BOOK REVIEWS AND NOTICES

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Zackariasson, Ulf. *Pragmatic Philosophy of Religion: Melioristic Case Studies.* **Lexington Books, 2022, 179 pp.**

Philosophers of religion regularly reflect on the best way of going about their business. In this relatively short book, Ulf Zackariasson, associate professor of philosophy of religion at Uppsala University, offers his thoughts on the topic with the conviction that pragmatism remains an underutilised resource for doing philosophy of religion. He acknowledges that over recent years, there has been a growing interest in pragmatic approaches to philosophy of religion, and indeed many fine works have been written with a particular emphasis on philosophical method. However, in the present work, Zackariasson seeks to complement these more methodologically focused studies with a *"problem-oriented*" approach (4). This means that, as well as developing his own version of pragmatic philosophy of religion, the book explores three "case studies" on what it means to be religiously mistaken; the nature of miracles and the miraculous; and how to best navigate religious diversities.

A central concern of the book is that much of Anglo-American philosophy of religion has been too focused on religious beliefs, doctrines and truth-claims at the expense of "lived religion and practice" (7). This has not only made philosophy of religion out of step with the wider field of religious studies, but has also risked philosophers discussing issues that have limited relevance or "cash value" to contemporary (religious) people. If one agrees with Karl Popper — as Zackariasson does — that "[g]enuine philosophical problems are always rooted in urgent problems outside philosophy, and they die if these roots decay" (9), then a philosophy of religion preoccupied with "problems" that have diminishing significance for those "outside" the field may imply that the discipline is itself facing "problems."

It is in this context that Zackariasson identifies the book as having a twofold purpose. "First, to articulate a pragmatic approach to the philosophy of

religion that takes the pragmatic idea about the primacy of practice seriously, and second, to apply this approach, in a series of 'case studies,' to different areas of philosophical debate in dialogue with well-known 'benchmark contributions' to those debates" (11). By "benchmark contributions," Zackariasson is referring to the works of influential Anglo-American philosophers of religion, such as John Hick, Richard Swinburne, Alvin Plantinga, and D. Z. Phillips, who have shaped much of the conversation over the last few decades. It is worth noting that despite Zackariasson's genuine concerns about the state of contemporary philosophy of religion, his aim is not simply to eradicate or supplant the work of these and other important philosophers who have gone before. Rather, he attempts to broaden the philosophical conversation and identify new "pragmatic" ways forward.

After the introduction, in chapter two Zackariasson develops "a pragmatic philosophy of religion that is consonant with… [an] emphasis on the primacy of practice" (19). His approach is guided by a pragmatic philosophical anthropology emphasising the need for humans to "uphold and frequently restore a state of equilibrium between" them and their environment" (19). For Zackariasson, human lives are directed by habits, and the equilibrium between humans and their environment is disturbed when existing habits are not able to adequately address new problems emerging in the environment. This kind of a shock — which could be caused by events, such as the death of a loved one, a new job, or recent scientific discovery — leads to a person questioning some aspect of their current habits and propels them towards inquiry. The inquiry first tries to identity the problem, before proposing possible solutions, and the solutions are typically revised actions and habits with the aim of restoring the equilibrium between the person and their environment.

So, how does religion fit into this philosophical anthropological framework? Zackariasson "approaches religion as a human phenomenon (or better, a family of human phenomena) that in various ways helps direct our ways of inhabiting the world, particularly with regards to life's existential dimensions" (31). Religions strongly influence the "life orientation" — Zackariasson's preferred nomenclature for "worldview" or "view of life" — of individuals and communities. They provide people with a set of "paradigmatic responses" with "an expectation that adherents should adopt them in encounters with life's contingencies" (35). In other words, religions provide humans a repertoire of responses and habits for different actualities and contexts.

The purpose of philosophy of religion is then to analyse, clarify, critique, and constructively revise the paradigmatic responses and habits of religious believers and communities. This is not criticism for the sake of criticism, but the aim is to make human life more valuable and to help both individuals and communities live good lives. In the words of Zackariasson "[t]he philosophy of religion, at its best, is out neither to bash nor to defend any particular religious tradition; but it has a critical and constructive task" (46).

In relation to Zackariasson's vision of a pragmatic philosophy of religion, I could not help but wonder what exactly he identifies as the good and valuable human life, as well as what the underlying assumptions are and the desired outcomes that guide his "critical" and "constructive" philosophical task. I take it that the goal of his pragmatic approach is to help people find a state of equilibrium in relation to their environment, and to embrace habits that make their lives meaningful and manageable. But the problem is that the aspired state of equilibrium can look very different for people of different religious traditions and "life orientations." For example, the desired equilibrium and meaningful habits regarding wealth and poverty are very different for the preacher of the prosperity gospel than for the Franciscan monk who has taken a vow of poverty. In fairness to Zackariasson, throughout the book he gives clues as to what he perceives to be the good life, but it would have been helpful to see him spell this out in more detail, particularly as these assumptions seem to drive his pragmatic philosophising.

Chapter three moves from general methodological discussions to the first "case study" and puts Zackariasson's pragmatic philosophy of religion and philosophical anthropology to work. The focus of the first problem under discussion is what it means to be religiously mistaken. From a pragmatist perspective, he notes that we should first "concentrate on disagreements that make a difference to our ways of in-habiting the world" (53). Second, "rather than concentrating on questions about justification/warrant, we should turn our attention toward questions about how we, as agents striving to in-habit the world, can detect cases where we are *religiously mistaken*, and thus need to reconstruct our habits of action, thought and judgment in order to restore equilibrium with the environment" (54).

After offering a succinct summary of how evidentialists, Reformed epistemologists, and Wittgensteinian philosophers of religion have dealt with being religiously mistaken, he develops his own approach on the basis of

William James's well known concept of the "will-to-believe." Zackariasson's essential claim is that pragmatists — particularly the Jamesian ones — combine "an anti-skeptical stance with *fallibilism*" (54). This means that they can be intellectually permissive about people's initial choice, but less so "about standards concerning how to proceed once such a choice is made" (63).

Throughout the chapter, Zackariasson wants to move away from a philosophy of religion which is overly focused on fundamental questions or "hinge propositions," such as whether God exists. He finds these questions "too broad and generic" (64). Moreover, he sees questions around God's existence as too polarising, because the opposing parties do not usually see the other side as holding a "live option" for them, which means that each side in such discussions tend to dig their heels in and become even more convinced of their existing position. There is much pragmatic and pastoral wisdom in Zackariasson's observations. That said, questions around the existence and nature of God do seem to have real implications for how people in-habit the world, and therefore I am unconvinced that pragmatic philosophy of religion can and should shy away from exploring such questions.

The next case study in chapter four explores miracles and the miraculous. Zackariasson's primary reason for discussing the question of miracles is because it "touches upon… what I would call the normative conditions for how beings such as us can confidently in-habit the world" (88). As with the previous chapter, William James — this time *The Varieties of Religious Experience* — is Zackariasson's way into the topic, and John Dewey's *A Common Faith* is then used to develop a pragmatic account of the miraculous.

Space does not permit a detailed exposition of Zackariasson's careful and thought provoking analysis of recent Anglo-American philosophical discussion on miracles, as well as the concept of survivor guilt and the problem of evil in relation to the topic. Nonetheless, in the chapter Zackariasson — inspired by Dewey's *A Common Faith* — offers a naturalistic reading of the miraculous. His account does not necessarily deny the possibility of the super/supranatural, but pragmatically he finds such accounts less fruitful than his more naturalistic account. He proposes that the miraculous "denotes… that general (and concrete) feature of human life that makes it *possible* for us confidently to in-habit the world" (104). This idea runs parallel with the pragmatic notion of *meliorism*, which navigates the middle path between pessimism and optimism. Meliorism

affirms the possibility of making the world a better place (optimism), but it does not assume that this will definitely be the case (pessimism).

My main issue with Zackariasson's idea of the miraculous is the extent to which it actually reflects the lived experience of religious believers. This question is particularly poignant for Zackariasson as he himself criticises contemporary philosophy of religion for not always dealing with concerns of people outside the discipline, and he seeks to help (religious) individuals and communities to better in-habit the world. For example, the global pentecostal and charismatic communities that I find myself part of would find his account of the miraculous very alien to their experience. Of course, this does not make Zackariasson's argument flawed as such, but it does mean that it is not a "live option" for many — perhaps even most — religious believers, especially in the Global South.

The final case study in chapter five assesses the issue of religious diversities. Again Zackariasson tries to broaden the conversation from being belief centric to becoming practice focused. After briefly reflecting on exclusivist, inclusivist, and plural paradigms used in theology/philosophy of religion, he proposes that in a religiously plural world "diapractice" is the way forward. Following Lissi Rasmussen he defines diapractice as "the activity that occurs when people at the grassroots from different religious traditions share experiences and work together, particularly with the aim of identifying and solving concrete shared problems in local communities" (138). He refines and develops the notion of diapractice and ends up by offering a compelling vision of living and working with the religious other.

In summary, Zackariasson's *Pragmatic Philosophy of Religion* is a significant work and deserves to be widely read. Zackariasson demonstrates the real potential of pragmatism to broaden and reframe the various discussions in contemporary philosophy of religion. My main reservation is to what extent his (naturalistic) philosophical anthropology and the philosophy of religion that flows from it connect with the world(s) that religious believers in-habit. As a reflective philosopher, Zackariasson is aware of this — in fact, he refers to this as the "adequacy argument," which is an argument that questions a philosopher's ability to "adequately" reflect religious life (46). That said, this qualm does not undermine Zackariasson's important contribution to pragmatic philosophy of religion, but is rather an invitation for others to join in the ever-broadening conversation.