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## Nancy K. Frankenberry, ed., RADICAL INTERPRETATION IN RELIGION

Philip L. Quinn

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tional metaphysical sense. The question ought not be framed in terms of the mind-body problem; it is instead an ethical and existential question. Is this entity a person? Many Nazis answered 'no' in the case of Jews. Those who disagree do not do so based on privileged access to facts and knowledge. Declaring that something is a person expresses a decision, a commitment to treat that being in a certain way.

Very well, but can one be *wrong* about such decisions? Van Fraassen's answer is pragmatic, "Of course; there are conditions under which we will revise a judgment. That revision would then imply the belief that they were never persons at all" (191). Yes, but the question isn't whether under different circumstances one might have believed otherwise. Could one affirm that  $p$  and yet not- $p$  be the case? He treats this as Carnap treated all "external" questions: framed in a hopelessly realist fashion, it ought not be entertained. The same goes for philosophical theology: "Encounter with the divine does not mean . . . contemplation of a theoretically postulated hypothesis of which neither science nor we ourselves have any need" (193). What about such theological hypotheses as the trinity and incarnation? Assume these have positive value in shaping the Christian's religious stance. If so, a Christian empiricist might very well use these constructs, but van Fraassen seems to have left no room for actually believing such doctrines to be true. It seems to me the empiricist is just as likely to dismiss these ancient creedal notions along with angels, demons, and supernatural intervention, which he rejects as the mythology of ancient folk (186).

Although it has not emerged in this review, themes from Continental philosophy and theology are often used for the sake of illustration. Without some knowledge of existentialism, the reader will find parts of the book rather puzzling. Van Fraassen's strength is in his challenge to epistemology; however, his own proposals are often vague. That's to be expected in a work aimed at a general audience, but the philosophical reader looking for van Fraassen's best arguments may be disappointed.

*Radical Interpretation in Religion*, edited by Nancy K. Frankenberry. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002. Pp. xvi, 232. £17.95 (paper).

PHILIP L. QUINN, University of Notre Dame

This volume collects papers that were written for a conference on Radical Interpretation in Religion that was sponsored by Dartmouth College and held in October 2000. The conference was organized to honor Hans H. Penner, who was, before his retirement in 2001, Kelsey Professor of Religion at Dartmouth. The editor has divided the volume into three parts. The first, whose title is "Pragmatics," contains papers by Terry F. Godlove Jr., Jeffrey Stout, Richard Rorty and Wayne L. Proudfoot. The second, which is entitled "Culture and Cognition," includes papers by Catherine M. Bell, E. Thomas Lawson and Maurice Bloch. And the third, which bears

the title "Semantics," consists of papers by Hans H. Penner, Nancy K. Frankenberry and Jonathan Z. Smith. The editor has written an introduction to each of the three parts as well as a preface to the entire volume.

Because the ten papers discuss many different topics, the book lacks thematic unity. In this respect, it resembles many other examples of the *festschrift* genre. It is therefore difficult to formulate any informative generalizations about the book's contents. The authors do share an interest in methodological and theoretical issues in the academic study of religion. Moreover, most of them approach such issues from within the academic culture of religious studies; it is the primary disciplinary affiliation of eight of the ten authors. The outsiders are Rorty, of course, and Bloch, who is a professor of social anthropology. This feature of the book no doubt helps to explain a striking fact about the papers it contains. They make almost no contact with current debates in philosophy of religion as it is practiced by those whose primary disciplinary affiliation is philosophy. Readers who are looking for contributions to those debates will find the book disappointing. Its engagement with philosophy is almost completely restricted to addressing the question of whether theories in philosophy of mind and language constructed by Robert Brandom, Donald Davidson and Rorty can be of assistance to practitioners of the discipline of religious studies when they interpret religious phenomena.

In her preface, Frankenberry suggests that all of the authors share at least three methodological commitments. First, they are committed to "holistic ways of thinking about the interrelations of language, meaning, beliefs, desires, and action" (p.xiv). Second, they stand in a tradition of religious studies that "explains religion in entirely naturalist terms, rather than on supernatural or faith-based premises" (p.xiv). Third, they hold that a descriptively adequate definition of religion "must include 'superhuman agent' or one of its variants as characteristic of what makes ritual action or belief specifically 'religious' for believers and interpreters alike" (p. xiv). This suggestion seems to me quite plausible, and it has one important consequence. Since the entities the authors have in mind when they speak of superhuman agents are such things as ghosts, demons, angels and gods, not extremely powerful space aliens, their naturalism together with their stand on definitional adequacy commits them to a reductive attitude toward the whole domain of religious belief and action. As Frankenberry puts the point, "all the authors thus adopt an externalist view of the subject matter and do not offer much to please religious realists or those who hanker after Radical Orthodoxy in theology" (p.xiv). The reductive naturalism shared by the authors is, of course, a controversial point of view, even within the confines of religious studies. Some of the authors offer considerations meant to support it, but none of them addresses any challenges to it. So the book does not provide a balanced treatment of arguments for and against a reductively naturalistic approach to interpreting and explaining religious thought and action. Readers with an interest in serious debate about the merits of reductive naturalism will have to look elsewhere.

Having said a bit about what is not to be found in the book, I turn to the task of conveying to my readers some information about what it does contain. I shall say a few words about each of the ten papers.

The papers in the first part focus on philosophical topics. Godlove defends the use of propositional attitudes in interpreting religious behavior. He argues for the conclusion that "when we detach a range of bodily movements from what we had formerly taken to be rationalizing religious beliefs, desires, hopes, fears, and the like—more generally, from a context of discursivity—we thereby let lapse a necessary condition for seeing them as religious practices" (p. 23). In the course of the argument, he provides a summary of Davidson's account of radical interpretation. Stout's paper is motivated by the conviction that Brandom's work needs an introduction to a religious studies audience because "the massiveness and theoretical intricacy of his 1994 book, *Making It Explicit*, have kept it from having the influence it deserves to have on neighboring fields" (p. 25). In order to remedy this situation, Stout presents an outline of Brandom's position and compares it to views expressed by Davidson and Rorty. Invoking the doctrine of the ontological priority of the social, which he derives from a paper on Heidegger by Brandom, Rorty argues that whether we should just stop talking about God is wholly a matter of cultural politics. He urges us to acknowledge that "it is possible to agree that society should grant private individuals the right to formulate private systems of belief while remaining militantly anti-clerical" (p.76). It is worth noting that Rorty has recently made his own anti-clerical commitments explicit, avowing that "secularists of my sort hope that ecclesiastical organizations will eventually wither away."<sup>1</sup> Proudfoot's paper is devoted to the religious thought of William James. Identifying the Jamesian religious hypothesis that there is an unseen moral order in the universe congruous with human thought and action with a kind of panpsychism, Proudfoot claims that "at the end of the twentieth century, that belief is no longer plausible" (p.85). He contends that "the moral order consists of what men and women have put there, of *Geist*, and the proper way to study it is through the humanities and social sciences, especially history" (p.92).

The second part of the book contains papers that have a more empirical orientation. Bell raises doubts about how the concept of belief is deployed in some studies of religion. Consider, for example, the claim that the Chinese believe in spirits, which she finds stated even in sophisticated literature on Chinese religion and culture. Bell points out that there are many Chinese positions on spirits found in the historical record, and she argues that any village or urban neighborhood in China, Taiwan or Hong Kong yields "evidence that individuals are very aware of the number of possible opinions and thus have located their own position—if it is clear enough to be called that—as a matter of some choice and deliberation" (p.111). Lawson discusses the prospects for investigating religious belief using the techniques of cognitive science. He reports experiments that confirm the following claims: "(1) that people have converging intuitions about the efficacy, i.e., well-formedness, of rituals; (2) that, when judging the efficacy of a ritual, superhuman agency will be more important than any other aspect of ritual; and (3) that people will regard having an appropriate agent as relatively more important than the particular action involved" (p.123). Bloch attacks the view that religious beliefs must seem counterintuitive to those who have them using a Malagasy example. As he tells the

story, when Welsh Calvinist and Norwegian Lutheran missionaries went to Madagascar, they arrived at the conclusion that, in order to become Christians, the Malagasy would have to give up their belief in *sampy*, which the missionaries called "idols." They overlooked rituals and practices involving ancestors because they did not seem to the Malagasy suitable subjects for questioning and choice. According to Bloch, "this fact explains much of characteristic contemporary religious activity in Christian Madagascar, which is accompanied by what looks very much like ancestor worship" (p. 135). Since accepting the existence of ancestors does not require the special effort involved in belief in counterintuitive beings, "to the Malagasy even today, after total familiarization with a Semitic religion, the idea of 'converting' somebody to a belief in ancestors is ridiculous, like converting them to a belief in the existence of fathers" (p. 137).

Methodological issues in religious studies occupy center stage in the papers grouped together in the third part of the book. Penner takes it to be a fundamental principle of interpretation that sentence meaning is always literal meaning. He also proposes definitions according to which a religion is a communal system of propositional attitudes and practices related to superhuman agents, a myth is an orally transmitted story about the deeds of superhuman agents, and a ritual is a communal system of actions involving verbal and nonverbal interaction with superhuman agents. Given naturalism's assumption that there are no superhuman agents, from Penner's principle of interpretation "we can conclude that myth and ritual do indeed entail information and the information is false" (p. 169). Starting from Davidson's claim that a metaphor has only literal meaning and so says only what shows on its face, Frankenberg launches an assault on the more general view that religious language has symbolic meaning, which is supposed to be another kind of meaning over and above literal meaning. She argues that her criticism of the idea of symbolic religious meaning "illuminates the semantic confusions created, for example, by Paul Tillich's systematic theology of God as 'Being-Itself' beyond conceptualization, by Reinhold Niebuhr's rehabilitation of biblical symbols so that they could be taken 'seriously but not literally,' and by Rudolf Bultmann's demythologizing program that was unable to say *what* 'Resurrection' meant once it was no longer thought of as the resuscitation of a dead corpse" (p.179). Smith juxtaposes two stories. One is about how the concept of manna functions in biblical narrative; the other is about how the concept of mana functions in social scientific theories of religion in the work of Durkheim, Lévi-Strauss and others. The two stories suggest interesting questions about the use of terminology drawn from religion in theories that have explanatory goals. Smith doubts that "we ought to rest content with reproducing native lexicography, and, thereby, give in to the prevalent ethos of localism, branding every attempt at generalization a Western imposition" (p.211). He urges us to recognize that understanding how the native speakers use such words as "mana" is no substitute for "the systematic stipulative and precisising procedures by which the academy contests and seeks to control second-order, specialized usage" (p. 212).

I enjoyed reading some of the lore about religion in this volume that was fleshed out with a good deal of concrete empirical detail. Bloch's

account of the encounter between Christian missionaries and the Malagasy is a wonderful cautionary tale about cross-cultural misunderstanding. And Smith's erudite history of the uses of the term "mana" in theorizing about religion is fascinating. I also greatly admire what Stout has succeeded in doing in his clear and succinct sketch of major aspects of Brandom's position. Perhaps only those who have struggled with *Making It Explicit* themselves will be able to appreciate fully the difficulties that had to be overcome in writing his paper.

However, I think that the volume does not contain much that will be of interest to philosophers of religion, or at least to those among them whose primary disciplinary affiliation is philosophy. Let me support this negative judgment by means of some critical comments on the papers by Proudfoot and Rorty.

No doubt panpsychism is attractive to only a few contemporary philosophers. But if we attend to James's general point about belief in a cosmic moral order that is not a human product, we ought to be suspicious of Proudfoot's judgment that this belief is no longer plausible. No longer plausible to whom? The social sciences, to whose authority Proudfoot is willing to appeal, tell us that Christianity and Islam, which involve commitments to such an objective moral order congruous with human thought and action, are attracting converts in large numbers in many parts of the world. The people to whose secularized plausibility structures his judgment correctly applies constitute a fairly small minority of humanity, concentrated mainly in Western Europe and American academic institutions. As I see it, moreover, Proudfoot underestimates the extent to which James's religious concerns continue to animate many people who are at home in postmodern culture. Charles Taylor expresses the point vividly in his recent book, *Varieties of Religion Today*. Taylor portrays James as feeling the pull of both the view that religion provides an excessively self-indulgent perspective on the world, uncourageous and unmanly, and the view that religion provides us with access to something more, bigger, outside ourselves. For Taylor, James is our great philosopher of the cusp, telling us "more than anyone else about what it's like to stand in that open space and feel the winds pulling you now here, now there."<sup>2</sup> And so Taylor concludes that it is because James "stands so nakedly and so valuably in this exposed spot that his work has resonated for a hundred years, and will go on doing so for many years to come."<sup>3</sup> In my opinion, Taylor's sympathetic appreciation of James is very insightful. Many people nowadays, both believers and those who lack belief, do indeed stand on this cusp, at least from time to time, and James's religious concerns remain important. At any rate, James continues to speak powerfully to me.

Rorty's paper gives us more of the sort of thing we have come to expect from him since he threw off the yoke of abiding by the standards of tight argument that are normative for the community of analytic philosophers. One example has some puzzling features. Rorty is notorious for once having claimed that truth is whatever your peers will let you get away with saying. Since his philosophical peers did not let him get away with saying this, it appears that his claim turned out to be self-refuting. Stout's paper now assures us that "Rorty has long since given up the old pragmatic habit

of running truth and justification together by saying such things as: "Truth is whatever your peers will let you get away with saying" (p. 30). Yet Rorty's paper contains a less general claim of exactly this kind; he asserts that "what counts as an accurate report of experience is a matter of what a community will let you get away with" (p. 61). What puzzles me is that Rorty also says in a footnote that he is "grateful to Jeffrey Stout for detailed and very helpful comments on a earlier draft of this chapter" (p. 77). Did Stout simply overlook the assertion about accuracy I have quoted? Or did Rorty insert it in a later draft that Stout did not see?

William P. Alston's doxastic practice approach to epistemology will, I think, allow us to see how the epistemic status of experiential beliefs can be subject to social constraints.<sup>4</sup> Inspired by Reid and Wittgenstein, Alston thinks of a doxastic practice as a mechanism that has beliefs as outputs. Some doxastic practices have experiences as inputs. Under favorable conditions, socially established doxastic practices may rationally be supposed to confer *prima facie* epistemic justification on the beliefs that are their outputs. Doxastic practices come equipped with systems of background beliefs that serve as overrides for the *prima facie* justification of the output beliefs. Rebutters are overrides that provide reasons for believing that an output belief is false; underminers are overrides that provide reasons for believing that an output belief is not adequately justified. If we charitably construe what a community will let you get away with to be what the override system of a community that shares a doxastic practice with experiential inputs does not rule out, then it is fair to say that what a community will let you get away with is what counts as an epistemically justified report of experience. But, even on this charitable reading, what a community will let you get away with is not in general what counts as an accurate report of experience. It is only in the special case of an override that is also a rebutter that what a community will not let you get away with is what counts as an inaccurate report of experience. Hence, from an Alstonian point of view, which seems quite plausible to me, Rorty's assertion about accuracy is guilty of running together considerations of justification and truth-related considerations of accuracy, and it is a false assertion.

According to Rorty, if one accepts the doctrine of the ontological priority of the social, "then one will think that the question of the existence of God is a question of the advantages and disadvantages of using God-talk over against alternative ways of talking" (p. 58). I take it to be almost blindingly obvious that the question of God's existence is very different from any question about how humans choose to talk. In any event, according to the theological realism that has been the view of the majority of theists throughout history, God would exist even if humans were to conclude that God-talk is on balance disadvantageous to them and so were to abandon it. To suppose that a human decision about how to use language would settle the question of the existence of God is to attribute magical power to human language. To be sure, as it has become increasingly clear that it is science, not the humanities, that gives us power over nature, academic humanists have become prone to activating the defense mechanism of exaggerating the power of language. Alice Kaplan, a professor of French literature, brings out some of the comedy and some of the pathos to which such an



obsession with the power of language gives rise in an elegant memoir.<sup>5</sup> It strikes me as superstitious to hold that human linguistic behavior has power over the existence of theological realities. If such a magical view of the power of human language is a consequence of the doctrine of the ontological priority of the social, then we have what I take to be a conclusive reason to reject that doctrine.

In sum, this collection of papers provides a window on a conversation about theory and methods in religious studies. When I look through this window, I see some interesting lore about religion and religious studies, but I do not see much that would be valuable to philosophers of religion whose primary disciplinary affiliation is philosophy.

#### NOTES

1. Richard Rorty, "Religion in the Public Square: A Reconsideration," *Journal of Religious Ethics* 31.1 (2003), p. 142.

2. Charles Taylor, *Varieties of Religion Today* (Cambridge and London: Harvard University Press, 2002), p. 59.

3. *Ibid.*, p.60.

4. For details, see William P. Alston, *Perceiving God* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1991), especially Chapter 4, "A 'Doxastic Practice' Approach to Epistemology."

5. Alice Kaplan, *French Lessons* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1993).

*Christianity and Western Thought. Volume II: Faith and Reason in the 19th Century*, by Steve Wilkens and Alan G. Padgett. Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2000. Pp. 436. \$30.00 (cloth).

ROBERT ROBERTS, Baylor University

Of their accessible history of 19<sup>th</sup> century ideas Wilkens and Padgett say, "As an overview for students, our book is primarily a survey. Our purpose is to introduce the major figures in Western thought, primarily philosophers, from a Christian perspective" (p.9). Chapters 2 and 5 and the last two chapters (totalling about 150 of the 370 pages of text) are devoted to theologians and social scientists. A distinctive mark of this history is its preoccupation with Christianity. The authors are particularly interested in the religious views of the philosophers, poets, and social scientists they canvass, and seek to show how these interact with the authors' (other) central views. After the discussion of each author's ideas, they offer a brief critical assessment and / or estimation of the author's importance. Their assessments strike me as fair, and as not reflecting any very particular or sectarian theological viewpoint. Often they simply report the main criticisms that have been offered in the literature.

Another distinctive mark, as indicated in the title, is the theme of reason or rationality, the nature of which is a very live question at or just below