

Introduction



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During the past five years the University of Chicago Divinity School has sponsored a series of seven conferences devoted to the philosophy of religions. These conferences have helped to constitute an interpretive community that is committed to the task of discovering and nurturing ways of doing the philosophy of religions that take account of new developments in the field of philosophy and in relevant comparatively oriented disciplines, such as the history and the anthropology of religions. The *Toward a Comparative Philosophy of Religions* Series provides one of the primary mechanisms through which the issues and insights that this community is generating are being brought into the public arena for discussions and critique.¹

Our series was initiated through the publication of a volume of essays dealing with *Myth and Philosophy*.² This topic was chosen because David Tracy and I (the codirectors of the project) were convinced that one of the most important tasks that confronts any contemporary effort to develop a philosophy of religions that is truly comparative is to deconstruct the received stereotypes of myth and philosophy being two mutually exclusive and hierarchically ordered modes of human expression. We were also convinced that it is necessary to begin the process of reconstructing a notion of philosophy that encompasses elements that we have come to classify as mythic, as well as a notion of myth that encompasses elements that we have come to identify as philosophic. In the discussions that ensued, and in the volume of essays that emerged, we were able to explore some of the descriptive and normative possibilities which are available to philosophically oriented scholars who share the conviction that it is essential to take the philosophies of "others" seriously into account.

The discussions that led to the production of the *Myth and Philosophy* volume also led to the recognition that there is another kind of hierarchically ordered binary opposition in the received tradition of Western scholarship that needs to be challenged and rethought in order to make way for the new kind of comparative philosophy of religions we are seeking. This is the polarity that is presumed, often implicitly, between discourse (which includes myth and philosophy in their various modalities and combinations), on the one hand, and practice, on the other.

As in the case of our discussions of myth and philosophy, so too in our discussions of discourse and practice, the commonly affirmed recognition that a challenge to reigning assumptions is needed has not led to a consensus concerning an appropriate alternative. However, this discussion has, as in the myth and philosophy case, led to a number of creative proposals. These include fascinating analyses of particular ways in which discourse and practice can be distinguished and related in the interpretation of specific historical phenomena. These proposals also include intriguing suggestions regarding ways in which the two have been (and could be) distinguished and related by those who seek to articulate and promote normative religious positions.

The discussion out of which this volume has arisen have also generated a terminology that has facilitated the exploration of key issues. Though there has been no absolute consensus among the participants—or even, for that matter, among the authors who have contributed to the present volume—a reasonably high level of terminological consistency has been achieved. For example, an original lack of clarity in differentiating between “practice” and “praxis” has been largely resolved. Generally speaking, “practice” has come to serve as the more encompassing term, whereas “praxis” has been limited to contexts in which an emphasis is being placed on the way(s) in which a religious orientation is effectively embedded in a some form of practical activity. This kind of usage accounts for the decision to use the term “practice” in the title of the volume, and for the tendency to move, in several of the chapters, toward a rhetoric of “praxis.”³

The exploration of key issues was also greatly advanced by the use of the term “metapractice” or “metapraxis.” A fuller explication of this important notion is spelled out later in this volume by the participant who introduced it (see Thomas Kasulis’s chapter on “Philosophy as Metapraxis”). However, it is important to note at the outset that “metapraxis” has emerged as a pervasive notion that informs many of the other chapters as well. Whenever the term “metapraxis” is used, it identi-

fies and characterizes a mode of reflexivity and reflection that serves to legitimate, to integrate, to explain, or to analyze a pattern or patterns of religious practice.

Taking this terminology into account, it is possible to formulate a unifying "thesis" that pervades the present volume. Stated briefly, it is the notion that any truly adequate comparative philosophy of religions must include a continuing effort to understand philosophical and religious practices (including, but not limited to, discursive practices), to understand the implicit metapractical orientations that are embedded in seemingly nonphilosophical types of religious discourse, and to understand the explicit metapractical theories that come to the fore in more explicitly philosophical contexts.

One aspect of this basic contention is that any truly adequate comparative philosophy of religions must maintain a concerted effort to interpret the practices and the metapractical reflections of a wide variety of religious communities and individuals—ancient and modern, Western and Eastern, and so on. Another equally important aspect of this contention is that the effort must include, both as a necessary prerequisite and as a goal to be fostered, a serious and critical reflection on the practices and correlated metapractical discourses in which we ourselves are engaged.

With this unifying "thesis" in mind, the group of ten chapters that are included in our present volume have been divided into four sections.⁴ The first section is entitled "Philosophy in Narrative and Practice" because it contains chapters that focus on narratives and practices which many Western interpreters would not immediately recognize as philosophical. However, in each of the three chapters, the author shows that the narratives and/or practices under investigation do, in fact, have implicitly embedded in them, elements of reflexivity and sophisticated articulation that are clearly philosophical in character.

Fitz John Porter Poole initiates the discussion with a fascinating chapter on "Wisdom and Practice: The Mythic Making of Sacred History among the Bimin-Kuskusmin in Papua New Guinea." Challenging the notion that the practice of philosophy is limited to highly literate civilizations, Poole spins out a multifaceted description of an indigenous wisdom tradition among a contemporary tribal people who live in a very mountainous and relatively isolated area. Drawing on several years of on-site field work, Poole vividly portrays the way in which this highly sophisticated Bimin-Kuskusmin tradition was formulated in a complex and malleable mythology and the way it was embedded in very rich and flexible patterns of ritual practice. He then describes the process through

which the philosophically oriented elders who transmit this tradition utilized and extended their notions of wisdom, their mythology, and their ritual practices in order to encompass and interpret the traumatic events that marked the penetration of Western intruders into their homeland.⁵

The second essay, written by Matthew Kapstein, is entitled "Samantabhadra and Rudra: Innate Enlightenment and Radical Evil in Tibetan Rnying-ma-pa Thought." Kapstein introduces his study with an extended reflection on the necessity of correlating myth and philosophy, both in our investigations of "others" and in our own Western context. This introduction is followed by an exploration of various ways in which the two complementary Tibetan myths of Samantabhadra and Rudra convey profound philosophical messages concerning "eternity and temporality, enlightenment and bewilderment, understanding and the rebellion of the will" and how, in so doing, they present the contours of a religious world within which Tantric Buddhist practice is both necessary and possible.

Francisca Cho Bantly completes the section with a fascinating discussion on "Buddhist Philosophy and the Art of Fiction."⁶ Bantly sets the stage for her own interpretive project by directly challenging Paul Griffiths's identification of philosophy with what he calls "denaturalized discourse" (see Chapter 3 in *Myth and Philosophy*). She argues that while highly abstract "denaturalized discourse" is, in fact, an appropriate philosophical mode, there are certain religious ontologies that are most effectively expressed in other quite different discursive styles. In order to validate her position, she then turns her attention to a Buddhist form of East Asian religious literature. Using a late seventeenth-century Korean novel as her primary text, she shows how its author brilliantly embodies the basic Mahayana Buddhist philosophical teachings concerning illusion and reality in a highly sophisticated fictional narrative. In the process, she demonstrates how this fictional account is constructed in order to engage the audience in a reading process that is, like the writing itself, an efficacious form of Buddhist praxis.⁷

The second set of chapters is entitled "Myth and Practice in Philosophy." This title was chosen because the essays that are included in the section deal with subjects that, unlike those discussed in Section I, are easily recognized as philosophical. Here, the authors are not concerned to identify implicit philosophical dimensions in traditions and texts that seem at first glance to present themselves as mythic, fictional, or practice-oriented. Quite the contrary, the authors of the chapters in this section are concerned about identifying implicit mythic and practice-oriented

dimensions in traditions and texts whose philosophical character is self-evident.

The first of the two contributions that are included is Philip Quinn's essay "On Demythologizing Evil." In this discussion, Quinn spells out the way in which the classical Western philosophical analyses of the problem of evil that were generated during the Middle Ages are grounded in the biblical myth of the sin of Adam and how they are more immediately dependent on the exegetical interpretation of that myth as set forth in the letters of Saint Paul. He then goes on to describe the process of "demythologization" that has occurred during the modern period and to point out some fundamental problems that the loss of a mythic dimension in the notion of evil has created for contemporary philosophers concerned with the formulation and legitimation of social and individual ethics. Quinn concludes his thoughts with some suggestive reflections concerning ways in which these contemporary issues might be creatively addressed.

Robin Lovin, in an essay entitled "The Myth of Original Equality," focuses on a crucial aspect of the political philosophies associated with modern liberalism in the West. This myth of original equality, he contends, is basic to the philosophical positions developed by a series of thinkers that began with Thomas Hobbes in the sixteenth century and continues today, most notably in the person of John Rawls. Lovin's basic historical contention is that, although this myth of original equality has been presented and interpreted by liberal philosophers in ways that have promoted more democratic and egalitarian forms of political and social practice, it has also contributed to the legitimation of various unjust forms of hierarchy and repression. At the normative level, Lovin's basic argument is that if the myth of original equality is to continue to provide an effective support for the achievement of a more democratic, egalitarian political and social practice, postliberal philosophers must creatively coordinate it with a historically relevant myth of final equality as well.⁸

The third set of chapters is entitled "Metapractical Discourse: Comparative Studies." Unlike the preceding essays, the three papers included in this section explore aspects of particular traditions and texts that are obviously metapractical in character. These papers also differ from those that have gone before by virtue of the fact that they are centrally concerned with the comparison of materials drawn from at least two quite different traditions.

Thomas Kasulis takes the lead with an essay that presents a strong case for recognizing the existence and importance of "Philosophy as Metapraxis." Kasulis initiates his discussion with an account of the differ-

ing interpretations of a very problematic passage from the Gospel of John in the Eastern and Western Churches. Using these interpretations as a starting point, he argues that Christian philosophers and theologians in the East have tended to highlight the centrality of praxis and metapraxis, while those in the West have tended to give a privileged position to epistemology and metaphysics. In the main body of his article Kasulis presents the work of the Japanese Buddhist philosopher Kukai (early ninth century C.E.) as a classic example of a philosopher who—in contrast to most Western philosophers and theologians—seriously engages in metapraactical discourse.⁹ In his more normatively oriented conclusion, Kasulis argues that any fully adequate religious philosophy or theology (whether it be Eastern or Western, Buddhist or Christian) must include metapraactical claims that mesh with correlated forms of religious praxis, on the one hand, and with correlated metaphysical affirmations, on the other.

Robert F. Campany takes a rather different tack in his paper on “Xunzi and Durkheim as Theorists of Ritual Practice.” Like several other contributors to the volume, Campany is particularly concerned to highlight the correlation between the interpretations generated by those “others” who often constitute the subjects of our study and by the interpretive efforts mounted by modern philosophers and academics. In his analysis, Campany convincingly demonstrates the high level of sophistication that characterizes the very different metapraactical theories developed by the third century B.C.E. Chinese philosopher on the one hand, and the renowned twentieth-century social scientist on the other. He then goes on to identify specific philosophical and interpretive insights that can be generated by recognizing the very great differences in context, and then—with these differences clearly in mind—taking the contributions of both thinkers seriously into account.¹⁰

Judith Berling brings this section to a close with a contribution entitled “Embodying Philosophy: Some Preliminary Reflections from a Chinese Perspective.” Berling, like Campany, draws explicit comparisons between perspectives that have developed in the modern academy and perspectives that she has encountered in her study of Chinese philosophy. She initiates her discussion by taking note of recent developments in contemporary academic research in philosophy, the history of religions, and the social sciences—research that reflects a new concern with the fact that ways of thinking, including religious ways of thinking, are necessarily generated from, embedded in, and expressed by bodily forms and activities. She then goes on to demonstrate that in the Chinese neo-Confucian context, philosophical teachings (which have often been treated

by outside interpreters as reflecting concerns that were more metaphysical than metapractical) have little relevance in the tradition itself apart from their actual embodiment in the persons and actions of its past heroes and present practitioners.

The final section of the volume is constituted by a set of two chapters that provide "Concluding Comparative Reflections." In both cases, the authors address theoretical and methodological issues that are relevant to the further development of the kind of comparative philosophy of religions that the volume seeks to foster.

William Schweiker's "The Drama of Interpretation and the Philosophy of Religions: An Essay on Understanding in Comparative Religious Ethics" uses the category of "mimesis" to generate a performance-oriented theory of interpretation.¹¹ Emphasising the ritual and dramatic origins of the term "mimesis," and its pre-Platonic meaning of "to make like" or "to bring to presentation," Schweiker highlights two extremely important and closely correlated theoretical points. The first is that the religious and ethical discourses in the traditions that we study are forms of mimetic, performative praxis that proceed through a dialogical, hermeneutical process to generate religio-ethical worlds, or *ethoi*, within which their practitioners live. His second point is that comparatively oriented philosophers of religions are themselves engaged in a similar form of mimetic, performative praxis that proceeds (or at least should proceed) through a similar kind of dialogical, hermeneutic activity.

Building on this basis, Schweiker carves out an important middle ground between formalistic, universalizing approaches and the sociolinguistic approaches advocated by radical relativists. He affirms a requisite commonality across cultures by maintaining that all religious, ethical, and philosophical "worlds," including those we ourselves bring into being and maintain, are constructed and discovered through mimetic, performative praxes. At the same time, he places equal emphasis on the very great differences that characterize the various traditions that we study, and on the differences between the patterns of praxis that they utilize, on the one hand, and our own academically oriented patterns of praxis, on the other.

Richard Bernstein, in his essay on "Reconciliation and Rupture: The Challenge and Threat of Otherness," provides a concluding reflection that very adroitly combines historical perspective with guidelines for future work. In Bernstein's view, the most important philosophical background for the kind of comparative philosophy of religions that the preceding essays (and the project that produced them) are striving to generate are to be found in the work of Hans-Georg Gadamer and Jacques Derrida.

Both of these giants of twentieth-century philosophy have, he argues, worked to produce a philosophy in which the reality of otherness is taken seriously and responsibly into account. According to Bernstein, what is needed at the present moment is a dual approach that creatively coordinates "hermeneutical" moments (à la Gadamer) with "deconstructive" moments (à la Derrida). What is required, in other words, is a two-pronged approach to the study of self and Other that creatively combines moments that emphasize conversation and the fusion of horizons, with moments that employ a sensibility which celebrates difference and focuses on the gaps, the fissures, and the disjunctions that resist every kind of interpretive effort. Some progress in forging and employing this kind of theoretical and methodological synthesis has, he suggests, already been made. At the same time, he makes it very clear that the real work has just begun.

Those who are tempted or challenged to read the ten chapters included in this volume should be able to catch a glimpse of the process of enthusiastic discussion and argument within which they have been conceived and written. Happily, thanks to the support of the University of Chicago Divinity School and the continued financial backing provided by the Booth Ferris and Luce Foundations, this process of discussion and argument will go forward in the years ahead. An eighth conference has already been announced. In addition, a third collection of essays will be published in our *Toward a Comparative Philosophy of Religions Series*. Tentatively entitled *Religion and Practical Reason*, this volume is scheduled to appear in 1992.

Notes

1. Those interested in the process of discussion and community formation should consult a fascinating volume edited by Francisca Cho Bantly entitled *Deconstructing/Reconstructing the Philosophy of Religions: Summary Reports from the Conferences on Religions in Culture and History, 1986-1989*. This volume was published by the Divinity School of the University of Chicago in 1989 and can be obtained by sending a check for \$5 made out to the University of Chicago to the Office of the Dean at Swift Hall, 1025 East Fifty-Eighth Street, Chicago, IL 60637.

2. This volume, also edited by Frank Reynolds and David Tracy, was published by State University of New York Press in 1990. In addition to two edited collections, the Series already includes one single-authored book, Lee Yearley's

Mencius and Aquinas: Theories of Virtue and Conceptions of Courage, published by State University of New York Press in 1990. One additional collection and four other single-authored books are presently in process.

3. For a short statement suggesting this kind of usage, see the comments made by Richard Bernstein in the preface to his *Praxis and Action: Contemporary Philosophies of Human Activity* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1971).

4. The way that I have formulated the thesis that unifies the volume, and the way that I have used that thesis to organize the essays into a coherent unit, was suggested by the comments of Richard Parmentier, who served as a SUNY Press reader for the original draft of the manuscript. Though I have retained most of my original terminology and most of the original content, the impact of his advice concerning the ordering of the essays and the conceptualizations of the connections between them is evident throughout. I am deeply grateful for his contribution.

5. For a very different kind of presentation that makes a similar point concerning the level of philosophical sophistication in a relatively small-scale community, see Gregory Schrempf's superb essay on "Kant among the Maori" in *Myth and Philosophy* (Albany, N.Y.: State University of New York Press, 1990), pp. 151–82.

6. In addition to contributing her own essay, Ms. Bantly has served as the project assistant during the period that the manuscript was being compiled and shepherded it through the publication process. The editors wish to express their profound appreciation for the superb contributions that she has made to the project as a whole and to the intellectual and technical quality of this volume in particular. She has very professionally assumed many of the most important and taxing editorial responsibilities, including the preparation of the index. She has also made very substantive suggestions that have improved the quality of this introduction.

7. For a study of the philosophical importance of a slightly earlier Chinese novel written in the same Buddhist tradition, see Bantly, "Buddhist Allegory in the *Journey to the West*," *Journal of Asian Studies*, 48 (3, 1989):512–525.

8. Several of the issues discussed by Lovin are also treated by Winston Davis in two articles entitled "Natural Law: A Study of Myth in a World Without Foundations" and "Natural Law and Natural Right: The Role of Myth in the Discourses of Exchange and Community." Both appear in *Myth and Philosophy* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1990), pp. 317–48 and 349–80.

9. In other contexts Kasulis has presented a more extended interpretation of Kukai's philosophical system. See Chapter 5 entitled "Kukai: Philosophizing in

the Archaic" that appears in *Myth and Philosophy* (Albany, N.Y.: State University of New York Press), pp. 131–50.

10. Campany has recently published another essay which similarly attempts to compare Chinese and Western religious "theories." See his article on "'Survivals' as Interpretive Strategy: A Sino-Western Comparative Case Study" in *Method and Theory in the Study of Religion*, 2 (1, 1990):2–26.

11. For a more complete development of Schweiker's basic position, see his *Mimetic Reflections: A Study in Hermeneutics, Theology and Ethics* (New York: Fordham University Press, 1990).