

EDITORIAL

This special issue of the *European Journal for Philosophy of Religion* is dedicated to introducing major figures, ideas, and arguments from East Asian religious philosophy in ways that promote productive conversations with the broader field of philosophy of religion. Max Müller famously defended the importance of the comparative study of religion, insisting that, “He who knows one, knows none.” It is surely true that one has a more complete understanding of the phenomena of religious experience if one pursues a comparative study of diverse traditions; this can lead to a deeper appreciation of what Lee H. Yearley calls, “the similarities within differences and the differences within similarities.” One might also plausibly believe that one does not adequately understand or appreciate important features of any tradition until one sees how they compare with alternative views, which brings one closer to Müller’s perspective. Such comparison can lead one to appreciate the contingent nature of features of religious belief or practice; it can lead one to wonder why certain beliefs and practices are part of a given tradition and what they really mean or imply.

One can see the same phenomenon in the process of learning a second language. For example, in English we say “It is raining” and “She is rich.” After studying Chinese, which would express similar propositions roughly by saying “Rain falling” (*xia yu le* 下雨了) and “She has money” (*ta you qian* 她有钱), one might begin to wonder what the “it” of the first English sentence refers to, and why we seem to say that a person who *has money is* something. Comparative study has led scholars of religion to reconceive the primary object of their discipline, moving it from a theocentric conception of “religion” to a broader concern with the sacred. Those who seek to justify universal claims should be interested in comparing and testing such with the available alternatives in search of confirmation or challenge. Indeed, philosophers who make such claims for moral theory and base their claims on empirical facts about human beings have an imperative to engage in comparative study. For they, like all human beings, begin their reflections with the beliefs and practices of a particular historically contingent tradition and seek a broad reflective equilibrium that can only be attained by exploring alternative sources of wisdom. In this regard, in general, Religious Studies is much closer

to disciplines like Psychology than mainstream contemporary Analytic Philosophy in appreciating the need for comparison and the nature of their epistemological position.

The essays contained in this special issue represent all three of the great cultures of East Asia – China, Korea, and Japan – as well as all three of its most sophisticated and well-known traditions – Confucianism, Daoism, and Buddhism. They describe, explore, and analyze conceptions of heaven and ritual, as well as other forms of spiritual practice, the character, role, and cultivation of virtue, the ethical status of non-human animals, and theories about human nature and how these inform ideas, attitudes, and practices about the sacred. This collection does not offer a comprehensive introduction to East Asian religious philosophy, a survey of its general features, or a systematic account of any particular culture or tradition; rather, it seeks to present samples of significant treatments of important and characteristic problems in the philosophy of religion that intrigued and inspired some of the most influential thinkers in the most important traditions found throughout the region. These more focused studies offer a good sense of several distinctive ideas and approaches and illustrate that at least in a number of cases religious thinkers in East Asia shared core concerns with their Western counterparts. Our hope is that this special issue will help to raise interest and build bridges among scholars of religious philosophy around the world and encourage mutual cooperation between those working in different traditions to the common edification of all.

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