

Burley, Mikel *A Radical Pluralist Philosophy of Religion: Cross-Cultural, Multireligious, Interdisciplinary*. (London: Bloomsbury, 2020). Pp. 245. £17.99 (Pbk). ISBN 9781350098329

Mikel Burley's book both unifies and extends his valuable work on diversification in philosophy of religion. Burley is particularly concerned with expanding the subject by drawing from other disciplines, including religious studies and anthropology, and by exploring a wider range of religious forms of life. This attempt to diversify philosophy of religion mirrors a similar trend in other areas of contemporary philosophy, and in Western culture at large. Burley observes that

As knowledge of multiple religions and cultures becomes ever more readily accessible, and as the recognition grows that parochialism and cultural myopia in philosophy is no longer an option, exploration of alternative methods is urgently needed. (65)

For Burley, this parochialism manifests in two particular problems. First, an 'obsession with a homogenized theism [that] militates against consideration of the full diversity of religions' (2). In his view, philosophy of religion has been devoted almost entirely to issues relevant only to the 'Abrahamic' religions – particularly questions about God – at the expense of other religions. Moreover, that even the Abrahamic religions are homogenised in philosophy of religion, with important differences between them ignored. The second issue is that there has been 'an exclusive preoccupation with matters of beliefs about God – narrowly construed in terms of 'propositional attitudes'' (ibid.), where questions concerning the justification of theistic belief are only one philosophically relevant issue for religion. Religious life also consists in active devotion, ritual experiences, ethical judgments, aesthetic appreciation, and community life, all of which create issues of philosophical interest. Burley's aim is to widen the scope of philosophy of religion and, in doing so, overcome these two problems.

The book opens with a three-chapter section largely devoted to methodology in philosophy of religion. The first chapter considers how to philosophically respond to the diversity of religions. It first outlines the pluralistic theories of John Hick and John Cobb, which attempt to find common ground between major religions with the aim of showing that all religions point to the same transcendent cosmic 'Reality' (Hick) or 'Worldsoul' (Cobb). Burley objects to these approaches to religious pluralism as homogenising and 'overlooking or misdescribing the [religious] diversity that exists in their hurry to devise a general theory of religion' (14). A third, non-homogenising theory by Victoria Harrison – 'internalist pluralism' – seeks to highlight the differences between religions by claiming that they constitute distinct 'conceptual schemes', and that religious people working within one conceptual scheme will not be able to understand those within another: one's 'faith-stance' must be internal to the religion if one is to understand its conceptual scheme. This idea is intended to produce religious tolerance and mutual respect between religions. Burley points out, though, that Harrison's theory is implausible, 'because we know that one does not have to participate in a given religion in order to come to

understand important features of it' (41). Hence, one does not, contrary to Harrison, need to have a faith-stance internal to a religion to understand that religion.

Motivated by the failures of these pluralistic theories, Chapter 2 sets out a methodology for conducting work in philosophy of religion with two dimensions. First, '*attentiveness to heterogeneity*', and second, '*thickening of description*' (43). These methods are connected in the sense that, for Burley, philosophy of religion ought to *describe* the *diverse* and distinctive features of religions, rather than seek to homogenise them. The function of philosophy to describe religious phenomena is central in this chapter. Burley claims that 'description is routinely undervalued in philosophy', where it is generally regarded that the 'proper' task of philosophy is 'critical evaluation' (44; cf. 52). Now, this may be the view of Kevin Schilbrack – Burley's main interlocutor for this chapter – but as a general claim about philosophy, this seems questionable. If conceptual analysis or metaphysics count as a methods of description, then Western philosophy is built on offering rigorous description. Despite these reservations, there are two proposals put forward in this chapter that seem fruitful for improving description in philosophy of religion. The first, drawn from a comparison with anthropology, is to study unfamiliar religious forms of life to then use as a critique against which one is more familiar. The second, drawn from the work of Gilbert Ryle, is to provide 'thicker' descriptions of religion. Though Burley resists offering a definition of thick description, he identifies it with the use of a wider range of sources for giving examples of religious phenomena, including 'literature, films and plays...biographical or autobiographical accounts...[or] ethnographic studies' (65). Deploying ideas from other disciplinary sources would certainly be a welcome innovation in contemporary philosophy in general.

Chapter 3 exemplifies Burley's aims at offering thicker description. It begins with broad endorsement of the view that narrative fiction, in various forms, is not 'merely illustrative of particular philosophical viewpoints,' but as 'doing philosophy' itself (67). But whilst the examples Burley draws from can certainly be said to make substantive philosophical claims, the point that I believe Burley wants to focus on is that narrative fiction reveals different ways of being religious, or indeed, of being anti-religious. His initial example is Dostoyevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov*, in which there are many claims that are clearly relevant to philosophy of religion, especially suffering and the existence of God. But by looking closely at the overall narrative, the point Burley takes away is that the result of detailed contemplation 'is the vivid exposition of contrasting perspective on the world, each of which is in its own way resolutely sincere' (82). The second example Burley draws from is Wole Soyinka's play *Death and the King's Horseman*. Set in colonial Nigeria in the 1940s, the play draws from a number of religious traditions and religious practices that are less-familiar to Western audiences. Burley attempts to draw out these religious stances in his aim at thick description (86-91), though only a book-length analysis could do justice to the various complex faith-positions occupied by the story's complex characters.

The second part of the book aims to exemplify the methodology Burley has proposed. Chapter 4 offers an account of several different conceptions of compassion within the Buddhist traditions with the aim of providing thick description. It is also a

move away from the tendency towards homogenisation of religions within philosophy, and to underline the point that there is 'genuine diversity not only between religions but also within them' (99). For, whilst compassion may be understood in one way within one religion, or even one branch of a religion, it may not be understood the same way across religions. He first considers the concept of compassion which is associated with maternal loving-kindness in which 'everyone be cared for as though they were one's mother or one's only child' (104). This is contrasted with the concept of compassion according to which compassion is 'the voluntary sacrifice of one's own body' (106) for some greater cause. The powerful example that Burley dwells upon is the self-immolation that has become more common in some cultures, as a political statement or attempt to bring about justice for others. One is tempted to draw similarities between these two kinds of compassion, as an attempt at deeper philosophical inquiry into the nature of compassion. For instance, it seems they both involve a self-sacrificial action for the benefit of others, which is perhaps at the core of compassion across all religious, and non-religious understandings. Burley seems drawn to this proposal for himself after considering the Buddhist doctrine of 'skillful means', according to which any action, including rape and murder, can be considered compassionate providing it is done with compassionate intent. Burley asks whether 'it is genuinely conceivable that an act of rape or murder be motivated by compassion, or whether we lose our grip on what 'compassion' could mean in such circumstances' (117). I stress that here is a way of combining Burley's desire to diversify the phenomena explored in philosophy of religion with the contemporary analytic approach that seeks to prosecute the essential components of a concept – an approach that would be multireligious with a thicker description, but also analytic in spirit.

Chapter 5 explores different cultural 'ways of being human' by focussing on different ways 'of respecting the dead' (127). From a Western perspective, it is often assumed that the dead should be buried or cremated in order to respect their deceased bodies. This view is likely due to the Christian influence on Western culture. But looking at ethnographic studies of the Wari' people from Brazil, Burley shows how they expressed respect for the deceased by engaging in a form of 'endocannibalism' (125-6), whereby the Wari' community would consume the dead body to relinquish emotional commitment to the deceased. This persuasive study shows a clear cultural distinction in how respect is carried out.

Chapter 6 provides a detailed description of a particular ritual practice carried out in India involving divine possession and animal sacrifice. The gruesome imagery described, including vivid depictions of pigeons and goats being sacrificed and their blood consumed (155-8), is contextualised in two principal ways. First, through the religious and theological background to the events. Second, through a literary understanding of 'the grotesque', which particularly emphasises 'a devouring body' focalised in the mouth of 'the grotesque face' (142). Whilst Burley's descriptions of sacrifice and possession increase our understanding of these phenomena, they do seem like anthropological case studies rather than philosophical description. But nonetheless, they raise interesting questions for philosophy, including, as Burley notes, the nature

and ethics of these practices (160-1). Rather than exploring these issues, though, Burley sees this chapter as providing a kind of critique of philosophy of religion by prompting a 'radical expansion' of 'the concept of religion itself'.

Chapter 7 investigates the concept of animism in indigenous traditions. One central idea that is explored is the use of language by indigenous people when they say, for instance, that 'The spirit of the land hates [the white people]' and 'trees talk to one another' (176-7). Rather than looking to treat this language as either literal or metaphorical, Burley draws from D. Z. Phillips, proposing that we are offered 'a language in which to think of the world' – a way to 'see different possibilities of sense...or meaning' (178). Nevertheless, it is presumably possible to determine whether a particular speaker or tradition intends to be understood as speaking literally or metaphorically. The chapter concludes by reviewing, and rejecting, 'the prevalent stereotype' of 'the ecologically noble savage' (187), by showing ways in which indigenous peoples have been especially brutal towards animals.

Burley's work on diversifying the questions, methods, and phenomena under investigation in philosophy of religion is a welcome development. But I want to close with a point of reflection. Let's grant Burley's claims that the contemporary field of philosophy of religion is dominated by questions of relevance to the Abrahamic religions, with a tendency to focus on questions concerning the existence of God, suffering and evil, and the rationality of religious belief (cf. 46-7). There are, nevertheless, good reasons for why contemporary philosophy of religion developed in this way: it arose within Anglo-American culture, which was predominantly Christian, but which has become increasingly secularised, in part because of concerns over the rationality of belief in God, increasing religious diversity, and the incompatibility of God's existence with widespread suffering. Far from being 'fixated on a small cluster of questions pertaining to an ahistorical and decontextualized theism'' (2), contemporary philosophy of religion is *highly* contextual, addressing the most central and important questions facing many religious people living in Anglo-American culture. Contemporary philosophy of religion is also in step with the analytic movement in philosophy, which in its early days was critical of religious language and belief, and in recent decades has developed in many areas of epistemology and metaphysics that is relevant to theistic questions. Rather than being critical of contemporary philosophy of religion, we can simply view it as the organic development of a discipline, responding to its cultural and academic context. Indeed, the need to diversify work in philosophy of religion, of which this book is an important contribution, is timely precisely because the cultural and academic context now calls for such diversification. Both the previous work in philosophy of religion, and the need for diversification, are both culturally located academic movements – both products of their time and context.

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