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Re-Visioning Philosophy of Religion

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Abstract: A brief perusal of the current textbooks in philosophy of religion will show that they have a common underlying theme. Most of these texts—and indeed the entire discipline of philosophy of religion itself—seem to take the position that the main task of the discipline is to identify the beliefs of those who practice religion and to figure out whether these beliefs are rationally justified. This is done by listing the main concepts used in religion (concepts such as God, faith, prayer, sin, etc.), clarifying them in such a way as to avoid linguistic traps or confusion, unearthing the common claims made by those who practice a religion, and figuring out whether these claims are justified by a set of cogent arguments. There are several problems with this approach to the philosophy of religion. One main problem is that it takes quite a narrow view of religion and assumes that what is central to religion is *a set of beliefs*. In this paper, I show that what counts in religion is not so much beliefs, but rather a set of rituals and practices. What makes these rituals significant is that they alter states of consciousness to such an extent that they may alter a religious person's behaviors, attitudes, and moral sense. I begin with the assumption that religion works—a claim justified by recent findings in positive psychology, and then propose that it works because the rituals associated with each religion produce trance states that heal and transform the personality of the religious person. This approach to the study of religion will generate new questions, focus attention on religious experiences, and provide opportunities not only for constructive interfaith dialogue but also for a fruitful communication between philosophers and experts from other disciplines.

Key Words: Philosophy of religion; states of consciousness; interdisciplinary approach

1. BACKGROUND

A brief perusal of the current textbooks in philosophy of religion will show that they have a common underlying theme. Most of these texts—and indeed the entire discipline of philosophy of religion itself—seem to take the position that the main task of the discipline is to identify the beliefs of those who practice religion and to figure out whether these beliefs are rationally justified. This is done by listing the main concepts used in religion (concepts such as God, faith, prayer, sin, etc), clarifying them in such a way as to avoid linguistic traps or confusion, unearthing the common claims made by those who practice a religion, and figuring out whether these claims are justified by a set of cogent arguments.

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beliefs. The task of any philosophy of religion, then—at least the way it has usually been done—lies in the attempt to study these beliefs and then to reconstruct their rational underpinnings using the usual philosophical tools of logic and argumentation. I suggest in this paper that religion is not so much a set of beliefs as it is a set of practices, grounded in rituals that alter states of consciousness. This is what actually drives religion and makes it work. This being the case, the way in which religion is studied philosophically must change, and it needs to be studied using a different set of assumptions, a different framework, and a different set of questions. I outline in this paper what such a philosophy of religion might look like.

In his book entitled “Philosophy and the Study of Religions: A Manifesto,” Kevin Schilbrack (2014) agrees with me regarding the need to change the way philosophy of religion has been done. As he puts it (Schilbrack, 2014, p. xi), “philosophy of religion ought to evolve from its present focus on the rationality of traditional theism to become a



fully global conversation with other branches of philosophy and other disciplines in the academic study of religions.” In short, philosophy of religion needs to escape from its narrow confines—especially in its focus on concepts found in traditional monotheistic religions—in order to make it more relevant to those who belong to other traditions. “The traditional view is narrow,” he says, “because it does not engage more than a few of the actual religions of the world” (Schilbrack, 2014, p. xi). This is quite unfortunate, especially for those who come from the ASEAN region, since it is a region where many different religions are found, some of which do not fit in neatly with traditional religious paradigms. Schilbrack is right when he says that traditional philosophy of religion “often defines God in such a narrow way that it regularly excludes the theistic views of many who believe in God” (2014, p. xi). Furthermore, traditional philosophy of religion practically marginalizes those religious traditions, such as Theravada Buddhism, that find no need to postulate the existence of a God at all. Apart from being narrow, traditional philosophy of religion is also intellectualist and insular. It is intellectualist,” says Schilbrack (2014), “in that it engages only the doctrinal dimensions of the religions it does cover” (p. xi). It is also insular “in the sense that traditional philosophy of religion draws very little from and contributes very little to the other disciplines in the study of religions” (Schilbrack, 2014, p. xii).

In order to correct this narrow, intellectualist, and insular approach to the philosophical study of religion, Schilbrack (2014) proposes that philosophy of religion should not exclude any religious tradition. It should also be self-reflective and should study not just religious beliefs and the justifications for them. Philosophy of religion, he says, should also focus on religious practices and rituals. He demonstrates throughout his book how this can be achieved. What his work lacks though—and this is the gap my paper wishes to address—is a focus on altered states of consciousness, and how these altered states affect human action.

2. ASSUMPTIONS

I begin with the assumption that religion works. What I mean by this is that religion has some practical value for those who adhere to it. This is not an outlandish assumption to make, and it does seem intuitively correct. People continue to practice their religion, whether or not they are clear about the underlying beliefs that operate within their religion, because it does something for

them. This has been corroborated, it seems, by recent findings in positive psychology. Those who engage in religious practices, research shows, are generally happier and even enjoy better health (Compton, 2005). “In terms of physical health,” says Compton (2005, p. 197), “people who report greater religiosity tend to have fewer illnesses, tend to live longer by having lower rates for cancer and heart attacks, recover more quickly from illness or surgery, and have a greater tolerance for pain.” We could conjecture then, that from an evolutionary perspective, we have evolved into the kind of beings who engage in religious practices because these religious practices help us to survive. The interesting thing about the research that has come up recently in positive psychology is that it is not religious beliefs per se that promote health, but rather the *practices* associated with these beliefs. Regular prayer, for example, has been shown to have beneficial effects on overall health. As Compton (2005, p. 198) notes, “studies have found that higher frequency of prayer is associated with indices of health such as better postoperative emotional health in cardiac patients, greater vitality and mental health, greater psychological well-being, and decreases in depression after cardiac surgery.” Furthermore—and this is interesting—“the strongest predictor of illness onset and longevity is *active participation*—in this case *whether or not people attend religious services*” (Compton, 2005, p. 197, italics mine). This means that it is not so much the beliefs that count as much as the practices and rituals associated with them. Apart from physical health, religious practices also tend to aid in mental health and general well-being because they give religious people a sense of purpose and meaning, connecting them with members of a common community and opening them up to various peak experiences (see Compton, 2005; Plante, 2012; Snyder, Lopez, & Pedrotti, 2011; Wulff, 1997).

When I make the claim that religion works, I make a claim reminiscent of those who studied science philosophically at the start of the 20th century. They began with the assumption that science works, and then tried to figure out exactly how and why science works. It is obvious of course that science works, since it has led to numerous advancements in technology and in our understanding of the world. What it is precisely that makes science work, however, is a mystery. At first, philosophers of science thought that what made science work was its underlying logic or methodology; and so the initial project was to try to reconstruct this underlying logic that apparently operates in all scientific work. This project failed.



Philosophers of science realized that science was messy and did not adhere to some universal method or set of principles. It even motivated a philosopher of science to maintain that the only thing that really works in science is “anything goes.” Thomas Kuhn (1996) then realized that to understand how science really works, philosophers needed to attend to the details of history. His approach generated numerous insights and revived the philosophy of science just when it began to stagnate.

3. ALTERED STATES OF CONSCIOUSNESS

I began with the assumption that religion works. I now conjecture that religion works because the rituals and practices associated with any religion alters states of consciousness in such a way as to produce dramatic changes in the way people act towards themselves, others, and the world in general. It is not so much that people start with beliefs and then use these beliefs to generate a set of attitudes towards the world. Rather, religious people engage in a set of practices that alter their states of mind, and it is these altered states that generate a set of attitudes. What I am saying here is that in the realm of religion, it is not beliefs that matter, no matter how much we are told that this is so. What really matters is our state of consciousness.

This can best be understood by means of a thought experiment. Imagine two persons walking in a crowded street. One of them, a man in his thirties, is in an agitated state of mind. Let us suppose, for the sake of this example, that he has lost some money, has been reprimanded by his boss at work, and has just had a heated argument with his wife. The other person in our thought experiment is a woman who is practically floating on air. She has just been promoted, has inherited a sum of money from a distant relative, and has just reunited with an old flame. Consider what would happen if each one of them suddenly experiences an unfortunate event in the crowded street. Let us assume that both of them are knocked over by a man hurrying down the street from the opposite direction. How would each character in our thought experiment react? The man with the agitated state of mind would most likely be upset or angry, get back at the imbecile who knocked him over, and cause a scene. The woman who had been walking on air, however, would most likely get up, brush off the dirt from her clothes, and laugh about the whole affair. It could have been worse, she might think, and she would be more likely to excuse the

man who knocked her over. Maybe he was just in a hurry, she might say, and then give the man a chance to apologize. We can infer from this thought experiment that the manner in which we treat others depends not so much on our beliefs about the world, or on our beliefs about what actions are proper (each of the characters in our story may actually hold the same beliefs), but rather on our state of mind as we move about in the world. There are certain states of consciousness, then, that may evoke a moral sense and get us to behave in ways that no set of beliefs can, since many of our actions spring from our states of mind. What religious practices do, it seems, is to hone these states of mind and produce, through trance states, deep personality changes.

When we examine the various rituals and practices of different religious traditions, we notice some underlying similarities. Although each religion or sect has its own particular method of praying or meditating or chanting or engaging in sacrificial rituals, each seems to produce trance states through the rhythmic and repetitive nature of the practices. Some rituals are even accompanied by the scent of incense or the ingestion of mind-altering drugs (as is the case with shamanism) that induce, deepen, and intensify the experience of trance. These trance states seem to hold the key to what makes religious practices significant. They not only generate psychological states of well-being that reverberate throughout the day; they may in fact actually bring about deep psychological changes that make ethical acts easier to perform. In her book, *Recreating the Self*, Napier (1990) contends that psychological change is best produced through changes in consciousness, or what she calls trance states. Trance states, she says, are quite common, and they usually occur “whenever you shift your attention from the outer world to your own inner awareness” (Napier 1990, p. 25). This shift towards inner awareness obviously occurs during the practice of religious rituals and ceremonies, and they thus become opportunities for re-creating the self in a positive way.

In spite of what rational-emotive therapists may say, I think many clinical psychologists would agree that though possible, it is difficult to change people’s characters by challenging their beliefs or by challenging their irrational assumptions. It is easier to change them by restructuring unconscious patterns. This is perhaps one of the best lessons therapists learn when they do therapy. In my experience as a mentor, for example, I have often discovered that personality changes are best induced through trance states that access the



unconscious, since it is difficult for the conscious mind to force itself, by sheer willpower, to change.

To reiterate, religion can be seen as a set of practices which generate healing states of mind and get people into trance states that, among other things, generate a moral sense. It is these states of mind, rather than conscious religious beliefs, that really count. How these states of mind alter behaviors and generate moral sensitivity is a question that can be addressed both phenomenologically—through a careful description of the essential structures of these trance states—and neurologically with the help of the latest findings in the field of neuroscience (see Nelson, 2011).

By focusing on religious practices and how they generate altered states of mind, we can bring a variety of religions together under a common theme. We no longer need to talk about belief in God, angels, heaven and hell, and divine retribution. We do not even need to ask whether there is a God or not, since the focal point would be the set of practices that induce altered states. This being the case, even nontheistic religions like Theravada Buddhism can find a place in the philosophy of religion. The questions that would arise would also change. Instead of asking the usual questions like “What do we mean by god? Does God exist? And Is there a way to communicate with such a being?” we can instead begin with questions like the following: What states of consciousness accompany religious or spiritual experiences? What are these states like, and how are they induced? How do these states of consciousness affect our usual constructs of the self? How do these states alter the way we act towards others? And how do they contribute to the generation of a moral sensibility? Furthermore, what can psychologists tell us about these states, and what further questions arise when we incorporate a study of states of consciousness in the philosophical study of religion?

4. CONCLUSIONS

To conclude, we can re-vision philosophy of religion by focusing not on beliefs but on religious practices, and ask how these practices contribute not just to well-being and a meaningful life, but also how they could generate a deep moral sense and change one’s personality. This method of doing

philosophy of religion would be more inclusive, more relevant for those who practice non-monotheistic or non-theistic religions such as those found in the ASEAN region, and could generate not only new insights about the role of religion, but also improve interfaith dialogue. It would also be more interdisciplinary and would generate fruitful discussions among scholars from different disciplines.

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