

# *Introduction*



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The time is ripe for the development of a new approach to the philosophy of religion. Among philosophers interested in religion, there is a growing recognition of the importance of the structure and content of actual religious traditions, both Western and non-Western. At the same time, many scholars in more empirically oriented disciplines such as the history of religions and anthropology are becoming increasingly intrigued by the philosophical aspects and implications of the religions they study.

The *Toward a Comparative Philosophy of Religions* series, which this volume initiates, will explore the possibilities inherent in this new situation. Over the next few years, this series will publish a number of books that consider a variety of issues in the comparative philosophy of religions and a variety of types of philosophically relevant data. Some of these volumes will be collections of essays; others will be individually authored books. Authors will include philosophers as well as philosophically oriented scholars from related disciplines such as theology, the history of religions, and anthropology.<sup>1</sup>

David Tracy and I have chosen to inaugurate this series with a collection of essays on *Myth and Philosophy* for two closely related reasons. We are convinced that a philosophy of religions that has pretensions to a truly global perspective must give a very high priority to the exploration of the various ways in which these two modes of discourse have been related in the past, and how they might be related in the future. We are also convinced that “myth and philosophy” is a topic that will be of immediate and obvious interest to the whole range of scholars to whom the series is directed.<sup>2</sup>

The twelve essays that are included in this initial volume are divided into two groups. The first, which goes under the rubric of “Philosophical

Perspectives," contains three papers that defend the notion that the philosophy of religions should and can become global in its orientation; that it should and can become comparative in its approach; and that it should and can be grounded in the empirical study of actual religious traditions including, though not limited to, their philosophical expressions. Each essay addresses the relevant issues in its own distinctive way.

David Tracy sets the stage for the series as a whole, and for this volume in particular, by revisiting the origins of the modern effort to develop a philosophy of religion. Tracy reviews the ground-breaking work of Hume, Kant, and Hegel, the three great figures of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries who are generally recognized as the founding fathers. In his "return to the origins" Tracy demonstrates that each of these highly creative philosophers of religion, unlike most of their more recent successors, give strong expression to global, comparative, and empirical concerns. Thus Tracy maintains that what must be done to reinvigorate the philosophy of religions today is not a wholesale rejection of the heritage that it has received from its past. What is needed, rather, is a retrieval—in a new mode commensurate with late twentieth-century sensibilities and resources—of the kind of vision that animates and informs the work of the founders.

The other two essays that are included in this section of the volume set forth constructive strategies for taking up Tracy's challenge. Charles Taylor, in his essay on "Comparison, History, Truth," makes the case for a globally oriented comparative approach that depends on empirical research carried forward in a hermeneutic mode. In spelling out his position, Taylor draws on the work of Hans-Georg Gadamer, and highlights and develops Gadamer's metaphor of philosophic and religio-historical interpretation as a process of "conversation."

Paul Griffiths takes up Tracy's challenge in a very different way. Entitling his essay "Denaturalizing Discourse," Griffiths sets forth a strategy for a globally oriented and comparative approach that pursues empirical study in a manner that is firmly rooted in the tradition of analytic philosophy. Griffiths distinguishes two different types of religious language, both of which appear cross-culturally. The first type, which characteristically operates within specific cultural contexts, he labels "naturalized discourse." The second type, which characteristically seeks to establish claims to truth on more rationalized and universally defensible grounds, he identifies as "denaturalized discourse." According to Griffiths, both types of religious discourse should be studied, and should be studied comparatively. But from his perspective the comparative analysis of denaturalized religious discourse—since it is more explicitly "philosophical" in character—is of special interest and importance for philosophers of religions.

In Part II of the volume there is a shift from essays that focus more directly on the discussion of theoretical and methodological issues to essays that deal more extensively with actual historical data. To be sure, the authors of the essays included in Part II share the same kinds of theoretical and methodological interests that are the explicit focus of the essays in Part I. Moreover these scholars are equally concerned with broad-ranging issues such as the nature and diversity of the human imagination and human rationality. In the present context, however, they have chosen to contribute the kind of essays that pursue these more general interests and issues through studies of particular religious expressions (especially mythic and philosophic expressions) embedded in particular historical situations.

In addition to their common concern to contribute to a new kind of philosophy of religions that is globally and comparatively oriented, the eight authors whose essays have been selected share a general perspective concerning the “myth and philosophy” topic. They all affirm that myth and philosophy (categories whose exact referents are very much at issue) are two different but broadly overlapping modes of discourse that have been, and still remain, related to one another in a variety of ways. On the one hand, they reject the notion—still very potent in contemporary academic culture—that philosophy is intrinsically superior to myth. On the other, they are seeking for ways to interpret the relationship that takes the distinctive characteristics and contributions of both myth and philosophy seriously into account.

Within Part II, the first section entitled “Myth and Philosophy: Similarities and Differences” contains three essays that make three very important and closely related points that are basic to refiguring the way in which we think about the relationship(s) between myth and philosophy. Arthur Adkins’ paper on “Myth, Philosophy, and Religion in Ancient Greece” begins this process of simultaneous deconstruction and reconstruction by providing a new look at the development of Greek intellectual life during the middle centuries of the first millennium BC. On the deconstructive side, Adkins’ discussion thoroughly discredits the all-too-prevalent notion that what was involved in the movement from Homer and Hesiod to Plato and Aristotle was a move from a naively mythic orientation that was prereflective and arbitrary to a truly rational philosophical orientation that has banished mythic modes of thought to the periphery. On the reconstructive side, Adkins presents a fascinating account of an intellectual development that leads from a *mythology* that involves its own modes of rationality and reflection, to a mode of philosophical discourse in which the processes of *demythologizing* and *remythologizing* coexist.

Thomas Kasulis’ discussion of Kūkai, the classic founding figure of the Japanese philosophical tradition, also has both deconstructive and reconstructive implications. The common Western prejudice which

Kasulis' essay implicitly but very effectively deconstructs is the notion that philosophy, by its very nature, must take a critical attitude toward "archaic" modes of religious expression in general, and mythic modes in particular. By focusing on Kūkai, Kasulis provides us with a powerful example of a philosopher of the very first rank who adopts and develops highly sophisticated philosophical categories and methods that he employs very effectively to express, to explain, and to defend the "truth" and efficacy of myth (and of other so-called archaic modes of expression as well).<sup>3</sup>

The essay that may have the most radical implications for restructuring our thinking concerning the relationship(s) between myth and philosophy (and certainly the one with the most intriguing title) is Gregory Schrempf's "Antinomy and Cosmology: Kant Among the Maori." This essay, like the preceding contributions by Adkins and Kasulis, challenges a common Western prejudice concerning myth and philosophy. This time the target is the very persistent modern Western notion that philosophy is sophisticated and profound in contrast to myth which is primitive and naive. Stated in a more positive mode, and in more specific terms, Schrempf's argument is that Kantian philosophy and Maori mythology express clearly analogous understandings concerning the rational necessity of two very similar (and logically inconsistent) notions of the origins of the cosmos. To put Schrempf's basic point more simply, the same kind of very profound and highly sophisticated cosmological insight that Kant generated and expressed in a philosophic mode, the Maori generated and expressed in a mythic mode.

The six remaining essays in the collection fall rather neatly into three pairs that depict three distinctive kinds of relationship between myth and philosophy. The first pair examine texts in which elements that we think of as mythic, and elements that we think of as philosophic, are tightly integrated within a more inclusive poetic frame. Laurie Patton, in her essay on the Ṛg Vedic "Hymn to Vāc," considers two radically opposed interpretations proposed by two highly respected Vedic scholars: one who approaches the hymn as a mythic text and one who opts for a philosophic analysis. In her discussion, Patton exposes the inadequacy of both interpretations and sets forth her own alternative. She makes a very convincing argument that in this famous and highly erudite hymn, undifferentiated mythic and philosophic elements are encompassed within a creative poetic vision that transcends them both.

The companion essay by Hossein Ziai focuses on the writings of Suhrawardī, a famous Iranian mystic of the twelfth century. In Ziai's account of Suhrawardī's didactic exposition of the mystic "Path to Illumination," he highlights the sophisticated use of philosophical allusions (Suhrawardī, is clearly a knowledgeable connoisseur of Greek philosophy), and the equally sophisticated use of mythic themes. But Ziai also demon-

strates that these philosophical and mythical elements are so intimately interwoven that they can hardly be separated; and that they both are integrated in a distinctive mode of soteriological rhetoric that share more affinities with poetry than it does with philosophy as such.

The next set of essays addresses the issue of myth and philosophy as it emerges within religious traditions that center on the exegesis of sacred texts. Focusing on rabbinic Judaism, Howard Eilberg-Schwartz challenges the tendency to see logic, which is closely associated with philosophy, as antithetical to myth. Eilberg-Schwartz shows how the distinctive logic of the rabbis is enmeshed in the Torah-myth, a set of assumptions about what the Torah (Scripture) is and how it should be interpreted. These foundational assumptions and practical rules validate, and in turn are validated by, the particular criteria of rationality that the rabbis utilize. It is Eilberg-Schwartz' basic contention that, since myth and logic are intimately connected, criteria of rationality are relative to specific historical contexts.

Francis X. Clooney, working with Indian Vedic and Vedāntic materials, also describes a situation in which there is a close relationship between the mythology and mythic authority of a sacred corpus of texts, and the development of an exegetical tradition that generates an authentically philosophical mode of thought (in his case, a full-blown philosophical theology). Clooney demonstrates that Vedānta—as the name itself implies—quite explicitly presents itself as an exegesis of Vedic texts. And he uses very specific examples to illustrate various ways in which Vedānta was actually influenced by its mythic/Vedic heritage, both in terms of its formal structure and its specific philosophical contents.

The final pair of essays, both contributed by Winston Davis, bring us back to our own historical situation in the modern West. Davis' subject is the Western version of the myth of natural law and the secularization of that myth that has occurred in the theories of modern political and social philosophers from Hobbes to the present. Focusing on two closely related lines of development, the two essays provide a fascinating, richly documented account of the way in which the once-dominant myth of natural law has been challenged and weakened, and of the various mythically oriented and philosophically oriented efforts that have been made to amend it, to reinterpret it, or to replace it completely.

In addition to their descriptive value, Davis' essays—perhaps more than any of the others included in Part II—present an explicitly normative viewpoint as well. In “Natural Law and the Study of Myth in a World Without Foundations,” Davis identifies himself rather closely with the modern tendency to utilize philosophically oriented rational reflection to ground and criticize principles of social order and practice. In “Natural Law and Natural Right: The Role of Myth in the Discourse of Commun-

ity and Exchange," he highlights the value, even the necessity, of recourse to mythic modes of thought and justification. Taken together, the two essays clearly convey Davis' prescriptive conviction that appropriate mythic resources and appropriate philosophic resources must both be marshalled (and maintained in tandem and in tension) in order to provide a sound basis for human flourishing in a modern, democratic society.

The *Toward a Comparative Philosophy of Religions* series, including this first volume on *Myth and Philosophy*, has been generated by a multiyear project sponsored by the Divinity School, University of Chicago. In 1986 the original initiative was taken by Dean Franklin I. Gamwell. At that time Dean Gamwell asked Stephen Toulmin (who later moved to Northwestern University and became a "special consultant") and David Tracy to join with me to serve as co-directors of a project designed to explore new ways of pursuing the philosophy of religions. Important seed money was personally contributed by two alumni of the Divinity School—E. J. Tarbox and Michael Busk. For the past three years generous funding has been provided by the Booth Ferris Foundation.

In order to generate the necessary conversations among interested philosophers and theologians on the one hand, and historians of religions and anthropologists on the other, the project has convened six semiannual conferences. Each conference has been attended by approximately thirty participants from approximately ten different universities in Europe and North America.<sup>4</sup>

All but two of the essays included in this volume were originally presented at one of the six semiannual conferences; and the two others (the first by Tracy and the last by Davis) have been written in response to conference discussions. All of the papers have been revised in order to assure a clear focus on a core of crucial issues identified by the group as a whole.

Despite the richness and diversity of the essays that constitute the present volume, many perspectives, many insights, and much very intriguing data put forward in the six conferences could not be included. Thus we plan to offer, as the third volume in our *Toward a Comparative Philosophy of Religions* series, another collection of essays that will explore the topic that we considered in the later phases of our discussion. This collection, which builds on the foundations already established through our deliberations and debates concerning "myth and philosophy," will appear under the title *Discourse and Praxis* (forthcoming from the State University of New York Press, 1992).

## Notes

1. The second volume in the series will be Lee H. Yearley, *Aquinas and Mencius: Theories of Virtues and Conceptions of Courage* (forthcoming from State University of New York Press in the fall of 1990). Volumes 3 through 7 are already "in process."
2. The editors wish to express their very special thanks to Francisca Bantly for her highly efficient help in the publication process, and for her excellent work in preparing the index. We are also grateful to Laurie Patton for her willingness to contribute whenever her assistance was needed.
3. Those interested in a fascinating and directly relevant comparison between a Greek understanding of language that became very influential in the history of Western philosophy, and Kukai's understanding of language, should consult Kasulis' earlier article on "Reference and Symbol in Plato's Cratylus and Kukai's Shojijissogi" published in *Philosophy East and West*, vol. 32, no. 4 (October, 1982).
4. A large amount of the credit for the success of the project during its first three-year phase must go to the four student assistants who have been involved. In the early stages of the project Sheryl Burkhalter, the Project Assistant for year one, handled the details of organization and hospitality with great skill and grace. What is perhaps even more important, she and Robert Campany produced "Summary Reports" of conferences one and two that brought order out of chaos and paved the way for the far more cohesive discussions that followed. In the later stages Francisca Bantly, the Project Assistant for years two and three, managed the administrative burden with a happy combination of competence, good humor, and personal flair. In addition, she and Laurie Patton wrote superb "Summary Reports" for conferences three through six. (The set of six "Summary Reports" is being edited by Francisca Bantly. It will be published by the Divinity School, University of Chicago, and will be available from the Dean's office in early 1990.)