

Charles Taliaferro, Victoria S. Harrison and Stewart Goetz, (eds.)

The Routledge Companion to Theism.

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Much like the Oxford Handbook or Cambridge Companion series, Routledge Philosophy Companions are aimed at giving surveys and assessments of major topics, periods and figures. But this most recent installment of the Routledge series is the first companion of its sort devoted entirely to “theism” - its history, its many contested conceptions and its implications for various registers of modern life. Although there are a few exceptions, the fifty-four compact essays, each about 15 pages in length and grouped into five parts, are generally of high quality. Part I deals with the various historical, religious and philosophical definitions of “theism,” while Part II treats the role that theism might play in the various scientific and humanistic fields of academic inquiry. Part III moves toward those wider implications of theism in social and political registers which the editors judge to be “of immediate and obvious theoretical and practical importance within the socio-political environment of the twenty-first century” (6). Part IV continues this discussion of society by exploring the impact of theism on “culture” (evidently understood quite narrowly in terms of “high” culture, insofar as these chapters hew closely to discussions of theism in aesthetics and the fine arts). In Part V, the editors include those essays which handle theism as a commitment that shapes our everyday lived experiences and practical comportments with the world.

Rather than simply discussing at length a handful of essays that sparked my interest, it may prove more useful to offer some more general remarks about the editors’ stated aims for the volume as a whole and the extent to which they were successful in achieving those aims. They single out three particular purposes for the book: 1) to correct common misconceptions about theism; 2) to indicate the richness and internal diversity of theistic commitments; and 3) to highlight the social, cultural and personal significance of theism outside the domains of philosophy or academic inquiry in general. Measured against these aims, the volume is at best a qualified success. A brief consideration of each goal in turn should suffice to indicate something of what I mean, after which I’ll make the standard turn to highlighting a few essays in particular.

With respect to the first aim, the editors point not only to the caricatures of theism propounded by so-called “New Atheists” of Dawkins’ ilk, but also to the dismissive rejections of theism by noted philosophers like John Searle, who regard theism to be a long defunct explanatory hypothesis which no serious person can any longer suppose we need. The discernment of a pressing need to counter mischaracterizations of theism carries with it a strong indication that the essays which follow are to be an exercise in *apologetics* on behalf of theism. And indeed, most of the authors included by the editors are themselves theists who contend for the viability, if not the truth, of theistic commitments, especially in Parts II to V. To find here an advocacy for theism is neither surprising nor a problem in itself. But it doesn’t follow from the aim of achieving greater accuracy or clarity about a subject matter that one must advocate for the truth, coherence or even intelligibility of its claims. We ought not expect, for example, that a *Companion to Aesthetics* should include only those perspectives committed to realism about aesthetic properties. Some readers might worry, therefore, that a companion ostensibly aimed at guiding readers across a contested terrain would not include more avowedly critical perspectives about the significance of theism for academic, social and cultural discourses. Surely theists cannot dismiss all critics as

easily as they can Dawkins and Searle. But the responsible critics of theism are represented almost entirely by way of their opponents. Non-theists looking for guidance in evaluating theism might therefore encounter the book as a false dilemma: “Do you agree or do you not understand?” To be fair, it makes sense that theists themselves will be among the most motivated and competent to clarify just what their commitments are, and the included essays for the most part succeed admirably in giving a perspicuous account of the varieties of theism that they represent.

I also worry that, contra their second aim, the editors do not after all fully succeed in representing theism in its variety. They include Segun Gbadegesin’s helpful analysis of theism in African Religions (ch. 8), as well as a concise summary of the various historical and contemporary strands of Hindu tradition by David Lawrence (ch. 6). Nikky-Guninder Kaur Singh offers a lucid description of the dialectic of finite/infinite and unity/plurality that underlies Sikhism (ch. 7), while Matthew Dasti provides an excellent taxonomic overview of theism in “Asian Philosophy” (ch. 2). But all of these treatments are confined to Part I wherein the task is primarily descriptive. Once we move into the territory of normatively appraising the significance of theism and contending for its importance in the academy or wider social and political contexts (Parts II through V), the attention to non-Abrahamic theism mostly drops out and is replaced by a strong preference for Abrahamic theism in general and Christian theism in particular. Harrison’s appropriation of John Hick on religious pluralism in the discussion of “religious diversity” as a social good (ch. 36) is a notable exception to this abrupt abandonment of the value of theistic diversity. This predilection toward Western Judeo-Christian thought and culture seriously attenuates the editors’ claim to fill the “need to exhibit such diversity when it comes to...different versions of theism and challenges to these” (4).

Finally, the editors aim to trace out the wider impact of theism in three domains: society in Part III where its impact, they claim, “might well be vital for the future of our current civilization and, indeed, of our planet” (6); the arts reflective of our engagement with our “built environment” in Part IV; and climaxing in an elaboration of the “experience of living a theistically informed way of life” in Part V (7). The trouble is that the articles included in these parts - taken by the editors to indicate respectively the social, cultural and personal significance of theism -- evince both sorts of partisanship mentioned above -- a narrow fixation on the importance of Abrahamic/Christian monotheism in the West as over against the wider variety of diverse “theisms” discussed earlier in the volume, and a preference for perspectives which endorse rather than criticize the nature and influence of Judeo-Christian monotheism in particular. The net effect of both forms of partisanship is to embrace a *descriptive* expansion of “theism” (one open to considering concepts of God other than that of the worship-worthy creator and sustainer of the universe derived from Abrahamic faiths) yet in a way so as to retain a *normative* contraction of “theism” (one in which the Abrahamic faiths in general and Christianity in particular remain evaluatively at center-stage). I observe an interesting parallel here between the Christian bias displayed by contemporary philosophers of religion and the early modern history of the invention of “religion” as an academic discipline distinct from theology. While early scholars of “religion” demoted Christianity to merely one instantiation of the wider notion (a “world religion”), their categories of analysis and evaluative judgments continued to operate on the assumption of Christianity as its paradigmatic instance. Whether or not this sort of covert and indirect privileging of Christianity is intentional, there is cause for concern about a similar dynamic in the attempt represented by this volume to carve out “theism” as an ostensibly religiously under-determined subject matter for the philosophy of religion.

But this reservation about the editors' claim to have accomplished their goals for the volume as a whole does not at all invalidate the considerable value of the individual essays included. Indeed, one reason for elaborating it is precisely that, as a Christian theist who found so much of interest here, I wish to avoid giving the misleading impression that non-Abrahamic theists or responsible critics of theism will likewise find their own normative commitments and concerns just as well-represented. It is obviously neither possible nor desirable to attempt a summary, much less an evaluation, of the contents of all fifty-four articles. I'll therefore conclude by highlighting a few essays I've unsystematically selected from among the five parts solely because of my interests given my specialization.

Most of the essays in Part I ("What is Theism?") simply describe the sort of theism entailed by a religious tradition. William Wainwright's excellent discussion of Christian theism (ch. 4) stands out for attempting to assess the more theologically austere "bare theism" entailed by Christianity in relation to the more theologically enriched notion given by the particularities of Christian dogma. He makes a cautious but convincing case for the surprising thesis that "Christianity is in an epistemically and existentially better position than bare theism in many respects" (64).

In Part II ("Theism and Inquiry") Robin Collins puts forward a very interesting strategy for preferring theism to naturalism, which he presents as an alternative to the appeal to God as an "ultimate explanation" for the natural world (ch. 14). The strategy is rooted in an "axiarchic" principle which says, very generally, that the way things ought to be is the way that they in fact are (189). It follows that if there is a potential good to be realized by standing in a particular relation to God, and it is logically possible that God exists, then it follows that God exists. Obviously, the difficulty here for the naturalist is in having any reason to accept axiarchism, and accordingly that is what Collins tries to establish. He makes a respectable case for the necessary presumption of the axiarchic principle in the natural sciences. But it is questionable whether theists confront fewer or less difficult problems in establishing a sufficiently robust version of axiarchy than they do in responding to naturalist complaints about the appeal to God as an ultimate explanation, and this significantly decreases its attractiveness as an alternative, even while it remains an interesting proposal in its own right.

Keith Yandell's discussion of religious language (ch. 27) repeats the old saw that traditional claims about divine ineffability held by such theological luminaries as Augustine and Aquinas are self-referentially incoherent, insofar as any attempt to say that concepts do not apply to or refer us to God is itself a putative instance of applying a concept or referring us to God. This is intended to vindicate a distinctively "cataphatic" (positive) approach to religious language from the obscure claims of the mystical tradition of "apophatic" (negative) theology. But it is just a bad reading of that tradition. The traditional idea is not that our concepts do not apply or refer us to God *simpliciter*, but rather that they do not apply or refer us to God in a particular sort of way, i.e., in any way that succeeds in marking out the divine essence or making it intelligible to us. There are of course versions of that idea which we might judge problematic for various reasons. But Yandell assimilates apophaticism in the direction of twentieth century positivist or constructivist theories of meaning rather than attending to the philosophical semantics that undergirded the patristic and medieval views he too easily dismisses.

These brief comments about just three of the included essays do not begin to scratch the surface of what is on offer here, but they give some indication of the general character of the volume. Despite some reservations about the shape and scope of the theistic terrain it maps out,

The Routledge Companion to Theism remains a valuable resource. For non-specialist readers, it provides a very useful compendium of historical and conceptual treatments of various theisms, even if the most original and provocative essays (i.e., those that might draw the eye of the specialist as well) are reserved for articulating and defending a traditional Judeo-Christian concept of theism.

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