Book Review


Professor Flood, Academic Director of the Oxford Centre for Hindu Studies, provides us with a strong argument for Comparative Religion that continues his significant existing work in this area (The Ascetic Self, Cambridge University Press, 2004) and theory in the study of religion more generally (Beyond Phenomenology, Cassell, 1999). He is certainly aware, though, that this work will, as he puts it, raise ‘the hackles of potential critics by …use of the terms “comparative”, “religion”, and “phenomenology”’ (p. 248). Indeed, a considerable portion of the book is given over to theoretical grounding for Flood’s comparative and phenomenological task, and as a previous opponent of phenomenology he is very aware of the criticisms.

Turning to the book’s construction, it has two main sections, with an initial chapter that overviews the main aims. The first section is the comparative work which involves two chapters each on Christian and Hindu traditions, and one on Buddhism. The shorter treatment of Buddhism is due to the fact that the work is primarily concerned with looking at the way that pre-modern/medieval Hindu and Christian traditions constructed the notion of ‘inwardness’. Buddhism is therefore used as a foil, or control group, to show that what Flood sees as a similar pattern of inwardness can be found within a tradition that claims there is no ‘self’. In relation to Christianity and Hinduism, his two chapters look at both ‘pre-philosophical’ and ‘philosophical’ accounts of inwardness: the former being what we may term devotional or personal visionary texts; the latter those of scholarly writers who have systematised the tradition. In these chapters Flood attempts a Geertzian layer of thick description based on philological and historical analysis—notably he works in English but provides originals in the footnotes so that area experts can check his claims and translation. Flood’s primary comparative claim is that although each tradition has very different claims and concepts, nevertheless a similar form of cosmological worldview founds what he terms a ‘participatory subjectivity’. He contrasts this, using theorists such as Charles Taylor, with a modern view of the self and subjectivity which is seen as more individualistic. However, Flood claims that, despite the very difference of our worldview, we can nevertheless empathise with and understand the claims made. Without wanting to make simplistic claims about a common humanity, Flood suggests that inwardness may, in a variety of conceptualisations, be something found across times and cultures with, perhaps, something of a common framework. This claim, justified by his textual reading, is what he seeks to ground theoretically in Part II, which turns to the possibility of comparison and phenomenology.

Space will not allow us to deal in any depth with Flood’s argument in the second part of his book, but he relies upon a number of important theorists. One of these is Martin Heidegger whose critique and reformulation of phenomenology he uses as a primary grounding basis. He also employs Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Paul Ricoeur and Julia Kristeva
and a great many other theorists, especially those dealing with semiotics. His phenomenology is Heideggerian, modified by Ricoeur, with a descriptive first stage, and he offers reasons why it is legitimate to take such a step and trust that it is something other than an arbitrary, biased, and subjective reading. This leads to a philosophical, or hermeneutic, second step. Flood’s argument is dense and complex and cannot be reproduced here; however, I would argue that he succeeds in showing that his comparative suggestions are broadly justified. Nevertheless, partly by working through and with postmodernism, critical theory, and semiotics, his argument can at times seem overly convoluted, while he appears to take on battles and include theorists and schools which, while perhaps important, do not necessarily lead him usefully towards his final end. Indeed, in the final chapter Flood addresses contemporary theological approaches (including George Lindbeck and the post-liberal tradition, John Milbank’s Radical Orthodoxy, Scriptural Reasoning, and Francis Clooney and Comparative Theology who usefully turned up earlier in the text), but without really addressing how they relate, and it seems almost an attempt to reference important thinkers and traditions. (To some extent academic work can encourage the attempt to show awareness and command of much relevant literature, while working to deadlines and word limits means this can never adequately be done.) Nevertheless, such criticisms are minor compared to the overall value of the text. Indeed, I may add that I believe Flood is right to argue, from a Religious Studies context, that Comparative Theology helps towards a Comparative Religions approach, and the concept that such work can be important data for the scholar in this area is something I am currently considering in my own work.

In conclusion, Flood has provided a solid and scholarly text that provides both a strong argument for the comparative method in the study of religion, as well as a clearly documented account of the way inwardness as a method of spiritual training operates across traditions and relates to modern notions of individuality. While many scholars remain suspicious of phenomenology and Comparative Religion, even seeing them as relics of a more primitive stage in Religious Studies’ evolution, I believe that this work is one amongst many contemporary books that show that both methods can be theoretically and scholarly sound. While I would not necessarily endorse Flood’s method, which I see as overly reliant on particular traditions within postmodernism, critical theory, and semiotics, his work is certainly important in theorising within these areas. Indeed, Flood’s work is part of a growth of new developments in Comparative Religion that scholars who summarily dismiss it would be wise to take note of.

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