravitate toward those predominant conceptions. One limiting

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[2] Here I am echoing the definition of "ambivalence" in R. Scott Appleby, *The Ambivalence of the Sacred: Religion, Violence, and Reconciliation* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2000), 29, which Appleby derives from *The Compact Oxford English Dictionary* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), 387.

[3] Job 1:21, *The Bible: Authorized King James Version*, ed. Robert Carroll and Stephen Prickett (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 608.

[4] See, e.g., instances of the long tradition in which God is "argued" or "wrestled" with. Expositions include: Anson Laytner, *Arguing with God: A Jewish Tradition* (Lanham, MD: Aronson, 1990); Steven T. Katz, Shlomo Biderman, and Gershon Greenberg, eds., *Wrestling with God: Jewish Theological Responses during and after the Holocaust* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007); Bernd Janowski, *Arguing with God: A Theological Anthropology of the Psalms*, trans. Armin Siedlecki (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2013).

[5] Continental philosophy of religion, especially in its feminist forms, has tended to be more mindful of ambivalence than has its analytic Anglo-American counterpart; see, e.g., the various references to ambivalence in Pamela Sue Anderson, "Life, Death and (Inter)Subjectivity: Realism and Recognition in Continental Feminism," *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 60, no. 1–3 (December 2006): 41–59.

[6] See, e.g., Andrei A. Buckareff and Yujin Nagasawa, eds., *Alternative Concepts of God: Essays on the Metaphysics of the Divine* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016).

[7] Timothy D. Knepper, *The Ends of Philosophy of Religion: Terminus and Telos* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 9.

factor has been a lack of conversance with a plurality of religions on the part of many philosophers writing in English or other European languages. But this cannot be the whole story, for there are ambivalences and complexities even within Christian, or more broadly Abrahamic, conceptions of God—ambivalences and complexities that are routinely neglected in favor of a view of God as, for example, the "perfect being," whose properties include "moral perfection."[8]

Two important constraining factors in the philosophy of religion that I focus on in this article are *intellectualism* and *moralism*. Intellectualism, as defined in recent work by Kevin Schilbrack, is the tendency to fixate upon the doctrines or teachings contained "in the texts of religious thinkers" while devoting little or no scrutiny to aspects such as "worship practices, sacrifices, spiritual disciplines, liturgies, rites of passage, contemplative exercises, and ceremonies."[9] As I use the term in this article, *intellectualism* also denotes the tendency, when religious practices are reflected upon by philosophers or other theorists, to assume that the practices are invariably motivated by some underlying intellectual rationale, typically in the form of a belief, doctrine, or theory. In principle, there is no reason why an intellectualist approach to the philosophy of religion should exclude the notion of ambivalence, for texts authored by religious thinkers are not universally devoid of ambivalent articulations of faith or conceptions of the divine. In practice, however, philosophical interest has been directed primarily toward instances of overt argumentation or reason-giving rather than more visceral or emotional expressions of religiosity, which is where ambivalence is generally more prevalent. This orientation on the part of philosophers is understandable, given that philosophy characteristically specializes in the evaluation of arguments. Problems arise, however, when religion is conceived of in overly intellectualized terms, for then there is a danger of the very subject matter of any study of religion becoming distorted. While contending that the intellectualist bias remains present in Schilbrack's own work, I shall endorse his call for methodological innovations that move away from this bias.

My second critical target, moralism, is the tendency to allow personal moral, or sometimes more explicitly religious, preferences to slant one's philosophical inquiry. Moralism does this by steering attention away from forms of religion that one finds morally

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[8] See, e.g., Mark Owen Webb, "Perfect Being Theology," in *A Companion to Philosophy of Religion*, 2nd ed., ed. Charles Taliaferro, Paul Draper, and Philip L. Quinn (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell), 227–34. I am not objecting to perfect being theology, but merely noting that it is only one among many conceptions of divinity.

[9] Kevin Schilbrack, *Philosophy and the Study of Religions: A Manifesto* (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2014), xii.

unpalatable and toward those that resonate with one's own values. Hence, for example, John Cottingham, who has been a pioneer over recent years in promoting an approach to philosophy of religion that avoids the intellectualist bias,[10] nevertheless operates with a normative conception of what religion ought to be that skews his palette of examples. The result is a purported philosophy of religion that is really a philosophy of (a certain style of) Christian theism. Further instances include John Hick, whose theory of religious pluralism deploys an "ethical criterion" to demarcate "authentic" conceptions of the divine (or manifestations of "the Real") from those that are deemed "defective."[11] The allegedly defective conceptions are, for the most part, excluded from the inquiry, leaving a "pluralism" that privileges only a subset of religious forms.

I amplify these objections to intellectualism and moralism in the section that immediately follows this introduction. Subsequent sections explore methods of overcoming these restrictive tendencies. For suitable conceptual resources, I turn to certain strands of philosophy inspired by Ludwig Wittgenstein as well as to phenomenological and anthropological approaches to the study of religion. It is in this context that I explain the evocative phrase "a shuddering awareness of death and life together," which I have imported into the title of this article from an essay by the Wittgenstein-influenced philosopher Cora Diamond.[12] In the interests of expanding the purview of philosophy of religion beyond its customary Christian-centric or Abrahamocentric parameters,[13] my principal examples of ambivalent conceptions of the divine will be drawn from Hindu sources. Most notable among these are, first, the terrifying theophany from the *Bhagavad Gītā* (*c*. first century CE), in which Lord Kṛṣṇa reveals his "marvelous and terrible form" to the noble warrior Arjuna on the battlefield of Kurukṣetra,[14] and, second, conceptions of the Goddess in Śākta traditions, where Kālī, for example, is both the Divine Mother and a ferocious demon-slayer. Each of

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[10] See, e.g., John Cottingham, *The Spiritual Dimension: Religion, Philosophy and Human Value* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005); Cottingham, *Philosophy of Religion: Towards a More Humane Approach* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014).

[11] John Hick, *An Interpretation of Religion: Human Responses to the Transcendent*, 2nd ed. (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), 339, 353.

[12] Cora Diamond, "The Difficulty of Reality and the Difficulty of Philosophy," *Partial Answers: Journal of Literature and the History of Ideas* 1, no. 2 (June 2003): 1–26, at 21–22.

[13] For the term "Abrahamocentric," see Christopher Cotter and David Robertson, "Introduction: The World Religions Paradigm in Contemporary Religious Studies," in *After World Religions: Reconstructing Religious Studies* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2016), 1–20, at 2.

[14] See *Bhagavad Gītā* 11.21, in *The Bhagavad Gītā: Twenty-fifth-Anniversary Edition*, trans. Winthrop Sargeant, ed. Christopher Key Chapple (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2009), 472.

these forms of divinity, comprising a blend of benign and threatening elements, diverges drastically from those which have become normative in Western philosophy of religion.

My claim is that attention to ambivalence is one, but not the only, means of widening the scope of the philosophy of religion. The larger project of which this article is an integral part is that of making conceptual space for a more radically pluralist approach. By avoiding intellectualist and moralistic strictures, such an approach to the philosophy of religion seeks to do justice to the multiplicity both of conceptions of divinity and of the attitudes and modes of religious practice associated with them.[15]

I. BEYOND INTELLECTUALISM AND MORALISM

In a notebook entry from 1950 Wittgenstein reflects upon the way in which someone might come to believe in God.[16] Doubtful whether anyone could be turned toward belief solely by means of an argument or "proof," Wittgenstein proposes that instilling faith would involve "a certain upbringing," the "shaping" of a life. One's experiences are crucial, he continues, not necessarily in the sense of mystical "visions," but in the broader sense of the experiences one undergoes in one's life as a whole—the sufferings one endures, for example. Summing up the point, Wittgenstein adds: "Experiences, thoughts,—life can force this concept on us" (and, from the context, it is obvious that he means the concept of God).

By means of contrast, these remarks of Wittgenstein's bring into sharper relief the tendency, prevalent especially in the analytic tradition of contemporary philosophy of religion, to accentuate the intellectual or cognitive dimension of religious life at the expense of what we might call the more embodied, practice-oriented, or experiential dimensions.[17]

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[15] For further exposition of the notion of radical pluralism in the philosophy of religion, see, e.g., D. Z. Phillips, "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*, ed. Andy F. Sanders (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2007), 197–211; Mikel Burley, *A Radical Pluralist Philosophy of Religion: Cross-Cultural, Multireligious, Interdisciplinary* (London: Bloomsbury, 2020); Randy Ramal, "Radical Pluralism, Concept Formation, and Interreligious Communication," in *Interpreting Interreligious Relations with Wittgenstein: Philosophy, Theology and Religious Studies*, ed. Gorazd Andrejč and Daniel H. Weiss (Leiden: Brill, 2019), 135–56.

[16] Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Culture and Value*, ed. G. H. von Wright and Heikki Nyman, revised by Alois Pichler, trans. Peter Winch (Oxford: Blackwell, 1998), 97e.

[17] I am not presuming contemporary analytic philosophy of religion to be a monolithic category. For instance, experiential aspects of religion have been invoked in support of the rationality of belief in God by several influential analytic philosophers; see, e.g., William P. Alston, *Perceiving God: The Epistemology of Religious Experience* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1991); Richard Swinburne, *The Existence of God*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2004), chap. 13. In common

The reminder that Wittgenstein is offering is that argumentation and the giving of reasons constitute only a relatively minor component of the religious lives of most practitioners. Similar reminders have been put forward more recently by figures such as Cottingham and Schilbrack. Cottingham, for instance, stresses "the primacy of praxis in religion," arguing "that it is in the very nature of religious understanding that it characteristically stems from practical involvement rather than from intellectual analysis."[18] Schilbrack, correspondingly, identifies an overemphasis on intellectual aspects of religion as one of three cardinal shortcomings of contemporary philosophy of religion, the other two being narrowness with regard to the set of religions discussed and an insular frame of mind, which discourages productive engagement with other branches of philosophy and other disciplines involved in the study of religion.[19]

"Intellectualist," as a term of disapproval in the study of religion, dates from the 1930s, when the anthropologist E. E. Evans-Pritchard used it to criticize the approach of his predecessors Edward Tylor and James Frazer.[20] While holding these forebears in high esteem, Evans-Pritchard nonetheless objected to their respective theories of magic, each of which displays an intellectualist bias by positing that practices of ritual magic constitute a rudimentary and misguided science.[21] Rather than noting how ritual objects acquire symbolic meanings in specific ritual contexts, Tylor and Frazer had, according to Evans-Pritchard, made overgeneralizing assumptions about the causal associations that people in so-called "primitive societies" imagine to exist between disparate entities (such as a stone and the sun, for example).[22] These early anthropologists had, in short, imposed an excessively intellectualist or "rationalistic" theory upon the acts in question and upon the peoples who perform them. Objections similar to these were being raised at around the same time by Wittgenstein in notes that he made after reading portions of Frazer's *The Golden Bough*, though there is no evidence to show that Wittgenstein ever had any contact with Evans-

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with Cottingham and Schilbrack, whom I discuss in this section, I am referring to a prevalent tendency.

[18] Cottingham, *The Spiritual Dimension*, 5–6.

[19] Schilbrack, *Philosophy and the Study of Religions*, xii *et passim*.

[20] E. E. Evans-Pritchard, "The Intellectualist (English) Interpretation of Magic," *Journal of the Anthropological Society of Oxford* 4, no. 3 (1973): 123–42; originally published in *Bulletin of the Faculty of Arts* (Cairo) 1, no. 2 (1933): 282–311.

[21] This early theoretical assumption in anthropology has been inherited by certain analytic philosophers of religion; see, e.g., the reference to "mistaken magical or primitive scientific beliefs" in Hick, *An Interpretation of Religion*, 310.

[22] Evans-Pritchard, "The Intellectualist (English) Interpretation of Magic," 136.

Pritchard.[23] Subsequent to Evans-Pritchard, other critics of early anthropological theories of magic and religion have applied the term "intellectualist" in the same sense.[24]

Schilbrack's notion of intellectualism has an affinity with that which obtains in the anthropological context to which I have just referred insofar as he, too, maintains that undue weight has been given to the role of intellection in religious life. The emphasis is different, however, for Schilbrack's chief concern is that philosophers of religion have over-intellectualized religion by concentrating on doctrines and beliefs at the expense of practices. My own use of the term *intellectualist* will combine Schilbrack's sense with the one derived from Evans-Pritchard, for the limitations of contemporary philosophy of religion include not only a lack of attention to practices but also a tendency to unquestioningly assume that practices themselves are driven or undergirded by intellectual rationales.

Although Schilbrack's critique of what he terms "traditional philosophy of religion" is well taken, his constructive enterprise remains hampered, I argue, by an implicit commitment to a version of the intellectualist paradigm that, on the face of it, he seeks to challenge. In characterizing "the distinctive contribution of philosophy of religion" to the broader field of the study of religions, Schilbrack asserts that this consists in "the evaluation of truth claims, which means the assessment of reason-giving and arguments."[25] Although this characterization need not preclude other modes of philosophical inquiry, such as those with a more phenomenological or hermeneutical orientation, in practice it leads to the privileging of the intellectual or cognitive over other elements of religion. This comes through especially in Schilbrack's treatment of religious practices, where he foregrounds the question of whether practices such as pilgrimages and rituals can provide "opportunities for cognition" or "opportunities for inquiry" about "self, other, and the world."[26] While these are legitimate questions to ask, they keep the focus very much on the intellectual or cognitive—the knowledge-acquiring—aspects of religion. So if the goal is to move beyond an intellectual bias, other questions will need also to be raised. These might include questions concerning the affective and conative dimensions of practice along with the roles of practices in

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[23] For a comparison between Evans-Pritchard and Wittgenstein, see Mary Douglas, *Edward Evans-Pritchard* (New York: Viking Press, 1980), 31–34.

[24] See, e.g., Paul Heelas, "Intellectualism and the Anthropology of Religion," PhD thesis, University of Oxford, 1974; Brian Morris, *Anthropological Studies of Religion: An Introductory Text* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 91–106; D. Z. Phillips, *Religion and the Hermeneutics of Contemplation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), esp. 146–51.

[25] Schilbrack, *Philosophy and the Study of Religions*, 25.

[26] Schilbrack, *Philosophy and the Study of Religions*, 44–45.

consolidating communal cohesion, reinforcing power hierarchies, and so forth. There is no reason to suppose that Schilbrack would regard these questions as less important than those concerning the opportunities for learning that practices afford; I am merely noting that, even if it is understandable that a philosopher should foreground questions related to cognition and learning, a focus on these questions to the exclusion of others keeps us within the intellectualist framework.

Alongside intellectualism, a further limiting factor in contemporary philosophy of religion is a moralistic tendency that restricts the purview of those engaged in this field of inquiry to the forms of religion that they personally find most morally edifying. As noted in my introduction, Cottingham typifies this tendency insofar as his perspective remains blinkered by a normative conception of religion that results in a narrow preoccupation with Christian theism. Having boldly sought to prioritize practice over theory in the characterization of religious life, Cottingham raises the question of how we are to determine which practices ought to be pursued. His advice is that we turn to "our intuitions to assess the moral credentials of the systems of praxis on offer."[27] These intuitions must not, however, be mere arbitrary feelings, for any religious position worthy of being adopted "should possess the characteristics of a *genuine moral system*" and have "some discernible *link with goodness*," which is to be construed in terms of promoting such qualities as "self-awareness, self-purification and moral growth."[28] Put in these broad terms there may seem little with which to take exception. There is, after all, a long tradition of philosophical theology in which Cottingham's work can be situated—a tradition in which a central task is the refinement of theological concepts in ways that make most sense to the philosopher concerned. A consequence of these appeals to "genuine" morality and goodness, however, is the exclusion from the inquiry of forms of religiosity that do not conform to the normative vision of the philosopher. If one's purpose is to study only the varieties of religion that coincide with the philosopher's moral intuitions, then this constraining filter may not be troubling. But if one's objective is to gain a deeper understanding of religion in a broader sense, including the aspects that conflict with one's own moral proclivities or those of the one undertaking the inquiry, one will have to look elsewhere.[29]

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[27] Cottingham, *The Spiritual Dimension*, 16.

[28] Cottingham, *The Spiritual Dimension*, 151, 152; Cottingham's emphasis.

[29] For further critical discussion of Cottingham, see Mikel Burley, "Prioritizing Practice in the Study of Religion: Normative and Descriptive Orientations," *International Journal of Philosophy and Theology* 79, no. 4 (2018): 437–50; Graham Oppy, "Review of John Cottingham, *Philosophy of*

Further exemplifying the limiting implications of moralism in the philosophy of religion is John Hick, who identifies as "clearly morally defective" certain conceptions of divinity that include "archaic images of a blood-thirsty super-power who demands human and animal sacrifices, or of a tribal or national deity who favours one section of the human community at the expense of others."[30] Designating these conceptions as "defective" is one way for authors to convey their own religious preferences, but it prematurely forecloses opportunities for understanding religion in its diverse manifestations. Underlying Hick's perfunctory treatment of "archaic" or "tribal" images of the divine is an evolutionary model, according to which "developed monotheism" supplies a conception of divinity that is in closer alignment with reality than do conceptions of "the lower and implicitly finite deities" to whom offerings and prayers are commonly made in "tribal religion."[31] Since his own insistence on the absolute transcendence of "the Real" precludes its being compared directly with any representations of it, Hick invokes an "ethical criterion" for the purpose of identifying which representations are most "authentic." For Hick, the stage of development of any religion can be measured in terms of its accordance with "the moral ideal of generous goodwill, love, compassion."[32]

This moralistic strategy for identifying the "authentic" religions that deserve a place among the ranks of the "great" traditions dramatically restricts the scope of Hick's "pluralistic hypothesis," excluding modes of religiosity and conceptions of divinity that fall short of the selected moral ideal. Moreover, Cottingham and Hick are far from alone in deploying moral criteria to sift the proper objects of inquiry from those that are deemed unworthy of further investigation. They were preceded by, for example, William James, who, while rejecting the intellectualist tendency outlined above, adheres to an evolutionary model of religious development comparable to Hick's. James's version of this model regards the "primeval" forms of worship characteristic of "cults" as undergoing a gradual refinement, through which "burnt offerings and the blood of he-goats have been superseded by sacrifices more spiritual in their nature."[33] As James sees it, "the practical needs and experiences of religion" are satisfied by a conception of the divine as "a larger power" that is "friendly" both

Religion: Towards a More Humane Approach," _Notre Dame Philosophical Reviews_ (2015.04.11), http://ndpr.nd.edu/news/philosophy-of-religion-towards-a-more-humane-approach/; Kevin Schilbrack, "Review of John Cottingham, _The Spiritual Dimension: Religion, Philosophy, and Human Value_," _Journal of Religion_ 87, no. 2 (April 2007): 288–89.

[30] Hick, _An Interpretation of Religion_, 339.

[31] Hick, _An Interpretation of Religion_, 275 n. 2.

[32] Hick, _An Interpretation of Religion_, 316.

[33] William James, _The Varieties of Religious Experience: A Study in Human Nature_ (New York: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1902), 462.

to the believer "and to his ideals."[34] Alternative conceptions, such as those that depict the divine as an ambivalent figure that is no less fearsome than friendly, are quietly passed over.

The exclusionary consequences of intellectualism and moralism are detrimental to the philosophy of religion insofar as the purpose of this branch of philosophical inquiry is to take account of what Hick himself described as "religion throughout history and throughout the world," as opposed to merely "one particular form of it."[35] The intellectualist bent serves to obscure from view the multidimensional nature of religion, to which Ninian Smart long ago drew attention in his explication of the several "dimensions of the sacred," which comprise ritual, mythic, experiential, ethical, legal, social, material, and political in addition to doctrinal or creedal dimensions.[36] Moralism, meanwhile, diverts attention away from modes of religion that, regardless of their prevalence in numerous societies, are perceived in light of certain modern philosophical standards as "defective" and in need of refinement or reform to bring them into alignment with some purportedly "common ethical ideal."[37] Needless to say, refining and reforming religious concepts and doctrines is neither an exclusively modern nor an exclusively Western philosophical preoccupation: it has had an important place in philosophical endeavors over the long course of human history. It is, however, not all that philosophy of religion is or has the potential to be. What I am contending is that the deployment of a narrow set of moral criteria for identifying the proper sphere of philosophical interest risks constructing an unduly sanitized and unidimensional picture of religion. To facilitate a richer and more expansive picture, I turn in the next section to a consideration of conceptual resources for philosophical contemplation of religious feelings and representations of divinity that are both morally and emotionally ambivalent—complex, unsettling, even terrifying.

II. CONCEPTUAL RESOURCES FOR ANALYZING DIVINE AMBIVALENCE

There is an obvious sense in which philosophy is concerned with resolving perplexities and unravelling "knots in our thinking."[38] But there are also occasions when philosophy can

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[34] James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, 525.

[35] John Hick, *Dialogues in the Philosophy of Religion* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 12–13.

[36] Ninian Smart, *Dimensions of the Sacred: An Anatomy of the World's Beliefs* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996).

[37] Hick, *An Interpretation of Religion*, 339.

[38] Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Remarks*, ed. Rush Rhees, trans. Raymond Hargreaves and Roger White (Oxford: Blackwell, 1975), §2.

usefully serve to highlight a phenomenon's resistance to being understood. This can be done by adducing pertinent examples and offering descriptions of them that encapsulate the complex reactions that they might evoke. Exemplifying this method is an essay by Cora Diamond in which she cites a number of literary sources to illustrate what she, borrowing a phrase from John Updike, terms "the difficulty of reality"—to which she adds the further difficulty faced by anyone trying to give a philosophical account of the phenomena in question.[39] Diamond's initial example concerns the difficulty, eloquently captured in a poem by Ted Hughes, of coming to terms with the fact that six young men, pictured in a photograph from 1914, were all dead within six months of its having been taken: victims of the First World War.[40] As Diamond admits, not everyone will experience the difficulty at issue—the difficulty of encompassing in one's mind the thought that these men, so exuberantly alive in the photograph, were so soon to be dead. Yet others will encounter the fact as something "awesome and astonishing in its inexplicability," so agonizing as to resist being thought.[41]

Picking up from Hughes's poem the term "single exposure," Diamond applies it to our predicament as readers—the predicament of finding in ourselves, through exposure to the scene evoked in the poem, "a shuddering awareness of death and life together," for the poem confronts us with an image that fuses a vivid depiction of life with an intense reminder of death.[42] There will be perspectives from which no difficulty, no paradox, arises. One might readily step back from the immediacy of the image and note that no fusion is occurring: the men were alive when the photograph was taken and they died later on. That is, of course, true. But what Diamond, through Hughes, is underlining is the sense in which there may remain something irreconcilable in the combination of elements with which a viewer of the photograph is faced. In such cases, the task of the poet is not to contrive a reconciliation of these elements, but to convey the felt irreconcilability. What Diamond is showing us is that philosophy, too, can perform this task through the discussion of suitable examples. My

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[39] Diamond, "The Difficulty of Reality and the Difficulty of Philosophy." Updike's use of the phrase "difficulty of reality" occurs in his essay "Emersonianism," which has been published in various places. Commenting on Melville's *Moby-Dick* and Whitman's *Leaves of Grass*, Updike remarks that "our received opinion, tested against the texts themselves, does seem just: the words sing, burn, and live; they have the exciting difficulty of reality itself, and the pressure and precision of things that exist." John Updike, *Emersonianism* (Cleveland, OH: Bits Press, 1984), 1.

[40] Ted Hughes, "Six Young Men," in *The Hawk in the Rain* (London: Faber and Faber, 1957), 54–55; cited in Diamond, "The Difficulty of Reality and the Difficulty of Philosophy," 1–2.

[41] Diamond, "The Difficulty of Reality and the Difficulty of Philosophy," 2–3.

[42] Diamond, "The Difficulty of Reality and the Difficulty of Philosophy," 21–22.

suggestion here is that, without glossing over salient distinctions, Diamond's notion of "a shuddering awareness of death and life together" can be used as an entry point into a consideration of more overtly religious responses to life and the world.

Partly in reaction to the intellectualist bias of early anthropologists such as Tylor and Frazer, certain subsequent anthropologists, and also phenomenologists of religion, emphasized religion's experiential dimension. Prominent among anthropologists in this regard was R. R. Marett (1866–1943), and relevant authors who have been termed phenomenologists of religion include Gerardus van der Leeuw (1890–1950) and Rudolf Otto (1869–1937). Important for my purposes are the concepts of awe, articulated by Marett and van der Leeuw, and of horror (*Grauen*) articulated by Otto. Each of these concepts, as analyzed by these thinkers, embodies an ambivalence that could, as a starting point, be described in terms of "a shuddering awareness of death and life together."

"Awe" was regarded by Marett as the English word that comes closest to expressing "the fundamental religious feeling."[43] He maintained "that all genuine rites involve one and the same fundamental mood and attitude, a drawing near in awe."[44] To put it in these terms is to make an unnecessary overgeneralization. We do not have to suppose that there is, at the heart of all "genuine" religious rituals, a single feeling, mood, or attitude; to do so risks ruling out, *a priori*, the possibility that there is an array of more or less distinct affective or attitudinal states, many subsets of which may be characteristic of religious rituals. Even worse, we could end up simply stipulating that, for anything to count as a *genuine* religious rite, it must involve the feeling of awe to which Marett refers. More positively, however, Marett's accentuation of this affective dimension constitutes a potentially fruitful counterbalance to the intellectualist tendency. Without our needing to subscribe wholesale to the view that all religious impulses have a single wellspring, Marett's analysis may be recognized as a pertinent reminder of the significant place of pre-theoretical (or pre-intellectualized) aspects of experience in religious life. It also offers a point of access to the study of religion that avoids the moralistic tendency, since awe, as Marett conceives of it, is logically prior to the formation of moral categories: it "provides religion with its raw material"[45]—or, as we might put it, with at least some of its raw material. What Marett exemplifies is a way of being attentive to a deeply embedded element of religious life without rushing to impose moral evaluations upon it.

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[43] R. R. Marett, *The Threshold of Religion*, 2nd ed. (London: Methuen, 1914), 13.

[44] Marett, *The Threshold of Religion*, 220.

[45] Marett, *The Threshold of Religion*, 1; italics omitted.

Van der Leeuw, whose name was to become "virtually synonymous with the phenomenology of religion" by the mid-1940s,[46] described awe (*Scheu*) as a reaction to "Power" (*der Macht*) in which the competing impulses of fear and attraction are equally in play. "Physical shuddering, ghostly horror, fear, sudden terror, reverence, humility, adoration, profound apprehension, enthusiasm—all these lie *in nuce* within the awe experienced in the presence of Power," van der Leeuw contends. "And because these attitudes show two main tendencies, one away from Power and the other towards it, we speak of the *ambivalent* nature of awe."[47] As in the case of Marett's treatment of awe, we need not accept the reductive essentializing implication of regarding awe in response to power as the essence of all religious experience. Even while remaining wary of such reductionism, however, these concepts of awe and power, as expounded by Marett, van der Leeuw, and others,[48] may selectively be invoked to enhance the conceptual repertoire of contemporary philosophy of religion.

An example of the concept of awe being deployed in recent philosophy of religion, in opposition to certain moralistic and intellectualist presuppositions, occurs in remarks by D. Z. Phillips on rituals involving the sacrifice of animals or even human beings. A moralistic approach would be liable to dismiss such rituals as products of a moral outlook that had yet to develop beyond a "tribal" or "archaic" horizon, and the intellectualist bias would encourage a search for beliefs or doctrines supposedly underlying the practices to the exclusion of other possibilities of meaning within the practices themselves.[49] Phillips's concern is not to stipulate how sacrificial rituals must be understood, but rather to make space for interpretations that do not immediately assume the rituals to be misguided attempts "to ward

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[46] James L. Cox, "The Phenomenology of Religion," in *Religion, Theory, Critique: Classic and Contemporary Approaches and Methodologies*, ed. Richard King (New York: Columbia University Press, 2017), 401–12, at 404.

[47] G. van der Leeuw, *Religion in Essence and Manifestation: A Study in Phenomenology*, trans. J. E. Turner (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1938), 48. In the original German, the final phrase reads "dem *ambivalenten* Charakter der Scheu"; see G. van der Leeuw, *Phänomenologie der Religion* (1933; Tübingen: Mohr, 1977), 34. For further exposition of this theme, see Richard J. Plantinga, "An Ambivalent Relationship to the Holy: Gerardus van der Leeuw on Religion," in *Religion in History: The Word, the Idea, the Reality*, ed. Michel Despland and Gérard Vallée (Waterloo, ON: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 1992), 93–100.

[48] Other significant exponents of the concept of awe in relation to religion include W. Brede Kristensen (1867–1953); see, e.g., his *The Meaning of Religion: Lectures in the Phenomenology of Religion*, trans. John B. Carman (The Hague: Nijhoff, 1960), esp. 180–82, 337.

[49] These moralistic and intellectualist tendencies are exemplified in Hick's brief discussion of human sacrificial practices in his *An Interpretation of Religion*, 309–11.

off the terrible in human life."[50] Without asserting, implausibly, that this apotropaic motivation could never be present, Phillips moots "the possibility that what gives rise to such terrible rituals is precisely that—awe at the terrible."[51] By speaking of awe as that which "gives rise to" certain ritual activities, Phillips is not suggesting that the feeling of awe initially exists unexpressed and is then given expression through, or by means of, some particular ritual. To phrase it in these terms would miss what he sees as the "internal relation" between the ritual and what gives rise to it. As Phillips puts it in one place, "It makes it look as though the rites are the means by which something is expressed, as though there were a distinction between means and ends involved."[52] More in line with Phillips's perspective would be to say that the ritual is not performed for the purpose of expressing awe; rather, the ritual is the form that the awe takes, and hence an observer sees the awe *in* the ritual, not behind or beneath it.[53] We do not need to endorse this understanding of sacrificial ritual tout court in order to recognize that it provides a productive alternative to an approach that is freighted with intellectualist and moralizing assumptions. As we shall see later in this article, Phillips's notion of "awe at the terrible," which itself echoes similar phrases from Rush Rhees and Wittgenstein, resonates strongly with themes from the celebration of fierce Hindu goddesses, in which votaries have been exhorted to "Worship the terrible!"[54] As a further step toward that topic, I now turn to the concept of horror that is conspicuous in, for example, Rudolf Otto's classic work on "the holy" (*das Heilige*).

A striking phrase coined by Otto is "a Mysticism of Horror" (*eine Mystik des 'Grauens'*),[55] by which he means to identify representations—whether verbal, literary, or pictorial—in which the divine is viewed as ferocious and frightening. Typifying such

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[50] Phillips, "Philosophy's Radical Pluralism in the House of Intellect," 205.

[51] Phillips, "Philosophy's Radical Pluralism in the House of Intellect." Although Phillips does not elaborate at length what he means by "awe," his account might usefully be supplemented by drawing upon an analysis such as van der Leeuw's, in which, as noted above, awe combines elements of fear and attraction in the face of power.

[52] D. Z. Phillips, "Wittgenstein's Full Stop," in *Perspectives on the Philosophy of Wittgenstein*, ed. Irving Block (Oxford: Blackwell, 1981), 179–200, at 193.

[53] None of this precludes the possibility that, in many instances, participants may perform ritual activities—even sacrificial activities—in a more-or-less mechanical way, relatively devoid of feeling. Phillips is not presuming to offer a general theory that covers all cases.

[54] Swami Vivekananda, quoted in *The Master as I Saw Him: Being Pages from the Life of the Swami Vivekananda* by his disciple Nivedita (London: Longmans, Green and Co., 1910), 233.

[55] Rudolf Otto, *The Idea of the Holy: An Inquiry into the Non-Rational Factor in the Idea of the Divine and Its Relation to the Rational*, trans. John W. Harvey, rev. ed. (London: Oxford University Press, 1936), 109. For the original German, see Rudolf Otto, *Das Heilige. Über das Irrationale in der Idee des Göttlichen und sein Verhältnis zum Rationalen* (Breslau: Trewendt und Granier, 1917), 126.

representations is Lord Kṛṣṇa's self-revelation as the god Viṣṇu in the eleventh chapter of the *Bhagavad Gītā*, where he manifests as the fire-breathing devourer of worlds; also relevant, however, are certain varieties of the worship of the god Śiva or goddess Durgā and what Otto calls "the gruesome [*der grausigen*] form of Tantrism in both Buddhist and Hindu fields."[56] Depictions of the divine as aggressive and dangerous are not, of course, restricted to religions originating from South Asia. In both Judaism and Christianity, for example, the idea of God as a "consuming" or "devouring" fire has been a recurrent motif. "And the sight of the glory of the LORD *was* like devouring fire on the top of the mount in the eyes of the children of Israel," declares the author of Exodus 24:17; "There went up a smoke out of his nostrils, and fire out of his mouth devoured," exclaims the author of 2 Samuel 22:9; and, in the New Testament, Paul's Epistle to the Hebrews entreats readers to "serve God acceptably with reverence and godly fear: For our God *is* a consuming fire" (12:28–29).[57] As Otto observes, Martin Luther was among the theologians to have emphasized passages such as these in his sermons. God is, Luther proclaims, "more terrible and frightful than the Devil. For He dealeth with us and bringeth us to ruin with power, smiteth and hammereth us and payeth no heed to us. … In His majesty He is a consuming fire."[58] So, too, might we note the imagery of a wrathful, vengeful deity in the Qur'ān, where believers are urged to fear Allāh lest they be condemned to eternal suffering for their disobedience.[59] In the final hour of judgment, the Qur'ān announces, nursing mothers will neglect their babies, pregnant women will miscarry, people will appear intoxicated despite being sober, "so severe will be God's torment."[60] Nevertheless, it is understandable that Otto should cite the terrifying theophany in the *Bhagavad Gītā* and the worship of bellicose female Hindu deities as notable instances of a mysticism of horror, given the striking and evocative imagery associated with them (which will be delineated at greater length in the next section).

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[56] Otto, *Das Heilige*, 126; my trans. (Harvey renders *der grausigen* as "the horrible"; see *The Idea of the Holy*, 109.)

[57] *The Bible: Authorized King James Version*. For further descriptions of God's wrathful demeanor, see Exodus 15:7; Numbers 11:1; Deuteronomy 4:24, 9:3; Psalm 97:3.

[58] Martin Luther, quoted in Otto, *The Idea of the Holy*, 103; *Das Heilige*, 119. Otto is quoting from *Dr. Martin Luther's sämmtliche Werke*, vol. 35 (Erlangen: Heyder, 1844), 167; vol. 47 (Erlangen: Heyder & Zimmer, 1851), 145 (now available online at https://catalog.hathitrust.org/Record/008627458).

[59] "Disgrace in this world awaits such a person and, on the Day of Resurrection, We shall make him taste the suffering of the Fire." *The Qur'an*, 22:9, trans. M. A. S. Abdel Haleem (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 209–10.

[60] *The Qur'an*, 22:1–2.

The German term *Grauens* (the genitive singular of *Grauen*), which is rendered as "horror" by the translator of Otto's *The Idea of the Holy* in the phrase "Mysticism of Horror," is rendered in an earlier passage of the same work as "tragedy."[61] What Otto means by the term is not a reaction to something purely repulsive, but the coalescence of the frightful and the holy—comparable, indeed, to the sense of "awe" elucidated by Marett and van der Leeuw, respectively. An alternative, though not unrelated, sense of "horror" occurs in more recent work by Talal Asad—a sense that Asad adapts from the philosopher Stanley Cavell and applies to the disconcerting topic of suicide bombing. Cavell had used the term "horror" to denote "the perception of the precariousness of human identity," the awareness of our proximity to something other than human and of the fact that our humanity, or the humanity of others, may be lost in an instant.[62] Asad gives concrete sense to this notion of precariousness by citing an all-too-vivid description of the aftermath of a suicide bombing, in which severed body parts become mingled with everyday physical objects.[63] Ordinary life is suddenly shattered, its fragility exposed along with the fragility of human bodies. This sense of precariousness and fragility is linked by Asad to the attitude of reverence toward the divine. As a "power capable of destroying all form, of absorbing all identities," the divine "remains a source of horror" from which reverence is a "refuge."[64] In this last point, Asad appears to be thinking of reverence as an attempt to placate the fury of the horrific deity, such as when offerings are made in the hope of winning the deity's favor. This is, no doubt, one of the forms that reverence can take. As we saw Phillips indicating, however, another form of reverence or awe would be that which is directed precisely at what is horrific in the divine, perhaps in a gesture of surrender—seeking refuge *in* rather than *from* it.

These nuanced possibilities of sense, in the notion of reverence in the face of horror, may be brought out more fully in relation to the examples from Hindu religiosity to which we now turn.

III. "DELIGHTFUL HORROR" IN CERTAIN HINDU CONCEPTIONS OF DIVINITY

On July 16, 1945, J. Robert Oppenheimer, in his role as Director of the Los Alamos Laboratory, was among the witnesses of the first atomic bomb detonation, codenamed

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[61] Otto, *The Idea of the Holy*, 83; compare *Das Heilige*, 99.

[62] Stanley Cavell, *The Claim of Reason: Wittgenstein, Skepticism, Morality, and Tragedy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1979), 418–19.

[63] Talal Asad, *On Suicide Bombing* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007), 69–70.

[64] Asad, *On Suicide Bombing*, 74.

"Trinity," which took place in the New Mexico desert known as Jornada del Muerto (literally, "Day of the Dead"). Nearly twenty years later, in a television documentary first broadcast on January 5, 1965,[65] Oppenheimer recounted his experience of that initial detonation in chilling words, which one biographer of Oppenheimer has described as "one of the most famous utterances of the twentieth century."[66] "We knew the world would not be the same," Oppenheimer asserts.

> A few people laughed, a few people cried. Most people were silent. I remembered the line from the Hindu scripture, the Bhagavad Gita: Vishnu is trying to persuade the prince that he should do his duty, and to impress him, he takes his multi-armed form and says: 'Now I am become death, the destroyer of worlds.' I suppose we all thought that one way or another.[67]

Oppenheimer's knowledge of the *Bhagavad Gītā* was not superficial. He had studied it in the original Sanskrit with Arthur Ryder at the University of California in the early 1930s.[68] The Sanskrit term that Oppenheimer renders as "death" is *kāla*, which can also be translated as "time" or, in certain contexts, as "black" or "dark."[69] The line quoted by Oppenheimer is thus one in which the deity Viṣṇu, of whom Kṛṣṇa has revealed himself to be a "descent" (*avatāra*), is declaring himself to Prince Arjuna to be an embodiment of time and death. He is

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[65] "The Decision to Drop the Bomb," directed by Fred Freed and Len Giovannitti, *NBC White Paper* (NBC News, 1965).

[66] Ray Monk, *Inside the Centre: The Life of J. Robert Oppenheimer* (London: Vintage, 2013), 439.

[67] J. Robert Oppenheimer, quoted in Monk, *Inside the Centre*, 439. This segment of the interview with Oppenheimer is widely available on the internet; see, e.g., PlenilunePictures, "J. Robert Oppenheimer: 'I am become Death, the destroyer of worlds'" (uploaded August 6, 2011), https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lb13ynu3Iac (accessed April 4, 2020).

[68] David C. Cassidy, *J. Robert Oppenheimer and the American Century* (New York: Pi Press, 2005), 149–50; Charles Thorpe, *Oppenheimer: The Tragic Intellect* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2006), 52–53. But see also Jagdish Mehra, "Preface," in Jagdish Mehra and Helmut Rechenberg, *The Historical Development of Quantum Theory*, vol. 1, pt. 1 (New York: Springer, 1982), ix–xliii, at xxv n. 20, where Mehra, who met Oppenheimer in July 1962, claims to have "determined that Oppenheimer did not read Sanskrit, though he was quite familiar with certain Sanskrit scriptures in English translations and liked the sound of Sanskrit poetry."

[69] "*kālá* … a fixed or right point of time, a space of time, time (in general) … time (as destroying all things), death"; "*kāla* … black, of a dark colour, dark-blue." Monier Monier-Williams, *A Sanskrit–English Dictionary* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1899), 278, 277.

that which devours and destroys all things, including thousands of soldiers on the battlefield that is the *Bhagavad Gītā*'s narrative setting.[70]

Shortly before this climactic moment in the *Gītā*, characterized by imagery of voracious slaughter and consumption on the part of the deity, the narrator of the dialogue between Kṛṣṇa and Arjuna, named in the text as Saṃjaya, relates that "If the radiance of a thousand suns / were to burst into the sky, / that would be / the splendor of the Mighty One" who stands before Arjuna.[71] As reported by Robert Jungk, this is the verse that "flashed into [Oppenheimer's] mind" at the very moment of the Trinity bomb explosion.[72] As Lindsey Michael Banco comments, it is striking that the vocabulary for which Oppenheimer avowedly reaches is that of religious poetry as opposed to scientific discourse; indeed, Banco calls it "nonrational language, drawn from the fearful uncanniness of thousands of suns bursting."[73] The language might well be described as an attempt to capture a feeling of awe or horror, such as we have seen expounded in the previous section, or the sense of astonishment elicited upon encountering the sublime. Borrowing a turn of phrase from Edmund Burke, we might describe the feeling as one of "not pleasure, but a sort of delightful horror, a sort of tranquility tinged with terror."[74]

As Arjuna's vision unfolds in the *Bhagavad Gītā*, his terror grows. The deific form comprises numerous limbs, bellies, and gaping mouths emitting fire and lined with jagged teeth, between which the heads of warriors on the battlefield are crushed.[75] Although Kṛṣṇa had already announced himself to be both "all-destroying death, / And the origin of those things that are yet to be,"[76] his unmitigated power is now being evinced. And the composer of

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[70] *Bhagavad Gītā* 11.32.

[71] *Bhagavad Gītā* 11.12, as translated in Robert Jungk, *Brighter than a Thousand Suns: A Personal History of the Atomic Scientists*, trans. James Cleugh (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1958), vii.

[72] Jungk, *Brighter than a Thousand Suns*, 201.

[73] Lindsey Michael Banco, *The Meanings of J. Robert Oppenheimer* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2016), 59.

[74] Edmund Burke, *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* (London: Dodsley, 1757), 129. For discussion of Burke in this connection, see E. J. Clery, "The Pleasure of Terror: Paradox in Edmund Burke's Theory of the Sublime," in *Pleasures in the Eighteenth Century*, ed. Roy Porter and Marie Mulvey Roberts (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1996), 164–81.

[75] *Bhagavad Gītā* 11.23–30.

[76] *Bhagavad Gītā* 10.34, trans. Sargeant; see also 9.19: "I am indeed both immortality [*amṛta*] and death [*mṛtyu*], / Being and non-being" (my trans.).

the text has represented it as simultaneously "marvelous [*adbhuta*] and terrible [*ugra*]."[77] Analogous to the Greek Titan Kronos (Κρόνος) devouring his own children,[78] this depiction of Viṣṇu, as sheer temporality, is one in which he consumes what he creates.[79] In one of the most unsettling lines of the whole text, Viṣṇu, having asserted that he has in effect already slain Arjuna's enemies, then commands Arjuna to "Be the mere instrument."[80] It is as though Arjuna, and by extension any hearer or reader of the text, is being enjoined to view human agency as nothing more than a tool for the fulfilment of the divine will, which itself encompasses—or is coterminous with—the whole of space and time. Even mass slaughter on the battlefield is just going through the motions.

The *Bhagavad Gītā*'s representation of supreme power in the form of destruction, conflagration, and ingurgitation became the prototype for several subsequent theophanic episodes in Hindu mythology.[81] A prime example is the self-revelation of the Great Goddess (*mahādevī*) in the *Devī Gītā* (*c.* thirteenth to sixteenth centuries CE), which is itself a relatively small but significant portion of the substantial text of Śākta Hinduism known as the *Devī Bhāgavata Purāṇa* (*c.* eleventh to sixteenth centuries).[82] As in the case of Kṛṣṇa's disclosure of his identity as Viṣṇu in the *Bhagavad Gītā*, the Goddess's self-revelation in the

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[77] *Bhagavad Gītā* 11.20, trans. Sargeant. See Monier-Williams, *A Sanskrit–English Dictionary*, 19 and 172: "*ádbhuta* … supernatural, wonderful, marvellous"; "*ugrá* … powerful, violent, mighty, impetuous, strong, huge, formidable, terrible."

[78] See Hesiod, *Theogony* 459–67, in *The Homeric Hymns and Homerica*, trans. Hugh G. Evelyn-White (London: Heinemann, 1914), 78–155, at 112–13.

[79] Cf. S. G. F. Brandon, *History, Time and Deity: A Historical and Comparative Study of the Conception of Time in Religious Thought and Practice* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1965), 32: "[I]n the theophany that constitutes the climax of this great spiritual epic [viz. the *Bhagavad Gītā*], deity, in its supreme form, is represented as ambivalent: it is the force that manifests itself in the universe, as both creating and destroying, and, in its destructive function, it is identified with Time." Compare also Ovid, *Metamorphoses* 15.234: "Time, devourer of things [*Tempus edax rerum*] …"—in P. Ovidi Nasonis, *Metamorphoseon libri XV*, ed. Hugo Magnus (Berlin: Weidmann, 1914), 587, my trans.

[80] *Bhagavad Gītā* 11.33, trans, Sargeant.

[81] For a study of Hindu theophanies that brings out important differences as well as similarities between them, see James W. Laine, *Visions of God: Narratives of Theophany in the Mahābhārata* (Vienna: De Nobili Research Library, 1989).

[82] For the approximate dating of the *Devī Bhāgavata Purāṇa*, see C. Mackenzie Brown, *The Triumph of the Goddess: The Canonical Models and Theological Visions of the Devī-Bhāgavata Purāṇa* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1990), 135. For the dating of the *Devī Gītā*, see Brown, *The Devī Gītā: The Song of the Goddess: A Translation, Annotation, and Commentary* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1998), 4. The term *śākta* means "relating to *śakti* ('power', 'energy')," *śakti* itself being a common designation of the Goddess, who is power personified (or deified).

Devī Gītā occurs in two main stages. Having been requested by the mountain king Himālaya to display her "aggregated cosmic form" (*samaṣṭy-ātma-vapus*), the Goddess initially presents, both to Himālaya and to "all the gods including Viṣṇu" (who are gathered as witnesses),[83] a vision in which her "splendid" or "illustrious" (*virāj*)[84] form shines forth as the various constituents of the universe: "The sky is its head, the moon and sun its eyes … the wind its breath," and so on.[85] But then, as Mackenzie Brown has noted, there is a shift toward an image of divinity that is more "dynamic," "apocalyptic," and "horrific."[86]

The Goddess's "great form" (*mahārūpa*)[87] not only comprises "thousands of blazing rays, licking with its tongues," but also generates dreadful "crunching sounds with its teeth," emits "fire from its eyes," bears multiple weapons, and chews people into pulp, regardless of whether they belong to the priestly (*brāhmaṇa*) or aristocratic warrior (*kṣatriya*) classes.[88] So terrified by this vision are the gods who witness it that they cry out and faint with fear, even losing the thought that "This is the World-Mother [*jagadambā*]."[89] In a moment imbued with evocative symbolism, the gods are revived by personifications of the four Vedas—the ancient scriptures that predate the emergence of this conception of the Goddess as the highest deity.[90] Implicit is the suggestion that, in coming to their senses, the gods recognize the Goddess, notwithstanding her terrifying mien, as epitomizing the truth or reality that inheres in the long tradition of Vedic Hinduism. In response, they prostrate themselves before her, praising her as the source and mother of all, yet also beseeching her to show them again her "exceedingly beautiful form."[91]

The iconography and mythology associated with the Great Goddess is thus no less characterized by the poles of benign order and prodigious violence than is Kṛṣṇa's "universal

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[83] *Devīgītā* 3.20–21, trans. Brown, *The Devī Gītā*, 122. For the Sanskrit text, see *Devīgītā* (input by Ursula Honegger), GRETIL [Göttingen Register of Electronic Texts in Indian Languages], http://gretil.sub.uni-goettingen.de/gretil/1_sanskr/3_purana/dbhp_dgu.htm (accessed April 7, 2020).

[84] Monier-Williams, *A Sanskrit–English Dictionary*, 982.

[85] *Devīgītā* 3.23–24; Brown, *The Devī Gītā*, 123.

[86] Brown, *The Triumph of the Goddess*, 189, 190.

[87] *Devīgītā* 3.35.

[88] *Devīgītā* 3.35–36; Brown, *The Devī Gītā*, 127.

[89] *Devīgītā* 3.38–39; Brown, *The Devī Gītā*, 128.

[90] *Devīgītā* 3.40–41.

[91] *Devīgītā* 3.53; Brown, *The Devī Gītā*, 131. As Brown notes (*The Devī Gītā*, 133 n. 17), this moment is comparable to that depicted in *Bhagavad Gītā* 11.45, where Arjuna pleads with Kṛṣṇa to "Show me that form … in which You originally appeared" (trans. Sargeant).

form" (*viśvarūpa*) as revealed in the *Bhagavad Gītā*.[92] In the modern era, certain Indian religious and philosophical thinkers have highlighted this uncompromising ambivalence of the Goddess as a virtue of Śākta theology. Sri Aurobindo (1872–1950), for example, has affirmed that Hinduism is one of "only a few religions which have had the courage to say without any reserve … that this enigmatic World-Power is one Deity"—to point to the Goddess not only in her beneficent aspects but also as "the terrible Kali in her blood-stained dance of destruction and to say, 'This too is the Mother; this also know to be God; this too, if thou hast the strength, adore.'"[93]

The willingness to not merely tolerate but fervently venerate a Goddess who embodies the painful and deadly qualities of life is emphatically expressed by Swami Vivekananda (1863–1902), whose provocative injunction to "Worship the terrible!" I cited briefly in the previous section. For Vivekananda, according to his disciple Sister Nivedita, religious practices that praise the divine as exclusively benevolent are contaminated by egoism: by seeking only comfort and solace in some imagined providential dispensation, while failing to see that divinity is present also in earthquakes, volcanos, and other catastrophic phenomena, one betrays the self-serving character of one's faith. By hearing Vivekananda propounding these ideas, Nivedita reports, his listeners came to recognize the small-mindedness of a style of worship that is, in the end, "merely 'shop-keeping'"—that is, something relatively mundane and transactional—as contrasted with "the infinitely greater boldness and truth of the teaching that God manifests through evil *as well as* through good."[94] Like Aurobindo after him, Vivekananda stressed the courage, perhaps even the audacity, required to espouse the radically non-moralizing devotion he commends. Only a "few have dared to worship Death, or Kali!," he maintains. "Let us worship Death! Let us embrace the Terrible, because it is terrible; not asking that it be toned down. Let us take misery, for misery's own sake!"[95]

These words of Vivekananda's are striking not only because of the mode of worship they extol, but also because they prefigure so forcefully what we earlier saw D. Z. Phillips venturing as a mere possibility—namely, that "the terrible" might become an object of awe and worship, not because one wishes to evade it but precisely because it is terrible. Phillips himself was recapitulating in his own terms remarks from Wittgenstein and Rush Rhees.

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[92] The term "universal form" (*viśvarūpa*) occurs in *Bhagavad Gītā* 11.16; the whole of the eleventh chapter is traditionally known as the lesson on "the yoga of the vision of universal form" (*viśvarūpadarśanayoga*).

[93] Sri Aurobindo, *Essays on the Gita* (1922; Pondicherry: Sri Aurobindo Ashram, 1997), 45.

[94] Nivedita, *The Master as I Saw Him*, 210; original emphasis.

[95] Nivedita, *The Master as I Saw Him*, 223, quoting Vivekananda.

Wittgenstein, for instance, had noted in response to reading James Frazer's account of the ritual killing of the King of the Wood in ancient Nemi, that there is no need to seek an explanation for the ritual among the supposed beliefs of those who performed it; this is because the act conveys its own "strange and terrible [*Merkwürdiges und Furchtbares*]" sense, such that "the answer to the question 'why is this happening?'" may simply be "Because it is terrible."[96] Similarly, Rhees, when contemplating the various phenomena that might be wondered at or solemnized in the religious ceremonies of small-scale societies, includes not only the sight of natural beauty, but also death, madness, and that which "is terrible and … evil": "Wonder—treating as important—what is terrible just *because* it is terrible," as opposed to wondering what one could have done to avoid such things occurring.[97]

It does not follow that wondering how one might have avoided terrible afflictions is inconsistent with a sense of wonder at the terrible itself. In many actual religious practices directed toward truculent Hindu goddesses, for instance, it is likely that both of these types of wonder are present simultaneously. Not only can a single attitude be charged with delight and horror, as Burke and several of the other authors cited in this article have claimed, but the motivation for a ritual act can combine aspects of attraction and aversion, fascination and repulsion. What Wittgenstein, Rhees, and Phillips are urging against is the assumption that the practical drive to avert danger is the only one that makes sense. Vivekananda is going further: speaking from a standpoint of committed faith, he implores his listeners to positively embrace and worship the terrible. There is, no doubt, much more that could be said about this injunction than I have the space to explore here. One might, for example, draw comparisons with certain aesthetic sensibilities that celebrate grotesque and cruel aspects of life, perceiving them as objects of wonder.[98] So, too, might one view power itself—"Power" with a capital "P" (or *Macht* with a capital "M," as van der Leeuw puts it) or indeed *Śakti* (to use one of the foremost Sanskrit terms for both power and the Goddess)—as having been elevated to a position beyond moral evaluation and hence as something demanding worship regardless of its (or Her) ferocity. My purpose here has been not to settle such matters but

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[96] Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Remarks on Frazer's "Golden Bough,"* ed. Rush Rhees, trans. A. C. Miles and Rush Rhees (Retford, UK: Brynmill Press, 1979), 3e.

[97] Rush Rhees, "The Fundamental Problems of Philosophy," *Philosophical Investigations* 17, no. 4 (October 1994): 573–86, at 578.

[98] Compare Mikel Burley, "Dance of the *Deodhā*s: Divine Possession, Blood Sacrifice and the Grotesque Body in Assamese Goddess Worship," *Religions of South Asia* 12, no. 2 (September 2018): 207–33.

rather to highlight them as worthy of further philosophical consideration and to indicate some possible directions to pursue.

Whether a purely theoretical explanation could be offered of what an injunction such as Vivekananda's amounts to is open to question. But what we have seen in the foregoing ideas, both from Vivekananda and from the Wittgensteinian philosophers to whom I have referred, is a decisive move away from intellectualism and moralism; this move is accompanied by the recognition that religious impulses may have as much to do with awe and horror—with "a shuddering awareness of death and life together"—as with, for example, rational arguments for the existence of a deity or the yearning for morality to be grounded in the divine's unsurpassable benevolence.

IV. CONCLUDING REMARKS: TOWARD A RADICAL PLURALIST PHILOSOPHY OF RELIGION

The foregoing sections have called attention to the one-sidedness or attenuated scope that results from the application of intellectualist and moralistic tendencies in the philosophy of religion. I have also recommended some places to look for conceptual resources and rich examples to facilitate a move beyond these tendencies. The contention for which I have been arguing is not that intellectual (doctrinal, doxastic, belief-centered) dimensions of religion ought to be ignored or marginalized; nor have I been claiming that there is no place for appeals to moral criteria if one wishes to appraise religious activities or conceptions of divinity in moral terms. Rather, I have been arguing that insofar as these intellectualist and moralistic tendencies continue to be foregrounded in philosophical inquiries into religion, the inquiries are destined to remain limited in their appreciation of the diversity of forms that religiosity can and does take. Insofar, then, as there is reason to strive to overcome the shortcomings of predominant strands of contemporary Western philosophy of religion— shortcomings that critics such as Schilbrack have articulated in terms of narrowness, intellectualism, and insularity—there is reason to pay heed to potentially innovative approaches. One such approach is what I, building upon work by D. Z. Phillips, have termed a radical pluralist philosophy of religion, which aspires to do conceptual justice to diversity and heterogeneity, and indeed to ambivalence, in its treatment of religious phenomena.

A twofold sense of ambivalence has been present in this article from the outset, and rather than trying to pin it down with an ostensibly totalizing definition, I have elaborated it by means of examples. We have been concerned, on the one hand, with the ambivalence of certain affective reactions and, on the other, with certain conceptions or representations of

divinity in which ambivalent qualities are embodied. These two senses of ambivalence are intimately linked because the affective reactions at issue are themselves often reactions to conceptions of divinity that involve terrifying or intimidating elements as well as more pacific ones.[99] To put it in Wittgensteinian terms, we might say that the affective reactions and the conceptions of divinity are internally related. In a discussion of the poetry of R. S. Thomas—who, as we saw in my opening paragraph, was himself alive to ambivalence in the religious life—D. Z. Phillips observes that "The God who is a *Deus absconditus* [Isaiah 45:15] is not contingently hidden from us. Inscrutableness is part of our conception of God. The grace of God is internally related to our realisation of the radical contingency of human life."[100] To realize this radical contingency is to realize the precariousness and fragility of our present situation, of our human bodies, of the lives that we live: it is to perceive "the precariousness of human identity" (to reinvoke the phrase that Asad borrows from Cavell's exposition of the concept of horror). Phillips is proposing that a certain understanding of divine grace gains its sense from this realization of contingency inasmuch as the realization is an acknowledgment that our very lives and wellbeing are not under our control: they were gratuitously given and may gratuitously be taken away at any moment (and, one might add, "blessed be the name of the LORD").

The idea of an inscrutable deity may itself assume many forms. The examples I have cited from Indian sources are among them. Both in the theophany of Viṣṇu in the *Bhagavad Gītā*—so poignantly invoked by Oppenheimer among many others—and in the apocalyptic imagery surrounding various manifestations of the Goddess in Śākta traditions, the deity's inscrutability is bound up with his or her ambivalence: it is the confluence of dazzling beauty and monstrous destruction, or of nurturing compassion and apparent cruelty, that eludes comprehension. The divine attributes are, as it were, on display and yet there is something impenetrable and bewildering about their combination.

Giving attention to these ambivalent attitudes and conceptions of divinity contributes to a radical pluralist approach by expanding the repertoire of examples to be identified and discussed in the philosophy of religion, thereby helping to avoid falling prey to overgeneralizing theses and assumptions about what religious attitudes, modes of worship, or conceptions of the divine "must" consist in. Far from derogating conceptions of "bloodthirsty" deities as morally deficient, such an approach looks for the significance that

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[99] It may also be noted that in neither of these senses is ambivalence an all-or-nothing matter: it may come in degrees.

[100] Phillips, *R. S. Thomas: Poet of the Hidden God*, 153.

these conceptions can have. As a final point I might note that over recent decades the phenomenology of religion has fallen out of favor in some influential quarters of the study of religions. It has been criticized for presuming that religion is a *sui generis* phenomenon and for failing to see religion's entanglements with, or reducibility to, other strands of social, cultural, or political life.[101] To the extent that I have rejected the essentializing implications of both the anthropological and phenomenological accounts of religious experience to which I have referred, my discussion is compatible with those critiques. In common with recent defenders of phenomenology, however,[102] I maintain that the phenomenological tradition harbors conceptual resources that may usefully be deployed in non-essentializing ways. Notably, I have contended, concepts such as those of awe, horror, and ambivalence are among those with the potential, if treated with due criticality, to aid the development of non-intellectualist, non-moralistic, radically pluralist approaches to the philosophy of religion. Doing so need in no measure involve treating religion as isolable from other areas of human life and discourse; on the contrary, it is against the background of life as a whole, in its ambivalent or multivalent character, that articulations of religious attitudes and conceptions of divinity have the complex meanings that they do.

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[101] For critiques of the phenomenology of religion along these lines, see esp. Russell T. McCutcheon, *Manufacturing Religion: The Discourse on Sui Generis Religion and the Politics of Nostalgia* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997); McCutcheon, *Critics not Caretakers: Redescribing the Public Study of Religion* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2001); Timothy Fitzgerald, *The Ideology of Religious Studies* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), esp. chap. 2.

[102] See, e.g., James L. Cox, *An Introduction to the Phenomenology of Religion* (London: Continuum, 2010), esp. chap. 9; Jason N. Blum, "Retrieving Phenomenology of Religion as a Method for Religious Studies," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 80, no. 4 (December 2012): 1025–48.