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Neither 'underpinning' nor 'overarching': explicating a critically reciprocal philosophy of religious studies

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ABSTRACT

One conception of philosophy's role vis-à-vis religious studies is that of uncovering the 'conditions of the possibility' of approaches such as the history, psychology, or sociology of religion. Bernard Lonergan, for example, regarded philosophy of religion as 'underpinning' and 'overarching' other approaches; hence Jim Kanaris designated Lonergan's conception of philosophy of religion a 'philosophy of religious studies'. Without simply rejecting the latter conception, this article explicates an alternative, according to which philosophy of religion has much to learn from other approaches. Indeed, attentiveness to empirical studies is one means of overcoming a fixation on an abstract 'theism'. Engaging critically though sympathetically with work by Kevin Schilbrack and Timothy Knepper, and expounding the notion of critical description in philosophy of religion, the article makes conceptual space for a *critically reciprocal philosophy of religious studies*; this downplays the evaluation of 'religious reason-giving' while emphasizing self-criticality and reflection upon interdisciplinary methods.

KEYWORDS

critical description; interdisciplinarity; Timothy Knepper; Bernard Lonergan; philosophy of religion; religious studies; Kevin Schilbrack; thick description

Introduction

The term 'philosophy of religious studies' was first coined by Jim Kanaris (2002) to designate a conception of philosophy of religion formulated by the twentieth-century Canadian Jesuit priest and theologian Bernard Lonergan. Philosophy of religion had been envisaged by Lonergan in terms reminiscent of Immanuel Kant's critical philosophy, as the project of disclosing 'the conditions of the possibility' of some particular area of human activity. For Lonergan, philosophy of religion should be in the business of analysing not only religion, or religious experience, but also the practice of studying religion. As he puts it, 'The relevant philosophy would follow the transcendental turn: it would bring to light the conditions of the possibility of the religious studies and their correlative objects' (Lonergan 1974, 191). As branches of religious studies, Lonergan names the history, phenomenology, psychology, and sociology of religion (204). He views philosophy of religion, in his sense of the term, as standing in a superior position to each of

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these branches. Mixing his metaphors, he regards philosophy of religion as both 'underpinning' and 'overarching' them all (204); it is philosophy of religion that should not only unearth the conditions of the possibility of these other academic pursuits but also 'survey the areas investigated and the methods employed; … provide the ultimate basis for appropriate methods; and … justify or criticize accepted distinctions and procedures' (Lonergan 1974, 191). This is why Kanaris recommends the term 'philosophy of religious studies' to distinguish Lonergan's conception of philosophy of religion – or, at any rate, this particular aspect of that conception – from what 'philosophy of religion' is normally assumed to mean in contemporary academic discourse (Kanaris 2002, 6).

It is not my purpose in this article to rigorously examine Lonergan's conception of philosophy of religion or Kanaris's characterization of it as a philosophy of religious studies. My reason for beginning by outlining Lonergan's view is to illustrate one way of understanding what the term 'philosophy of religious studies' might mean. Following Lonergan's terminology, we could think of it as the 'underpinning' or 'overarching' conception: one in which philosophy has a privileged position in relation to other disciplines or other approaches to the study of religion. This privileged position purportedly affords philosophy not only the right but also the responsibility to police what goes on under the name of religious studies, adjudicating over whether the methods, concepts, and assumptions that are operative within the field are, or are not, legitimate. Without wishing to reject this construal of a philosophy of religious studies altogether, I do wish to argue that there is, or ought to be, conceptual space for alternative visions.

The principal vision that I advance and explore in this article is one that may be styled a critically reciprocal philosophy of religious studies: that is, an approach to the philosophy of religious studies whose primary objective is to cultivate relationships of reciprocal critical engagement between philosophical and other approaches to the study of religion. Concisely put, it is a conception of the philosophy of religious studies that views the philosophy of religion as having at least as much to learn from other approaches to the study of religion as those other approaches have to learn from the philosophy of religion. In this respect, it eschews the hierarchical metaphors of philosophy as 'underpinning' or 'overarching' other disciplines, instead favouring a metaphor of cordial – yet, where appropriate, suitably critical – mutual interaction.

Following this introduction, the article briefly surveys some existing conceptions of reciprocity between different disciplines involved in the study of religion, with particular attention to Kevin Schilbrack's understanding of the potentially mutually beneficial relationship between philosophical and social scientific approaches. I then discuss critically the work of some philosophers of religion who, like me, are eager to expand the scope of Western philosophy of religion beyond its traditional preoccupation with an abstract 'theism'. Taking recent work by Schilbrack and also Timothy Knepper as cases in point, I observe that their professed commitment to a conception of the distinctive task of philosophy as the evaluation of instances of reason-giving tends to be tacitly renounced when they undertake the difficult exercise of analysing diverse religious traditions and dimensions of religious life. What can be useful, I argue, is an alternative conception of philosophical enquiry, formulated in terms of what I here and elsewhere call *critical description*. This mode of descriptive philosophizing facilitates not only the questioning of overgeneralizing assumptions in the study of religions and of other aspects of human life, but also the utilization of ethnographic and other thickly descriptive material from fields outside of standard

philosophy of religion. This critically descriptive approach thus also encourages productive reciprocal engagement between philosophy and other disciplines involved in the study of religions. It is the project of explaining and promoting this interdisciplinary methodology that I term a critically reciprocal philosophy of religious studies.

Existing conceptions of reciprocity in the philosophy of religious studies

Although it was Kanaris who first coined the term 'philosophy of religious studies', more recently Kevin Schilbrack has done much to stimulate further thought about what this area of enquiry might consist in (e.g., Schilbrack 2014, 21, 199–200; 2016, passim). For Schilbrack, the philosophy of religious studies comprises 'critical reflection on the metaphysical, epistemological, and axiological presuppositions operating in the study of religion' (2021b, 45). In some places, he asserts that 'philosophers of religion should understand their task as including the philosophical study of the study of religions' (2014, 199) and that 'the philosophy of religious studies fits naturally as a subfield of philosophy of religion' (2021b, 45). Elsewhere, he observes that the philosophy of religious studies 'arises for any scholar of religion who becomes reflexive about our conceptual tools' (2017). It is thereby implied that, in principle, scholars of religion who do not identify themselves as philosophers may nonetheless participate in the philosophy of religious studies. Indeed, the implication is that they do participate in that enterprise to the extent that they reflexively scrutinize the concepts deployed in their own field of study. Furthermore, Schilbrack readily acknowledges that philosophers of religion have hitherto been neglectful of giving due reflexive attention to their own intellectual pursuits (2016, 101). For Schilbrack, therefore, the philosophy of religious studies need not take the form of philosophers exposing, or purporting to expose, conceptual weaknesses or dubious assumptions in the work of non-philosophical scholars of religion. Rather, not only is the philosophy of religious studies a type of enquiry that may be taken up by scholars other than philosophers, but the concepts, assumptions, and theories of philosophy of religion may be among its principal targets. Schilbrack thus makes room for reciprocal critical engagement between philosophers and other scholars of religion.

Prior to Schilbrack, the notion of reciprocity had already been invoked by Kanaris in connection with the philosophy of religious studies, albeit in a somewhat different relational context. Kanaris observes that in Lonergan's work there is 'a reciprocity of influence' between the philosophy of religious studies and religious experience, an influence 'which is multidimensional' (Kanaris 2002, 144). Lonergan's contention, Kanaris remarks, 'is that religious experience grounds philosophical reflection on it existentially as well as that which is grounded philosophically' (145). This remark is puzzling, however, for if religious experience is held to ground philosophical reflection, it is not obvious how the relationship is supposed to be reciprocal, unless the philosophical reflection is also held to inform (or 'ground') the religious experience. (Did Kanaris perhaps mean to write 'as well as *being* that which is grounded philosophically'?) Fortunately, for our present purposes it is not necessary to resolve this issue, given that the relationship being described by Kanaris is not specifically one between different disciplines or fields involved in the study of religion.

More pertinent to our present concerns is a remark from Schilbrack in which he overtly describes as reciprocal the relationship between philosophy (by which he

means primarily the philosophy of religion) and the social sciences. Schilbrack's point is that, while philosophy can usefully supply an analysis of 'philosophical assumptions' that may be implicit in social scientific explanations of religious matters, 'the explanatory work of the social sciences has a largely unacknowledged relevance to philosophical questions' (2014, 202). As Schilbrack sees it, this latter relevance pertains not to the truth of religious claims but to their justification. If, for example, a religious community tries to justify some belief or set of beliefs by appealing to the veracity of their own experience, or to the veracity of the experiences of those from whom the belief or set of beliefs has been inherited, 'they open their justification to challenge from rival explanations' (Schilbrack 2014, 202). Among other sources, these rival explanations may come from the social sciences. In such instances, Schilbrack maintains, it behoves philosophers of religion to pay attention to the social scientific explanations that are being proffered. To ignore them, we might suppose, would be philosophically naïve.

What Schilbrack is delineating is a situation in which social scientific enquiry informs a critique of the purported justification for a religious belief or cluster of beliefs. Elaborating Schilbrack's point, we might note that in situations of this sort the social sciences are aligned with what Paul Ricoeur famously dubbed the 'hermeneutics of suspicion' (e.g., Ricoeur 1971); such hermeneutical approaches serve to undermine the perceived epistemic legitimacy of religious commitment. The three patriarchal 'masters of suspicion' identified by Ricoeur are Marx, Nietzsche, and Freud (Ricoeur 1970, 33); he elsewhere also includes La Rochefoucauld and Feuerbach (Ricoeur 1974, 331; Ricoeur 1995, 22). For all these suspicion mongers, interpreting religion consists in dissolving the mirage of its object and identifying the underlying sources, whether these be political and economic oppression, the 'will to power', pathological neuroses, projections of human values, or anything else. The efforts of these figures exemplify explanation in its destructive mode. Following Heidegger, however, Ricoeur notes that destruction supplies an opportunity for a 'new foundation' (Ricoeur 1970, 33; cf. Heidegger 1962, 44). In effect, what the masters of suspicion are tearing down are inauthentic simulacra of faith, clearing the ground for what Ricoeur conceives as the project of 'restoration' or 'recollection' (1970, 28), the recovery of a genuine faith from the debris of poor imitations. Atheistic attacks on religion, or reductively secular efforts to explain its origins and function, are thus viewed by Ricoeur as harbouring the potential for arriving at a purified faith (see esp. Ricoeur 1974, 440–467; Burley 2014, 322–323).

Unlike Ricoeur, Schilbrack is not concerned with the recovery or reconstruction of faith, or of religion more generally, out of the rubble left in the wake of the deconstructive manoeuvres of social scientific explanations; neither does he wish to uncritically endorse the deconstructive manoeuvres themselves. Schilbrack merely wants philosophers of religion to be attentive to social scientific explanations so that they, first, do not blithely ignore the possibilities that those explanations represent, and second, are in a position to apply philosophical methods of analysis to the purported explanations that are being put forward. There is no significant disagreement between Schilbrack and me on these matters. Where we diverge is in our respective conceptions of the critical potential of philosophically informed varieties of description. For Schilbrack, in brief, the proper and 'distinctive' task of philosophy in general, including philosophy of religion, consists in 'the evaluation of truth claims, which means the assessment of reason-giving and arguments' (Schilbrack 2014, 25; see also idem 2021a, 714). This

understanding of philosophy is congruent with widespread assumptions about what philosophy ought to be, and I do not wish to gainsay it. I do, however, want to make space for a specific approach to philosophy that is concerned less with evaluating the 'truth claims' or 'reason-giving and arguments' of religious believers and more with offering descriptions of religious ways of being that call into question prevalent assumptions either about what religion 'must' be or about other features of human life.

Taking its inspiration in large part from the work of the Wittgenstein-influenced philosopher D. Z. Phillips, my approach develops in interdisciplinary and cross-cultural directions what Phillips termed a 'hermeneutics of contemplation' or 'contemplative conception of philosophy' (e.g., Phillips 2001; Sanders 2007). Central to this approach is a philosophical method that I call *critical description*, because it serves the critical function of highlighting questionable assumptions or overgeneralizations, whether on the part of oneself or on that of others involved in the study either of religion or of other branches of human activity. Notwithstanding their explicit advocacy of the evaluation of truth-claims or instances of reason-giving, Schilbrack and certain others who aspire to expand the philosophy of religion implicitly adopt other modes of philosophizing when seeking to engage with non-standard topics, such as religious traditions from outside the parameters of 'theism' or aspects of religion other than the affirmation of beliefs or doctrines that can be formulated in propositional terms. I thus detect a type of performative contradiction, or at least a tension, in the work of these philosophers of religion, a tension that needs to be recognized if the full potential of reciprocity between philosophy and other disciplines in the study of religion is to be actualized. Before I turn to a positive account of my proposed critically descriptive approach, the next section fleshes out, with reference to specific examples, the above contention concerning a performative tension in alternative approaches.

Performative tensions in expansive philosophies of religion

My notion of a performative tension is indebted to that of a performative contradiction, which was originated by Karl-Otto Apel and subsequently deployed by Jürgen Habermas and others (see Thomassen 2019). As Apel puts it, a performative contradiction occurs when there is a lack of consistency 'between one's *proposition* and one's *act of argumentation*' (2001, 43, original emphasis). Similarly, in Habermas's words, 'A performative contradiction occurs when a constative speech-act … rests on noncontingent presuppositions whose propositional content contradicts the asserted proposition' (Habermas 1990, 80). For my purposes, I am less concerned with revealing outright contradictions than with showing how certain ways of proceeding in philosophy of religion slip out of alignment with the explicit statements of method, or the conception of the proper role of philosophy, on the part of the philosophers at issue. Hence I am seeking to disclose performative tensions rather than contradictions. To illustrate what I mean, I shall discuss aspects of the work of Kevin Schilbrack and Timothy Knepper respectively.

Schilbrack and Knepper have been at the forefront of recent efforts to expand the philosophy of religion in ways that do justice to the multiplicity of religious traditions and the full range of activities that can be counted as religious. Notably, when it comes to specifying what philosophy of religion consists in, both Schilbrack and Knepper accentuate the task of evaluating instances of reason-giving. Schilbrack, as we have seen, does this

when articulating the 'distinctive contribution' that philosophy can make to the study of religion (2014, 25). Comparably, Knepper maintains that 'a philosophy of religion that has something to contribute to religious studies can and should critically evaluate those instances and forms of reason-giving that it describes and compares' (2013, 19, repeated on 66–67). While admitting that this evaluative task 'ought to take a back seat to description and comparison' until the philosophy of religion has established a sophisticated comprehension of the religious phenomena under examination, Knepper nonetheless repeatedly stresses that the primary focus of philosophy of religion – whether in its descriptive, comparative, or evaluative element – is and ought to be 'religious reason-giving' (19). When it comes to actually doing philosophy of religion in ways that give attention to diverse traditions and aspects of religious life, however, it is not only critical evaluation that takes a backseat in the respective work of Schilbrack and Knepper, but the theme of religious reason-giving altogether.

As I have argued elsewhere (Burley 2020, 51–52), when Schilbrack offers examples of what he means by 'the evaluation of religious reasons' (Schilbrack 2014, 192), the examples tend to involve briefly describing, or simply identifying, disagreements between different philosophers or religious thinkers rather than demonstrations of how, as a philosopher of religion, one might take a stance in relation to those disagreements. In one instance, Schilbrack invites his readers to imagine 'a class on religious ethics' in which the exercise is to establish whether, or to what extent, the implications of the bodhisattva vow, as articulated in the writings attributed to the Buddhist philosopher-monk Śāntideva (7th–8th centuries CE), are consistent with the universalizability principle laid out in Kant's moral philosophy (Schilbrack 2014, 192). In a second instance, we are invited to imagine 'a class on religious thought' where it is asked whether the arguments advanced by the Vedānta philosopher Śaṅkara (*c.* 8th–9th centuries CE) contain 'the logical inconsistencies that [the twentieth-century American philosopher] Charles Hartshorne says they do' (192; cf. Hartshorne 1988). These are both interesting examples of exercises in cross-cultural comparative philosophy. It is notable that each of them is concerned with the ideas of figures who have commonly been recognized to be philosophers. In this respect, the works of these figures are indeed places where instances of reason-giving are apt to be found. Although the examples are sketched too thinly to provide any indication of how the comparative exercise ought to proceed, there is undoubtedly the potential in them for fruitful analysis and elucidation of the philosophical positions in question. Whether each of the exercises counts as critically evaluating these philosophical positions, rather than simply comparatively analysing them, would depend on whether we treat as normative Kant's moral philosophy, in the one case, or Hartshorne's criteria of logical consistency, in the other. The main point that I want to make, however, is that, when we step outside the realm of ideas that can readily be recognized as philosophical positions or claims, the insistence that the distinctive contribution of philosophy resides in the evaluation of truth-claims or instances of reason-giving and argumentation crumbles.

In recent work, Schilbrack acknowledges this crumbling, when he asks what form 'a philosophy of religious practices' should take (Schilbrack 2021b, 44). Appreciating that the jury remains out on this question, Schilbrack nevertheless admits that the model of philosophy as the appraisal of truth-claims hardly applies in this case. There is no consensus concerning which questions relating to religious practices should be addressed by

philosophy; yet, as Schilbrack acknowledges, it would be out of place to ask, for example, whether a service of worship is true or false or whether some particular religious community is 'warranted' in celebrating religious feasts or undertaking religious fasts (where 'warranted' is assumed to have some categorical or objective sense) (Schilbrack 2021b, 44). Questions of this sort are out of place because it is unclear what it would even mean to ask them in relation to these or other religious practices. In such cases, therefore, Schilbrack concedes that instead of trying to concoct evaluative questions, one important role for philosophy is to take a 'step back … and to focus on the logically prior interpretive issue' – namely, the issue of 'what kind of activity' a religious practice is (44). This seems right, although the qualification should be added that we need not assume that what get called religious practices all fall neatly into one category: not only may they take diverse forms, but they may serve many different purposes, and some may not be well described as serving any purpose at all. It might also be added that Schilbrack's way of formulating the question – 'what kind of activity is a religious practice?' – could be heard as harbouring the metaphysical assumption that there is some determinate set of activities that 'really are' religious practices, and the job of the philosopher is to reveal the shared essence or common features of all and only those practices. An alternative way of phrasing the question, which would give it a more conceptual inflection and a less metaphysically question-begging one, would be 'what kinds of activities get designated as "religious practices" – and why, and by whom?'

As a further task for philosophy to pursue in connection with religious practices, Schilbrack identifies the second-order project of examining presuppositions underlying sundry approaches to the study of such practices, whether the approaches be rooted in the humanities or in the social sciences (2021b, 45). In other words, this further task consists in the philosophy of religious studies, in roughly the sense of this term that I earlier labelled the 'underpinning' or 'overarching' sense.

We see, then, that when it comes to expanding the scope of philosophy of religion to encompass the scrutiny of religious practices, Schilbrack's commitment to the evaluative character of philosophy does not go completely out the window. The evaluative lens, however, is refocused away from the practices that, in various contexts, get designated as 'religious', and towards the disciplines that study them. With regard to the practices themselves, philosophy must rest content, at least for the time being, with 'clarifying the nature of religious practice' (2021b, 44). It is noticeable that his depiction of the latter clarificatory objective relies on the two-stage (or 'two-task') model of philosophy of religion that Schilbrack has recommended in various places (e.g., 2014, 25 et passim; 2021a, 713), the two stages being, first, description or interpretation, and second, evaluation. That this two-stage model is in play is implied by Schilbrack's remark that addressing the 'interpretive issue' (of 'what kind of activity' religious practice is) involves *stepping back* from evaluative questions. A consequence of this way of depicting the clarificatory endeavour is that the business of describing, interpreting, or clarifying is insinuated to be no more than a preliminary exercise, a mere prerequisite for the further task of evaluation to occur. With such a model in view, the philosophy of religious practice that Schilbrack advocates is bound to seem incomplete until it has been established what are the right methods to apply, or the right questions to ask, in order for religious practices to be philosophically evaluated. This is precisely the insinuation that the philosophical method which I call critical description is intended to avoid, for critical

description is not a first-stage method waiting to be superseded by a second stage; it has its own critical purposes built into the descriptive method itself. Moreover, it is well suited for drawing upon material from fields that are not explicitly philosophical, thereby facilitating reciprocal engagement between philosophy and these other fields. Critical description thus constitutes a paradigm for the philosophy of religious studies that diverges from those which characterize the role of philosophy in terms of 'underpinning' or 'overarching' the procedures of other approaches. These points will be elaborated in the next section; prior to that, however, I shall again illustrate the theme of performative tensions in expansive approaches to philosophy of religion, this time with reference to work by Tim Knepper.

Knepper's book *The Ends of Philosophy of Religion* sets out a threefold methodology, comprising 'thick description', 'formal comparison', and 'multidimensional explanation and evaluation' (2013, esp. Part 2), all three components of which are supposedly directed towards 'religious reason-giving' (e.g., 2013, 75). His more recent textbook, *Philosophies of Religion: A Global and Critical Introduction* (2023), aims to put this threefold methodology into practice. The textbook is a monumental achievement, constituting by far the most thoroughgoing cross-cultural and multireligious textbook for the philosophy of religion on the market. One of its most notable features is its pluralization of the very category of philosophy of religion. Rather than assuming (as many philosophers of religion tend to do) that this category is reducible to the way in which philosophy of religion has typically been prosecuted in modern Western academic contexts, Knepper picks out six traditions or 'meta-traditions' of 'philosophizing about religion' (2023, 6), only one of which is the tradition of 'European/academic philosophy of religion during and after the European enlightenment' (17). The other five are, respectively, the traditions of 'East Asian', 'South Asian', 'Mediterranean/Abrahamic', 'African', and 'Indigenous American' philosophies of religion (2023, ch. 1 et passim). Knepper treats these six as exemplary rather than exhaustive of the myriad ways of engaging in the philosophy of religion, invoking the term 'meta-tradition' in recognition of the fact that the traditions are themselves internally variegated (14).

The aspiration to diversify philosophy of religion in the way that Knepper does is admirable; the textbook succeeds in laying bare the narrowness of prevailing paradigms by presenting us with a vividly contrastive exemplar of what a 'global' philosophy of religion might look like. What is less clear, however, is whether Knepper fulfils the 'critical' promise of his project by retaining a sharp focus on instances of religious reason-giving. Echoing his earlier work, Knepper's proposed methodology for a global–critical philosophy of religion comprises 'three steps' – namely, 'robust description, formal comparison, and critical evaluation' (2023, 78). As in the case of Schilbrack's two-stage model, Knepper's formulation of his approach in terms of steps implies a progression from one to the next. The descriptive and comparative steps are necessary, but only insofar as they set the scene for the task of evaluation to get underway. As Knepper emphasizes, if '*sophisticated judgments*' rather than superficial ones are to be made, then a sophisticated understanding 'of what religion is and how it works' will be required (2023, 2, original emphasis). The robust or thick description, combined with comparative analysis, is designed to engender this sophisticated level of understanding. According to Knepper, the 'third and final step, critical evaluation', can be viewed as addressing 'the "so what?" question' – that is, the question of why 'any of these descriptions and comparisons

matter to me and the world' (80). 'More precisely', Knepper adds, 'critical evaluation is the process by which philosophers raise and pursue questions of truth and value about acts of religious reason-giving in comparative perspective' (80).

In view of the prominence given to the critical evaluation of acts of religious reason-giving in Knepper's professed methodology, it would be understandable for readers to expect some substantial examples of such evaluation to be supplied in the textbook. In practice, however, despite frequently enjoining his readers to decide which of a number of different religious or philosophical outlooks is to be preferred, Knepper does relatively little to illustrate how to arrive at such a decision. For example, among the 'Questions for Discussion' at the end of a chapter on different views about the origin of the cosmos, is the request to 'Describe, compare, and evaluate some of the cosmologies of our six traditions of philosophy of religion. What arguments can be provided for or against them? Which cosmogonies do you find true? Why?' (2023, 292); yet the main body of the chapter, while providing extensive overviews of various ideas from each of the six traditions to which Knepper refers, offers few resources with which to address these questions.

In the case of the Indigenous American and African philosophies of religion, for instance, creation stories from Lakȟóta and Yorùbá mythology, respectively, are cited to instantiate the cosmologies of these communities. In 'Lakȟóta philosophy of religion', we are told, 'the cosmos is created by, or perhaps just comprised of, the creative force of *Wakȟáŋ Tȟáŋka*, which means something like great incomprehensibility, great mystery, or great sacred' (272). The myth depicting how the world comes into being is intriguing and elaborate. It begins with a lone 'rock' (*Iŋyaŋ*) creating 'a circle out of himself' through the power of his own blood; the circle or disc, named *Makȟá*, comprises 'the earth and the waters on it' (273). The story proceeds by recounting how a quarrel between the earth and waters gives rise to the sky, how the sun was created out of 'the darkness' to keep Makȟá warm, and how, eventually, the first 'two-legged' beings – the human nation – were brought into existence (273; see also White Hat 2012, 29–30). When turning to the Yorùbá creation myths, Knepper notes that, in these as well, the complex world is generated through the acts of several divine agents, including 'one "high God" … and three primordial *Òrìṣà*' (2023, 274). In the course of his synopsis, Knepper usefully reiterates the point that the involvement of multiple divine contributors to the process of creation signals a difference between the kinds of myth typified in the Lakȟóta and Yorùbá traditions, on the one hand, and those that feature a supremely powerful monotheistic deity, on the other. This and similar comparative observations present a challenge to pervasive assumptions in mainstream Western philosophy of religion, most notably the assumption – evident in the practice of the majority of participants in this branch of philosophy – that its parameters are coterminous with those of the analysis of monotheism.

Knepper's treatment of the Lakȟóta and Yorùbá myths fails to take full advantage of this critical dimension of his exposition, largely because he remains implicitly committed to the expectation that these myths should be subjected to the type of critical appraisal that is best suited for evaluating philosophical arguments. No reasons or arguments for accepting or indeed for rejecting the myths in question have been advanced, nor is it even obvious what form such reasons or arguments could take. One might go so far as to suppose that it would be a category mistake to regard these myths as though they were evaluable in terms of whether there are strong arguments 'for or against

them'; yet there is no acknowledgement of this confusion of categories when it comes to the 'Questions for Discussion' at the end of Knepper's chapter. What would have been appropriate is an admission comparable to the one we saw in Schilbrack's recognition that evaluative questions are hardly applicable to religious practices; so too, we might think, are they hardly applicable to creation myths. At the very least, some account is needed of the role of such myths in the lives of those for whom they possess deep significance. It is in providing such an analysis of mythic narratives that the important philosophical work resides; otherwise there remains a danger that one's readers will assume that they are being urged to evaluate the myths by reference to the criteria that have been set out for evaluating acts of religious reason-giving or argumentation.

As I have suggested already, an exposition of creation myths deriving from indigenous religious traditions, or the examination of religious practices such as the performance of rituals, has the potential to constitute a provocation that calls into question prevailing assumptions in Western philosophy of religion. To do so effectively, however, the treatment of these topics needs to be framed in a way that appreciates *how* they constitute such a provocation. My proposal is that the method I call critical description can provide such a framing, and that the method facilitates productive engagement with other disciplines in the study of religion.

Critical description and interdisciplinary reciprocity

A textbook such as Knepper's *Philosophies of Religion* serves the valuable purpose of describing heterogeneous ideas, stories, or systems of belief and practice, from numerous religious or cultural traditions. What is needed for injecting a critical purpose into these descriptions is their mobilization as extensive counterexamples to overgeneralizing assumptions or theories that are operative either in the philosophy of religion or in cognate areas of enquiry. To reiterate the problem: by clinging to the conception of critical philosophizing as the evaluation of instances of religious reason-giving, Knepper implies that what is to be evaluated are the religious ideas, stories, and systems of belief and practice themselves. But given that, in many instances, the presentation of these ideas, stories, beliefs, and practices – whether by the traditions in question or in secondary expositions such as Knepper's – is not accompanied by anything readily recognizable as an act of reason-giving, readers are liable to be left wondering how any critical evaluation is to occur. What I call a critically descriptive approach, by contrast, turns the critical lens around, focusing it upon the conceptual and theoretical presuppositions (including presuppositions about what counts as 'religious') both of the one undertaking the enquiry and of others engaged in comparable investigative exercises. It thus enables the descriptive material to function critically itself rather than being the supposed target of critical evaluation.

D. Z. Phillips, though not using the specific term 'critical description', expounds aspects of this method in various publications. Especially notable is an essay about the philosophical approach of his friend and colleague Peter Winch in which Phillips contrasts Winch's reflections on the Zande people of southern Sudan with the assertions of someone who assumes that a Western scientific worldview is superior to the traditional Zande one (Phillips 1990, 216–217). Far from presupposing the superiority of Western science, Winch looks for the sense in the Zande beliefs and practices. By

seeking to bring out this sense for readers whose own cultural context is very different from that of the Zande people, Winch, as Phillips puts it, shows an interest in 'weaning us away from the idea that what *we* find important, the ways in which *we* make sense of our lives, are underpinned by a necessity, such that this is all that *could* be important or make sense to anyone' (Phillips 1990, 217, original emphasis). In the same essay, Phillips proceeds to contrast Winch's approach to moral philosophy with the approaches of those philosophers who assume that it is the purpose of such philosophy to supply guidance for what to do and how to live. For Winch, the philosophical task is to offer descriptions of complex morally relevant situations, not to then tell us how we should respond to those situations, but rather to elucidate the diversity of possible moral responses to the world. A course of action that presents itself as an option for one person may be viewed as no option at all by someone else: 'Winch is emphasising that philosophy's task here, as elsewhere, is *descriptive*, one of noting that this is how it is where moral considerations are concerned' (Phillips 1990, 225, original emphasis).

Philosophers who are captivated by the assumption that the distinctive or indeed defining purpose of philosophy is an evaluative one are liable to perceive the approach that Phillips is presenting as somehow deficient or merely preliminary. Overlooked by such philosophers is the reflexively critical potential of this approach. By describing a practice or course of action in ways that show how it can make sense in a human life, philosophers may open up, both for readers and for themselves, fresh understandings of human possibilities. Among the potential consequences of this opening up (or 'loosening up', to paraphrase Wittgenstein (2003, 83)) are that one's previous assumptions are shown to be unduly narrow. One may also come to see that one's beliefs and values, or the beliefs and values that are prevalent in one's own culture or social group, are contingent to a degree that one had previously underappreciated. In this respect, the description serves a critical function which may be compared to the notion of cultural critique in anthropology.

Since I have drawn a comparison between critical description in philosophy and cultural critique in anthropology elsewhere (Burley 2020, 57–60; see also Burley 2023), it would not be a good use of the space that I have here to expound the comparison at length. The crucial point, however, is that cultural critique in social or cultural anthropology consists in the explicit or implicit calling into question of 'taken-for-granted assumptions' in one's own society by viewing them in juxtaposition to 'cultural patterns' in one or more other societies (Marcus and Fischer 1999, 1). Borrowing vocabulary from literary criticism, proponents of this notion of cultural critique have characterized it in terms of 'defamiliarization': by comparing and contrasting one's cultural norms and expectations with those of very different societies, one's own norms and expectations may appear less familiar than they did before (hence 'defamiliarized'), thereby affording a fresh perspective on them (Marcus and Fischer 1999, esp. ch. 6). What I am calling critical description in philosophy of religion can do something similar, affording fresh perspectives on aspects of religion in human life by drawing attention to diverse examples across different cultures.

This resemblance between methods in philosophy and anthropology facilitates mutual engagement between philosophical and other approaches to the study of religion. A fertile point of intersection is the method of thick description. First coined by the philosopher Gilbert Ryle (1971, chs. 36 and 37), the term 'thick description' was subsequently

adapted and popularized in social scientific contexts by the cultural anthropologist Clifford Geertz (esp. 1973) and by sociologists such as Norman Denzin (e.g., 2001, ch. 6). In these social scientific environments, the paradigmatic forms of thick description are those supplied in ethnographic studies of human communities. Looking to such ethnographic studies for richly textured expositions of the cultural settings in which certain religious beliefs, practices, and modes of discourse have the life that they do is one way in which philosophy of religion can learn much from social scientific, especially cultural anthropological, approaches to the study of religion.

Knepper stresses the value of thick description for understanding the place of religious claims and concepts (and, of course, 'varieties of religious reason-giving') in the complex worldviews and ways of life of the communities whose claims and concepts they are (e.g., Knepper 2013, ch. 4). Although instances of thick description are difficult to find in his published work, one way of reading Knepper's textbook would be to regard each chapter as contributing to a cumulative picture of each of the six traditions or meta-traditions of philosophy of religion with which the book is concerned. If read in this way, then the book as a whole could be deemed to supply something close to a thickly descriptive account of the six traditions in question and, as a consequence, of the possible styles of philosophy of religion more generally. One means of thickening the description further would be to situate the myths and stories of a people more firmly in the lives of those who tell them. In the case of the creation myths outlined in Knepper's presentation of Lakȟóta and Yorùbá cosmogonies, for example, stronger connections could be drawn between these myths, on the one hand, and the traditional conception of the landscape on the part of the respective communities, on the other. For this purpose, the concept of 'sacred geography' could usefully be invoked.

Originating in nineteenth-century studies of topographical locations associated with the Bible (e.g., Parish 1813; Sime 1835), the term 'sacred geography' has recently been applied to religious traditions outside of these biblical contexts, ranging from the Maya of Mesoamerica (Bassie-Sweet 2008) to the Hindu traditions of India (Eck 2012). Of particular relevance to Yorùbá indigenous religion is a study by Jacob Olúpọ̀nà of the sacred geography that pervades the city of Ilé-Ifẹ̀ in southwestern Nigeria (Olúpọ̀nà 2011). 'Topographical features and important geographic landmarks are endowed with religious meanings and associated with events that embody a people's cosmology and worldview', Olúpọ̀nà writes. 'These events confer meaning and distinction on the Yorùbá people and places' (Olúpọ̀nà 2011, 28). In the case of the city of Ilé-Ifẹ̀ in particular, its 'religious system' might be regarded as 'a record of places, activities, and peoples in experiences of religious significance' (28). Olúpọ̀nà begins his exposition of 'the Ilé-Ifẹ̀ experience of place' by narrating a creation myth of the Yorùbá people, for myth and geography are so tightly interwoven that 'it is primarily the sacred story that gives this city its legitimacy and identity' (28).

Similar points can be made, and have been made, concerning the relation between myth and geography among the Lakȟóta. David Martínez, for example, has accentuated the need to 'appreciate the connection between myth and place' (Martínez 2004, 329), noting that the Lakȟóta have traditionally regarded 'the land and its flora and fauna … as expressions of [*Wakȟáŋ Tȟáŋka*], who is the "great unifying life force that flowed in and through all things"' (326). Drawing connections such as these between mythology and sacred geography complements rather than supplants Knepper's

treatment of Lakȟóta and Yorùbá myths, and much more would need to be said about these connections to provide a genuinely thick description which illuminates the religious worldviews of the peoples concerned. All I am intending to do here, however, is to indicate one direction in which to proceed if thick description is what one is aiming to develop. We see in these suggestions, and also in Knepper's textbook, the value of utilizing material from a variety of disciplines, in this case especially cultural anthropology and folklore studies, to build up a nuanced picture of relevant cultural and religious features. This is a key aspect of what I mean by 'critical reciprocity'. The material from outside philosophy enriches the philosophical enterprise, prompting critical reflection both on religion in its multiple dimensions and on the limitations of extant philosophical theories or assumptions related to religious topics; meanwhile, the attentiveness to conceptual specificities, which is or ought to be characteristic of philosophy, enables a refinement of the analysis of the descriptive material. Opportunities are thus created not only for mutual critical engagement between practitioners of different disciplines and subfields within the study of religions, but also for potentially rewarding collaborative interactions and the development of interdisciplinary methods.

The further possibilities of critical description are extensive. It is not only ethnographic studies that can be utilized as sources of thickly descriptive accounts of religious beliefs and activities in their broader cultural spheres; other viable sources include works of biography, history, and narrative fiction. In works such as novels, plays, and films, religious themes can be brought to life by showing the meaning and significance that they have in the experiences and social intercourse of people in diverse scenarios. As a case in point, the plays and memoirs of a literary master such as Elie Wiesel can exhibit, through the depiction of concrete characters and situations, a variety of responses to the world which elude simple characterizations in terms of religiousness or anti-religiousness. In Wiesel's play *The Trial of God*, for instance, the character Berish powerfully embodies the long tradition of protesting against or wrestling with God in the face of horrific suffering. When he declares that 'it is as a Jew that, with [his] last breath', he will 'protest to God' (Wiesel 1979, 156) – protest, that is, about the terrible misfortunes that have befallen his family and the wider Jewish community in seventeenth-century Ukraine – he encapsulates a complex vein of religious faith that combines belief and repudiation. Such complexities become intelligible through their portrayal in narrative or dialogic form: we see how such attitudes can make sense within the intricate layers of a human life. In this respect, thickly descriptive – or thickly depictive – representations, whether fictional or not, are capable of disrupting assumptions such as that according to which there is a categorical demarcation between 'theism' and 'atheism', thereby enabling philosophers of religion to undertake more nuanced interrogations of the categories of belief, non-belief, and the rejection of belief (see, e.g., Sutherland 1977; Schweizer 2011).

The latter example, in which a work of literature is brought into critical dialogue with prominent assumptions in philosophy of religion, may not immediately seem pertinent to the philosophy of religious studies. This is because the term 'religious studies' is not typically, or primarily, associated with literary works. But the category of religious studies is capacious enough to accommodate both the study of religiously relevant literary works and those literary works themselves. Indeed, just as claims have been made to the effect that works of narrative or dramatic art, including novels, plays, and

films, can engage in philosophy (e.g., Diamond 1982; Nussbaum 1992; Mulhall 2007), so it may be contended that such works can engage in the study of religion as well. For this reason, to the extent that the artistic works serve as critical lenses or mirrors through which to examine assumptions and theories in philosophy of religion, they can legitimately be described as participating in a critically reciprocal philosophy of religious studies.

Of course, not all approaches and materials supplied by disciplines in the broad family of religious studies – whether historical, literary, social scientific, or anything else – will be of equal value to a critically reciprocal engagement between philosophy and these other modes of inquiry into religious matters. Critically reciprocal philosophers of religious studies must be discerning about the sources upon which they draw, just as must anyone else involved in academic pursuits. The point, however, is to remain receptive to opportunities for learning from a variety of disciplines rather than either writing off any discipline as a whole or presuming that the only, or principal, philosophical objective is to evaluate where those other disciplines are going right and where they are going wrong.

Concluding remarks

The conception of a philosophy of religious studies that I have been explicating in this article is one that involves a measure of humility on the part of philosophers of religion. Instead of viewing the role of philosophy vis-à-vis other approaches to the study of religions as one of supplying an analysis that 'underpins' or 'overarches' them all, a critically reciprocal philosophy of religious studies affirms the degree to which philosophy of religion can learn from its interactions with other approaches as much as it can be of benefit to them. Needless to say, the fruitfulness of this critically reciprocal orientation will be assessable only in the light of its deployment in particular instances. Since my main purpose in this article has been to explain, at a fairly high level of generality, what this orientation might look like, this has not been the place to venture far into specific examples. Nonetheless, my mentioning, in the previous section, of how studies of sacred geography might enhance an understanding of mythology, and of how dramatic and narrative sources can constitute types of thick description that elucidate religiously complex attitudes and forms of life, are hints in the direction of determinate possibilities.

One complaint about the conception of a philosophy of religious studies advanced in this article might be that it could just as readily be called an interdisciplinary approach to the philosophy of religion. What is it that makes it a philosophy *of religious studies*? My response is that the name is not of ultimate importance. Whether the term 'critically reciprocal philosophy of religious studies' catches on is neither here nor there in comparison to the crucial issue, which is that cross-disciplinary and interdisciplinary engagement between subfields in the study of religions ought to be encouraged. As many readers will be aware, the field known as 'religious studies', 'study of religions', or variations on this theme, operates under conditions of insecurity in many contemporary institutions of higher education (British Academy 2019; AAR Board of Directors 2020). Academic positions, and in some cases whole departments, are all-too-often viewed as dispensable by institutional management strategists. Although the type of cross-disciplinary interplay that I am championing in this article is unlikely to contribute significantly to fortifying the position of religious studies in the academy, it does have the

virtue of, among other things, accentuating the degree to which disciplines and subfields may profitably interact. What the term 'critically reciprocal philosophy of religious studies' indicates is that reflection upon methodological matters remains to the fore, and that the reflection goes in more than one direction. The present article has been one contribution to the ongoing discussion of those methodological matters.

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