Philosophy in Review

Timothy Knepper, "Philosophies of Religion: A Global and Critical Introduction"

Kelly C. MacPhail

Volume 43, Number 4, November 2023

URI: https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1108420ar
DOI: https://doi.org/10.7202/1108420ar

See table of contents

Publisher(s)

University of Victoria

ISSN

1206-5269 (print)
1920-8936 (digital)

Explore this journal

Cite this review

MacPhail, K. (2023). Review of [Timothy Knepper, "Philosophies of Religion: A Global and Critical Introduction"]. *Philosophy in Review*, *43*(4), 19–21. https://doi.org/10.7202/1108420ar

Timothy Knepper. *Philosophies of Religion: A Global and Critical Introduction*. Bloomsbury Academic 2023. 496 pp. $100.00 USD (Hardcover 9781350262959); $34.95 USD (Paperback 9781350262966).

How ought we to teach the philosophy of religion in an increasingly multicultural and pluralistic world? Timothy Knepper's *Philosophies of Religion: A Global and Critical Introduction* attempts to answer this question in a new way that will appeal to the many university instructors who realize the need for an undergraduate introductory textbook with a broad approach not centred on Western religions or philosophical approaches. Knepper's background makes him well-situated for this project. He teaches philosophy at Drake University and directs The Comparison Project, a public program in Des Moines, Iowa, that studies and promotes interfaith dialogue and relationships. Knepper has also authored a related book about the path he believes the philosophy of religion ought to take called *The Ends of Philosophy of Religion* (2013). In many ways, this textbook reflects the concerns Knepper raises in his earlier book, such as a keen attention to traditional terminology, conceptualizations, and assumptions that may no longer offer a good fit, the limitations of both analytic and Continental approaches to the contemporary philosophy of religion, and his argument that the study and teaching of the philosophy (or philosophies) of religion must be at once global, critical, constructive (emphasizing thick description and formal comparison), and aim for a multidimensional explanation and evaluation of the reason-giving of the religions being compared.

In meeting these challenges, Knepper builds the textbook around impressive innovations to address the limitations of older approaches. His first solution is a bold methodology that seeks a decidedly open-minded and balanced approach to an array of world faiths. Indeed, Knepper attends to the constructed nature of the field to open it up. As he argues, 'the questions and topics of some philosophy of religion are never simply natural or essential' (6); thus, 'the practice of global-critical philosophy of religion need not take up religious traditions as whole entities but rather should look to the ideas and arguments of particular religious texts and thinkers on a topic-by-topic basis, always with a sensitivity to socio-historical context and rhetorical-political ends' (81). In enacting his global-critical vision, Knepper organizes the book around the metaphor of life as a journey. Following an introduction and three chapters exploring the nature of religion and philosophy, he then applies his journey metaphor in five chapters focusing on the self and five focusing on the cosmos. The chapters pose a corpus of questions pertaining to their title question, work through six religious meta-traditions to describe varying perspectives, and then leave the reader with a comparative summary and a more complicated view of the initial questions for further examination and, crucially, the work of critical evaluation.

Hence, instead of announcing a traditional philosophical topic (such as the existence of God), each chapter is titled and based on a more general ultimate question. For example, the first chapter of the section on the self asks, 'Who Am I?' followed by questions regarding where we came from, where we are going, how to get there, and the obstacles in our journey. The third section focuses on the cosmos, which Knepper succinctly defines as 'everything that is, taken as an ordered whole' and 'stuff upon which humans have imposed a certain order, transforming it into a meaningful whole'

(237), and asks the same set of five questions posed of the self. Admittedly, there is some overlap with traditional textbooks here that sometimes appears unexpectedly since chapters are titled with questions instead of stating that they treat free will or eschatology. For instance, the last chapter, 'What Obstacles are in the Way of the Cosmos,' deals with the traditional problem of evil but is understood in a broader sense than simple theodicy. Likewise, Knepper acknowledges that the journey metaphor that organizes the text is sometimes potentially misleading; as he clarifies, 'We do not presume that the cosmos has an origin, destination, and path (etc.)—for to do so would be to favor a teleological view of the cosmos… Put simply; we do not presume that the cosmos is on a journey, whether literally or metaphorically' (238). Another complexity is that not all these questions apply equally well to all of these religions. For example, sections on miracles and theodicy are typically linked to belief in an omnipotent God. However, there are, of course, overlapping concerns with understanding science and suffering in non-theistic religions.

Knepper's key solution to the problem of Western- and even Christian-centric textbooks is both to broaden and narrow the religious traditions that are addressed. His six categories cover Mediterranean/Abrahamic, European/Academic, South Asian, East Asian, Yorùbá, and Lakȟóta traditions. This method offers a global foundation while creating manageable groupings, and the chapters seek to democratize the six religious traditions by presenting them in a different order each time so that no precedence is given to any group. Yet, out of necessity, four of these categories are very broad, and two are very narrow. The European/Academic category includes the Classical Greeks and all three Abrahamic religions; much in these traditions carries over into the European/Academic philosophical category, which is concerned with theologians and philosophers during and following the Enlightenment but also contemporary analytic, Continental, feminist, and postcolonial thinkers and scientific perspectives informed by fields including cognitive science and astrophysics. The South Asian group includes Hinduism, Buddhism, and Jainism, but Buddhism reappears in East Asian philosophies and folk religion, Confucianism, and Daoism. Conversely, African religion is represented by the tradition of the Yorùbá and Native American beliefs by the Lakȟóta. These selections reflect issues that Knepper discusses, including his desire to 'respect the individualities and particularities … rather than creating some overgeneralized, monolithic, ahistorical' representation, coupled with a lack of 'robust extant sources from which to reconstruct a meta-tradition of philosophizing about religion' due in part to colonizing and proselytizing groups (30).

Knepper further chooses how to articulate the 'reason-giving' derived from a segment of a tradition or from a particular text, philosopher, or thinker within that tradition. Some of these individual articulations are outliers within the traditional study of religion or within their traditions, which provides for a flexible and fascinating examination of beliefs that might not appear in a traditional textbook. These lesser-known perspectives include the Yorùbá and Lakȟóta sections but also the Hindu Nyāya philosophers who believe in a divine creator overseeing the laws of karma (275-7; 350-1) or Jacques Derrida and his conceptualization of 'messianicity' (313-4).

Useful learning resources include an extensive glossary and a bibliography for each chapter organized by the six traditions. Some instructors might desire more teaching support and student

study aids, such as a companion website, question banks, links to suggested readings or other materials, or more developed questions for discussion. Another concern might be that the book includes only a few excerpts from primary texts; however, it would be unwieldy to go that much in-depth because Knepper not only presents answers from each tradition but also identifies their main divisions and ranges of opinion. Additionally, the textbook could include more on contemporary or controversial issues. An instructor might prefer whole chapters devoted to issues like race, sex, gender, sexuality, politics, or environmental ethics that garner increasing attention in the classroom. This is not to say that these issues and perspectives do not arise in Knepper's book, for they do and most notably in reference to feminist and postcolonial scholars, but these mainly appear in reference to the European/Academic philosophy tradition.

Another strength of Knepper's approach is careful attention to language and terminology that foregrounds how 'power dynamics are always implicated in these critical issues: Who gets to decide how "God" is used and when it is capitalized? Who is included? Who is excluded? Whose religion is normalized? Whose is abnormalized?' (3). Chapter 2 pushes this further by asking whether the concept of 'religion' should be abolished due to its fraught history. The chapter carefully parses what it means to use the term so broadly and how to employ thick description in tackling how it applies to diverse traditions. Further, as explained in Chapter 3, such thick description is the essential first step in Knepper's methodology, followed by comparison and critical evaluation through applied questions of truth and value. Knepper elucidates what such critical evaluation looks like and its intended result; he notes, 'For me, this is the ultimate goal of global-critical philosophy of religion—to critically evaluate whether and how the realities, truths, and goods of religious traditions, texts, and thinkers *matter for me*' (81). One can easily imagine many productive classroom discussions on such vital questions.

Chapters end with a concise summary of the main perspectives (often indicating overlap among the six traditions) and the author signalling that it is now up to readers to further compare, evaluate, and decide. He has presented an initial question or difficulty, gone through perspectives from six traditions, and concluded by presenting more questions or complicating the initial question. This moment of critical evaluation becomes the focal point for the instructor and class. It delivers an excellent opportunity for group discussion and individual soul-searching, which is the book's chief aim. Knepper is not content to treat the philosophies of religion merely as an exercise in comparative religion. Alternatively, by organizing the text around these ultimate questions, his presentation is generative of much wider interconnections among diverse religious traditions as well as among human beings who appear to be divided by their religious faiths, moments in history, languages, and cultures yet who are united by the ultimate questions they all face in the human search for meaningful answers.

Kelly MacPhail, University of Minnesota Duluth