

BOOK REVIEW

Timothy Knepper *Philosophies of Religion: A Global and Critical Introduction*

(London: Bloomsbury, 2023). Pp. xvi + 476. £24.99/US\$34.95 (Pbk). ISBN 9781350262966.

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(Received 26 January 2023; accepted 20 February 2023; first published online 23 March 2023)

This is a hefty and ambitious book, the aim of which is nothing less than to reconfigure the field of philosophy of religion. The author, Timothy Knepper, has been at the forefront of recent innovations in comparative approaches to this subject area. Among other things, he is Director of The Comparison Project (based at Drake University in Des Moines, Iowa), which has produced several publications, including two edited volumes that showcase the comparative enterprise, one on the theme of death and dying, the other on the theme of ineffability. In 2013, Knepper's monograph *The Ends of Philosophy of Religion: Terminus and Telos* was published, containing a scathing critique of much contemporary philosophy of religion plus a vision for how it might be improved. The book under review is a textbook – designed primarily for use in mid- to upper-level undergraduate courses – that seeks to put into practice the vision that was delineated in that earlier work, exemplifying what Knepper styles as a 'global-critical philosophy of religion'.

Dissatisfied with attempts to increase the scope of philosophy of religion by merely asking what non-Abrahamic traditions have to say about the standard repertoire of philosophical questions, Knepper has devised a new framework. The framework is shaped by the metaphor of a journey, and this metaphor is applied to both the self and the cosmos. Thus, instead of recapitulating the same old cluster of questions that regularly populate textbooks on this subject, Knepper raises – in relation to diverse religious and philosophical traditions – the questions 'Who am I?', 'Where do I come from?', 'Where am I going to?', 'How do I get there?', 'What obstacles are in my way?' These questions constitute the chapter titles of Part II of the book; Part III then poses analogous questions in relation to the cosmos as a whole, about what it is, its origins, its destination, how it gets there and what obstacles stand in its way. Before all this, there is an introductory chapter followed by the three chapters of Part I, which outlines the traditions of philosophy of religion that are to be compared and contrasted throughout the book; this part also, bravely, broaches the questions 'What is religion?' and 'What is philosophy?' Simply at the level of structure, then, Knepper is doing something fresh and potentially transformative.

The plural term 'philosophies' in its title intimates the central motif of the book. Each chapter in Parts II and III is divided into sections that expound ideas on the chapter's theme drawn from what Knepper characterizes as 'six (meta)traditions of philosophizing about religion' (6). The six traditions in question are: African, East

Asian, European/Academic, Indigenous American, Mediterranean/Abrahamic, and South Asian. To keep the parameters of the 'African' and 'Indigenous American' categories manageable, Knepper treats the Yorùbá tradition and the Lakhóta tradition as exemplary of these two categories, respectively. In the case of the Lakhóta, Knepper relies heavily on the work of a single spokesperson, Vine Deloria Jr, who was an ardent advocate for Native American peoples in the twentieth century. Knepper's claim is not that, by foregrounding these six traditions, he has encompassed all available perspectives on religious matters; no single textbook could hope to do that. Rather, the traditions are an indicative sample; Knepper's aspiration is to demonstrate one way of fruitfully comparing them.

Comparison (or 'formal comparison') is one of three 'steps' in Knepper's declared 'global-critical' method, the other two being 'robust description' and 'critical evaluation' (78). The principal targets of these components are '*individual acts of religious reason-giving*' (58, original emphasis). The descriptive component is intended to consist of 'four corners': 'logical form, conceptual content, contextual setting, and political use' (58). Together, these four elements are supposed to furnish a description that is robust and 'thick'. The comparative dimension of the method is designed 'to facilitate critical understanding of the similarities and differences between objects of comparison', these objects being the traditions under scrutiny (80). Most important of all, according to Knepper, is critical evaluation, which has distinctly personal reflective implications; he envisages 'the ultimate goal of global-critical philosophy of religion' as being 'to critically evaluate whether and how the realities, truths, and goods of religious traditions, texts, and thinkers *matter for me*' (81, original emphasis) – that is, whether they matter for each of us.

The breadth and detail of the descriptive and comparative explorations in the book are remarkable. Knepper exhibits impressive erudition in his handling of the traditions being discussed. His use of the term '(meta)traditions' is apposite, given that, for example, the Mediterranean/Abrahamic tradition includes Jewish, Christian, and Islamic perspectives, the East Asian tradition incorporates Confucian, Daoist, and Buddhist schools and thinkers, the South Asian encompasses Brahmanical, Jain, and further Buddhist lineages, and so on. Although aimed at undergraduates, the book does not oversimplify; Knepper consistently strives to do justice to the intricacies of the world-views and debates that he is elucidating. Along the way, he introduces numerous non-English terms from the various relevant languages, taking care to respect the conventions of scholarly transliteration. These conventions are explained early in the book, and a 39-page glossary is appended towards the back. Any reader – not only undergraduates – will learn a great deal from Knepper's treatments of the topics.

One of the advantages of a cross-cultural approach is that one is apt to encounter conceptual resources from one tradition that are applicable to the analysis of others. A small instance of this occurs when, in discussing diverse 'religious paths', Knepper utilizes the distinction between 'self-help' and 'other-help' paths (from Buddhism) and relates this to the distinction between 'monkey-hold' and 'cat-hold' paths (from Hinduism) (180). A 'self-help' or 'self-effort' path is characteristic of Chán Buddhism, which demands rigorous self-discipline, whereas 'other-help' or 'other-effort' is characteristic of the form of Pure Land Buddhism which involves invoking the grace of Amitābha Buddha through the recitation of a mantra (194). The term 'monkey-hold' alludes to the way in which a baby monkey clings to its mother when being transported around, in contrast to the 'cat-hold' displayed when cats carry their kittens by holding them with their mouths (427 n. 1). Once these evocative terms have been explained, they become available for application to other traditions.

Although Knepper's engagement with several traditions of thought and practice is admirable, there is a notable ambiguity in his use of the term 'philosophy of religion'. In many instances, he uses it to denote what would be more naturally referred to as

religions. For example, in certain places, he refers to, say, Christianity, Buddhism, or Jainism as a philosophy of religion, and he uses terms such as ‘religious philosophy’, ‘religio-philosophies’, and ‘religio-philosophical traditions’ apparently interchangeably with ‘philosophy of religion’. There is undoubtedly some justification for this terminological sliding; Buddhism and Jainism, in particular, are spoken of by many people both as religions and as philosophical traditions. But the ambiguity in Knepper’s usage is indicative of a deep ambiguity about the purpose of the book as a whole. By ‘philosophy of religion’, are we expected to understand the (first-order) religious beliefs of a given tradition or, alternatively, the (second-order) enterprise of analysing and devising arguments in support of or against those beliefs? On the basis of Knepper’s scholarly practice in the book, it would seem that we are expected to understand the term in both of these ways.

The ambiguity that I have just identified need not be a problem. It is, indeed, a feature of the term ‘philosophy of religion’ that it can, in a rather loose sense, denote the worldview or outlook on life of a given religious community while, in a somewhat stricter sense, also denoting an academic subdiscipline or field of enquiry that consists in the philosophical study of religious matters. It appears to be the former of these senses that is in play when Knepper recounts, for example, myths and rituals espoused by Yorùbá or Lakhóta communities, scriptural narratives associated with Abrahamic religions, the proclamations of mystics, and so on. Contrastingly, it is more clearly the second meaning – of philosophy of religion as a second-order discipline – that is operative when Knepper is expounding, for example, arguments for or against the existence of God in South Asian or modern academic contexts. The problem arises when the reader starts to consider how to respond to Knepper’s injunction that a global-critical philosophy of religion must comprise not only description and comparison but also the ‘critical evaluation’ of ‘acts of religious reason-giving’ (e.g. 80). The ‘Questions for discussion’ sections at the end of each chapter explicitly invite readers to ‘Describe, compare, and evaluate’ the sundry viewpoints presented in the chapter; yet how is one to *evaluate*, for example, the Lakhóta view that ‘the cosmos is created by, or perhaps just comprised of, the creative force of *Wakháŋ Thánka*, which means something like great incomprehensibility, great mystery, or great sacred’ (272)? Knepper’s exposition does not supply any reasons for or against holding this view. Similarly, when Knepper tells us that, for Confucius, a ‘self’ is something ‘that is fundamentally in relation with others, that strives for moral perfection . . . and that observes social conventions and official rituals’ (106), this view is not overtly supported by reasons. By contrast, when, in the same chapter, Descartes’s conception of the self as an immaterial thinking substance is discussed, Knepper does enumerate some of Descartes’s reasons, and he proceeds to examine the contrasting view of David Hume (113–115).

Thus, when it comes to critically evaluating multifarious positions, the reader is provided with argumentative resources in connection with certain traditions, most notably the tradition of European/Academic philosophy of religion, but in connection with ‘positions’ or ‘theories’ that are embodied in myths, rituals, or bald assertions, the reader is liable to feel somewhat at sea. Just when we might hope to see a demonstration of how to evaluate complex material – such as Huston Smith’s contention that ‘higher levels of reality correspond to deeper levels of the self’ (201) – we are told ‘As always, it is up to you to decide’ (202), ‘Yet again, it is up to you to decide’ (202), ‘As always, it is up to you to decide’ (263), or that ‘[s]pace prevents us from addressing each virtue with respect to each theory, but that is no reason why you cannot do some of this work yourself’ (119). I, for one, am not at all sure how one ought to go about philosophically evaluating things such as scriptural narratives, creation myths, religious rituals, or conceptions of human nature for which no reasons have been offered. (Are we supposed to treat these, as Knepper sometimes implies, as though they were competing *theories*, comparable to

scientific theories or hypotheses?) Expecting undergraduates to be able to 'do some of this work' for themselves, without clear illustrations of how to do it, strikes me as expecting rather a lot.

This question of how to evaluate the ideas, viewpoints, and practices of diverse religions and cultures (or, in Knepper's terms, diverse philosophies of religion) is crucial for any approach that aspires to be global in scope and critical in its methods. Knepper gives us a prescription: evaluation should take into account '*empirical adequacy . . . external coherence or practical usefulness*' (146, original emphasis), but readers would have benefited from more rigorously worked-out examples of how to deploy these criteria.

In many respects, this book is a tour de force that warrants attention from not only teachers and students but virtually anyone interested in the philosophy of religion. Knepper is far from being the first to incorporate material from non-Western, non-Abrahamic, and Indigenous traditions into a textbook on this branch of philosophy (I am reminded, especially, of Gwen Griffith-Dickson's pioneering *The Philosophy of Religion* in the SCM Press 'Core Text' series, 2005), but he has done it in an exceptionally thoroughgoing way. Notwithstanding the shortcomings I have mooted above, the achievement is considerable. It constitutes a radical alternative to much mainstream contemporary Western philosophy of religion, taking this subdiscipline by the scruff of the neck and giving it a vigorous shake. Knepper never pretends that this is the definitive word on how to formulate a global-critical philosophy of religion. He confronts us with a stimulating prototype, encouraging and provoking readers to expand their assumptions about what religion is, what philosophy is, and what the philosophy of religion might become.