

Book reviews

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Terence Cuneo *Ritualized Faith: Essays on the Philosophy of Liturgy*.
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A disquiet about the way philosophy of religion is standardly practised in much of the anglophone world has begun to be voiced by a small but growing number of writers in recent years. This is not necessarily a matter of wanting the subject to be more ‘continental’: the old ‘analytic/continental’ dichotomy in philosophy has long been exposed as a very blunt instrument that ignores many important connections and cross-currents, and in any case those voicing the disquiet tend to be trained in the analytic tradition and firmly committed to its guiding values of precision in language and rigour in argument. The perceived problem, rather, is about what Eleonore Stump has called the ‘cognitive hemianopia’ of many philosophers – the way their philosophical thinking about religion has become curiously detached from the involved imaginative and emotional modes of awareness that are manifest in scriptural texts and inform the religious outlook generally. To this may be added a worry about the failure of philosophers to recognize what I have called the ‘primacy of praxis’ – the pivotal importance of spiritual practices and disciplines, as opposed to intellectual debate, for developing and deepening religious understanding.

In this collection of essays, Terence Cuneo, though not referencing any of the above, implicitly aligns himself with these developments, arguing that the detached stance of contemporary philosophy of religion gives a distorted picture of what is important to the religious way of life (p. 6). As the book’s title suggests, the main focus is on liturgical practice and language, specifically that of the Eastern Orthodox tradition. Cuneo himself has followed an unusual religious trajectory, as he discloses in the final essay in this collection: he was baptized a Roman Catholic, but his family switched to the local Evangelical Free Church when he was very young, and though initially enthralled by this brand of Protestantism he later became disillusioned. As a student he became interested in returning to Catholicism, but it ‘just didn’t take’ (p. 207), and a series of events led to his

deciding to become Orthodox. One such event was being invited by a friend to attend an Orthodox Pascal liturgy where he ‘sensed, for the first time ever, a fit between the actions being performed in an Easter service and the significance of that which was being celebrated’ (p. 210).

Throughout the book, Cuneo offers a wealth of detailed examples of Orthodox liturgical practice and its religious significance. The seven petitionary litanies in the Liturgy of St John Chrysostom, for example, provide a way of ‘develop[ing] and enact[ing] an ethic of outwardness . . . understood to include not only . . . opening ourselves up to the needs of others but also standing in solidarity with them’ (p. 33). Or in the Eucharist, the celebrant’s blessings over the gifts are a way of ‘affirming their goodness’: they ‘affirm and treat the natural world, as symbolized in the bread and wine, as being a means of communion, a point of contact with God’ (p. 48). Part of what is involved here is the symbolic power of liturgical language and performance, and Cuneo is drawn to Robert Adams’s account of worship as a way of ‘symbolically being *for* the Good’, adding the gloss that ‘to live well we need ways in which we can *regularly and corporately* symbolically stand against evil’ (p. 51).

But more is involved here than understanding liturgy as having moral significance through its symbolic power. As Cuneo develops his argument (drawing on but modifying the account of liturgy given by Nicholas Wolterstorff), the notions of *enactment* and of *re-enactment* play an increasing role. The rite of foot washing celebrated by many Orthodox (and indeed many Catholics and Anglicans, Cuneo might have added) on the Thursday of Holy Week involves ‘non-fictional immersion in a core narrative’ – non-fictional because the participants are not just pretending or playing a role, but engaging with it at a deep imaginative level (p. 82). They fundamentally alter their relation to the episode being re-enacted by imaginatively *inhabiting* it in such a way as to appropriate it (p. 87). One of the key dispositions here is *receptivity*, and Cuneo goes on to make good use of Martha Nussbaum’s seminal account, in *Love’s Knowledge*, of how our powers of moral discernment and understanding can be developed by engaging with a literary text with the right kind of attentive openness (p. 95). But the additional dimension that liturgy supplies, in contrast to literary engagement with a novel or poem, is that the participants are called upon by the liturgical script to *commit* themselves to certain moral and religious ideals, including ‘being like, or aspiring to be like, the characters presented in the . . . script’ (p. 104).

But how far, in all this, can the doxastic or credal questions be bypassed? Cuneo aptly objects to many contemporary discussions of justified and warranted religious belief in so far as they ignore the way in which religious beliefs ‘might be the fruit of extended effort, including engaging in those activities . . . central to the religious life such as prayer, meditation, fasting and what the Eastern Fathers call “watchfulness”’ (p. 146). But it is one thing to underline the importance of spiritual praxis in the religious life in generating and fostering belief, and quite another to say that praxis can continue to flourish whether belief

emerges from it or not. Cuneo never quite says that, though he does admit, with disarming honesty, that 'on most days' he finds himself 'not believing many of Christianity's core claims' (p. 214). But don't the practices presuppose believing? If I understand Cuneo's position aright, he thinks that 'non-doxastic commitment' is all that is needed to support engaging in the practices. He finds 'beauty, forgiveness, redemption, and meaning' in the Christian vision of the world, acknowledges that this vision is inextricably bound up with a theistic framework, and 'hopes with all [his] being that what the tradition says is true' (p. 214).

There are many kinds of religious believer and some may be suspicious of such a stance, but it strikes me as a coherent and persuasive position that corresponds to how very many sincere religious practitioners think and feel about their outlook. And there seems a lot to be said for a tradition (Cuneo regards the Orthodox position as a paradigm case, but I think there are others) that allows 'breathing room', as Cuneo puts it (p. 217), for such a position.

This is not to say that there are not aspects of Cuneo's account that raise further questions. The most potentially problematic of these, I think, concerns the epistemic status of the practitioner who engages in liturgical rituals with the kind of commitment and involvement that Cuneo describes. We are told, for example, that 'knowing how to engage in religious ritual is, when all goes well, a way in which we know God' (p. 148). Cuneo wants to suggest that 'engaging in the liturgical activities . . . is not primarily a *means* to forming beliefs about God, but . . . knowing God . . . *consists* in engaging in them' (p. 162). This strong constitutive claim in turn hinges on the idea that the liturgical practices handed down in the tradition 'provide the materials for . . . *knowing how* to engage God' (p. 163, emphasis supplied). And elsewhere Cuneo compares the kind of knowing he has in mind with having a *rapport* with someone (p. 148). But of course there is a logical gap between engaging in the practices and engaging with God, or 'engaging God'. The latter notions, like having a *rapport* with someone, or making contact with someone, are what Gilbert Ryle called 'success verbs' – they automatically carry the sense of a relation *accomplished*, which in turn implies the actual existence of the persons involved. So all sorts of assumptions are presupposed here – for example that there are good reasons for thinking that the prescribed rituals are indeed an effective way of making contact with the divine, and that there is indeed something or someone to be made contact with.

Nevertheless, someone embarking on the practices may take comfort from the thought that one can set about acquiring the know-how (learning how to perform the various enactments and re-enactments) without directly having to confront the stringent epistemic conditions required for knowing *that* – for knowing certain propositions about God. This does not mean, of course, that acquiring the know-how is a soft option: it is no trivial matter to learn how to engage in the prescribed practices with the appropriate kind of engagement and attention, so as to become able to 'navigate and inhabit a certain life-world of which these activities

are a part' (p. 154). At all events, and whatever the epistemic complications involved, Cuneo at the very least has made a strong case for concluding that philosophers of religion could afford to look more carefully at traditions that 'have placed emphasis on knowing how to engage God by doing such things as blessing and thanking God rather than being in or trying to manufacture certain doxastic states' (p. 165).

At one point Cuneo quotes with approval Nussbaum's dictum that every style in itself makes a statement about what is important and what faculties of a reader are important for knowing (p. 128). Sometimes Cuneo's own style lapses into the tiresome tics that have become characteristic of the brusque tone of much anglophone analytic philosophy, as when he frequently orders us to label his points ('call this cluster of concerns the *Intelligibility Puzzle*' (p. 168)), or instructs the reader to keep awake ('the issue before us, recall, is that . . .' (p. 177)). I would venture to suggest that the peremptory imperatives 'call' and 'recall' should at all costs be avoided by someone aspiring to philosophize in a humane manner. But for the most part this book engages the reader's imagination in rich and productive ways. By the materials he deploys and the extended quotations from the liturgical scripts that he provides, Cuneo is in effect showing us that abstract analysis of propositional and doxastic content is very far from being the whole story for a proper philosophical understanding of what a religious outlook amounts to. Above all there is an admirable integrity here, the sense of a close connection between the philosophical stance of the writer and the personal commitments that make sense of his life, that seems to me a mark of philosophizing at its best (and which often appears lacking in today's professionalized academic philosophy). *Ritualized Faith* is highly to be recommended, and should be warmly welcomed by any reader seriously interested in philosophy of religion and its current trajectory.

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Jessica Frazier is one of the foremost exponents of Hindu ideas to a largely western audience; her passion and enthusiasm for the subject are palpable both in