

Faith and Philosophy: Journal of the Society of Christian Philosophers

Volume 20 | Issue 2

Article 10

4-1-2003

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Recommended Citation

Reasoner, Paul (2003) "Griffiths, RELIGIOUS READING: THE PLACE OF READING IN THE PRACTICE OF RELIGION," *Faith and Philosophy: Journal of the Society of Christian Philosophers*: Vol. 20 : Iss. 2 , Article 10.

Available at: <https://place.asburyseminary.edu/faithandphilosophy/vol20/iss2/10>

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BOOK REVIEWS

Religious Reading: The Place of Reading in the Practice of Religion by **Paul J. Griffiths**. Oxford University Press, 1999. Pp. xii + 210. Cloth \$39.95.

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Paul Griffiths argues for the recovery of a particular type of reading, religious reading, which has as its purpose learning to give a religious account of the world. Religious reading assumes and develops a particular relationship between the reader and the world (e.g., [for Christians] “the world is to be interpreted in terms of the Bible, *written into its margins*, so to speak, rather than the other way around” (19, my emphasis)). Griffiths claims religious reading has all but died out and consumerist reading is the dominant type of reading in the academic world today, where consumerist reading is understood as focusing on “the metaphors of production, consumption, use, and control” (42). Memory is central to religious reading, and Griffiths offers both moral and practical arguments for the necessity of memory in religious reading. The latter part of the book takes up the genres of religious reading and examines at length commentary and anthology with extended discussions of their importance in Buddhist India and Roman Africa. While the preceding gives roughly the themes of the book, it fails to capture the passion of the text. The book is a serious defense of religious reading, a harsh attack against consumerist reading, and a passionate call for more converts to religious reading. After a few general comments, I will focus on memory, the distinction between religious and consumerist reading, and the role of specialists in religious reading.

Everyone should find something of interest here. Topics include: the physical properties of writing and manuscript construction in India (Ch. 5) and in Roman Africa (Ch. 6); mnemotechnical devices (memory techniques); descriptions of Buddhist monastic life in India by Chinese Buddhist pilgrims; and a discussion of commonplace books in Europe with special attention to John Locke’s prescription for constructing the index for such a book. Lovers of language will find themselves scurrying to the notes for further references.

Griffiths’ prose has a bracing freshness and vigor. For example, he introduces the reader to a theory in the first half of a sentence (“Olsen...has recently claimed that systematic thought about the structure of a language has the existence and use of writing among its preconditions,...”), only to



refute the theory in the second half of the same sentence by means of a brilliantly decisive counter-example (“...a claim falsified at once by the example of Panini, the Indian grammarian, who thought deeply and systematically about the structure of the Sanskrit language, but who did so without using writing and possibly even without knowing of its existence” (31)). Here and there powerfully phrased thoughts beg to be written down into one’s commonplace book for later use (at least until reading Chapter 4 when the practice is roundly condemned!)—e.g., “Bilingualism is possible, but bireligionism is not” (12). Savor this selection from a discussion of the catechumenal stage of those joining the early Christian church: “The oral instruction was intended to provide a resonant manifold [echoing George Steiner’s phrase] of memorized words, to textualize the catechumens, and by so doing transform them into people who, as a result of becoming textualized—having the blood in their veins replaced, corpuscle by corpuscle, with the words of Scripture—will act in accord with what these words prescribe” (162).

But readers should be warned that few will come out unscathed from biting criticisms. Griffiths is harsh on scholars in biblical studies, religious studies, anthropology, Indology, and philosophy. Concerning religious studies, he writes, “One [irony], most pressing for scholars of religion, is that the very intellectual activity that makes possible and largely constitutes the study of religion in universities also makes it effectively impossible to understand what is studied” (182). Or, consider another instance of Griffiths at his polemical best: “Indologists and anthropologists have done more to destroy traditional Sanskrit learning than ever Christian missionaries could” (185). He also has a sweeping indictment of the university: “University scholars, therefore, in their role as creatures of global consumerism, have made major contributions to the eradication of religious reading as an intellectual or cultural force of significance” (185). Griffiths argues that the university based study of religion is squarely in the consumerist mode.

The contrast between the consumerist reader and the religious reader is sharply illustrated by what each reader does with a text: “The response of a consumerist reader to a work like this [Nāgārjuna’s *Sūtrasamuccaya* (Anthology of Sacred Works)] is to make a critical edition of it; that of the religious reader is to learn it by heart” (132). Griffiths condemns consumerist reading in part because he believes the strong claim that religious texts in the end can only be understood by religious readers.

Pride of place in the practice of religious reading is given to memory. Indeed, Griffiths takes great pains (and rightly so given our culture of literacy) to show that writing and literacy are not necessary for composition, display, and storage (“learning a work, was a matter of ears, memory, and mouth” (147)). Memory is so important in the ideal version of religious reading that Griffiths can summarize this point by saying, “Religious readers, paradoxically, need not know how to read” (40). Memory, then, and not written records, is the preferred method of storage. In both sustained arguments and scattered comments on the topic of memory throughout the book, Griffiths offers reasons for the necessity of memory in religious reading. Memory is the preferred method of storage because: (1) there may be technological difficulty in storing texts on written records (in some times and places); (2) creating written records is expensive (in some times and places);

(3) memory allows for more instant access to any part of the text (even when compared with the current technological search methods); (4) memorizing is hard, and what takes more effort is preferred morally from a religious perspective; (5) memorized text will (or has the capacity to) change the life, character, and very being of the one in whose memory the text is stored.

Some of these reasons (e.g., (1) technological difficulty of storage, or (2) expense) are clearly only decisive in particular historical/cultural contexts. However, Griffiths tries to justify the dependence on memory on practical grounds even when technological and economic difficulties are not present. He claims that retrieval from memory is faster than searches in storage devices such as books or electronic media (see (3) above). These comparisons seem forced. However, claims (1) through (3) are not critical. The heart of the matter for religious reading lies in the moral claims about (4) effort and (5) personal transformation.

While it takes effort to memorize a text, it also costs something to have a text copied or to copy it oneself. Each of these instances is thought to display one's spiritual intentions, and, in some religious traditions, lead to the accrual of merit. Memory does seem to be one marker of spiritual intention, but it is not the only such marker.

The strongest argument in moral terms for the superiority of memory over other storage devices is that memorized religious texts work internally to change the person. Religious traditions are replete with examples of such positive changes, so I accept this judgment about memory. But to nuance the claim, consider two points.

First, memory is not a sufficient condition for such character transformation. Memory is possible without depth of understanding. But Griffiths is surely correct when he follows Hugh of St. Victor's lead (*Didascalicon*) where memory is considered to be necessary for the rumination out of which deep understanding comes.

Second, unlike his writings elsewhere, Griffiths deliberately avoids talk of the truth of religious accounts ("There is always the question of truth; is one, none, or several of the religious accounts offered true? But this is not my interest here" (14)). To be sure, Griffiths does include content in his analysis of religious reading (see in particular his discussion of anthology and commentary). Griffiths assumes throughout that the internal change caused by religious reading is a good thing. Can religious reading be defended as a good aside from consideration of the content and truth claims of the various religious accounts?

Depending upon the religious account inculcated, one "sees" the world and its people and aspects differently. Since these accounts do differ on valuations and meaning given to disparate aspects of life and world, the religious reader will be shaped differently depending upon the particular tradition followed. The personal transformations may be in conflict across religious accounts (e.g., a particular group of people might be honored in one account, and castigated by another). So, it seems that the truth claims cannot be set aside after all, unless one is willing to argue that religious reading in general is a good because it produces some good (not specific to a particular religious account) in the religious reader, where that good is then specified, e.g., moving away from self-centeredness to other-centered-

ness (Hick). Griffiths does not offer such an argument here. Rather, he argues with passion for the conclusion that consumerist reading (particularly of religious texts) is evil. The implication is that since consumerist reading is evil, religious reading must be good.

Memory also seems to serve for Griffiths as one criterion of distinction between religious reading and consumerist reading. He is convincing in his demonstration of the centrality of memory in religious reading. But one could argue that memory is a crucial ability for consumerist readers as well as for religious readers. Good university scholars are famous for their memories. They remember reading in a particular journal article precisely this or that objection or reply; how to access certain technologically advanced research tools; that there is a coffee stain on the page before the one where the passage they are looking for appears; and they have memorized passages in key texts in their specialties. While memory alone may not be sufficient to distinguish between religious and consumerist reading, what is done with memory in the two types of reading is distinguished sharply by what the reader expects from the text. In consumerist reading, the reader *uses* the text for personal creative purposes. In religious reading, the reader *submits* to the text and understands the text to be "a stable and vastly rich resource" such that there is "no final act of reading" (41).

Griffiths recognizes that not all persons will be religious readers to the same extent. Indeed, he identifies an inner core of virtuosi readers—specialists—who (1) provide a model of what it means to be a religious reader, (2) maintain the purity of the tradition, and (3) determine how the tradition should interact with texts from outside the tradition (here canon and index are mentioned with approval (64-65)). Specialist readers, as a category, are easily understood as those in the religious tradition most highly regarded for memory ability, depth of understanding, and interpretive ability based on the memorized texts. Those less advanced in a religious tradition aspire to becoming specialist readers; or, alternatively, if life commitments yield less time for the practice of religious reading they often financially support specialist readers and approve of their place in the religious tradition. Specialist readers have mastered the canon and assist others in their study of the canon.

However, when Griffiths includes in the specialist reader the role of arbiter of the tradition with the world outside the tradition, e.g., politically or with the establishment and protection of the canon and the designation of proscribed works (index), the nature of the reading of specialist readers begins to blur. Someone within the tradition must have ascertained (by reading, presumably) which works are on the index. This type of reading would seem to be in the consumerist mode by Griffiths' categorization. Furthermore, the very nature of the reading—wide-ranging, topical, once through—necessary for keeping an index seems antithetical to the ideal of religious reading—focused, slow, committing works to memory, ruminatory. Yet, at least some specialist readers seem to be required to have both traits. This suggests several threads to untangle. On the one hand, religious reading is marked by the *kind* of reading—focused on traditional texts, slow, committing works to memory, ruminatory. On the other hand, religious reading could also be characterized by the *purpose* of the reading—to

make sense of oneself and the world in terms of the religious account and to continually be working out that account more fully. In this latter characterization, some of what appears to be consumerist reading must surely be going on, i.e., consumerist reading in terms of the *kind* of reading—quick, cursory, not committing to memory. But it is not consumerist reading in terms of the second thread, the *purpose* of the reading. For consumerist reading is self-absorptive, focused on creative production for its own sake, whereas religious reading is fundamentally reading aimed at providing a better and deeper religious account of the world.

The questions I have raised about the role of memory and the nature of virtuosi readers are only intended to rein in some of Griffiths' analyses where the distinctions are drawn perhaps too starkly. His fundamental point about the loss of religious reading and its importance in learning and living a religious account of the world is surely right. It has implications for the future of universities and religious institutions of learning and worship. It also has personal implications: one should start memorizing, choose more carefully what to read, and be more intentional about the task of giving a religious account. Griffiths seeks to convert readers to the practice of religious reading. I have been so converted.

Characters in Search of Their Author: The Gifford Lectures, Glasgow 1999-2000 by Ralph McInerny. University of Notre Dame Press, 2001, 132pp. \$25.00.

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In these lectures, presented in Glasgow in October and November of 1999 and February of 2000, Professor McInerny spins a fascinating tale of the history of philosophy since Descartes that reads like a novel. Though he finds most of the major modern figures wanting with respect to their philosophical views, they emerge from these pages as living, three-dimensional persons, so vividly portrayed that one's previous encounters with them seem to have taken place in a kind of philosophical flatland. We follow Descartes from his famous dream as a young soldier to his death in Stockholm in the presence of his priest and confessor. Looking back to a medieval thinker, we pause beside Anselm of Canterbury in "the first stall on the left in the monastery at Bec in Normandy," chanting Psalm 41: "The fool has said in his heart there is no God."

The burden of these early lectures is to show that the trajectory of philosophy tends toward today's widespread intellectual nihilism, a philosophical attitude that McInerny calls "radical chic." The remainder of Part I of the book begins a ground-clearing operation for the project of natural theology, itself taken up more explicitly in Part II. Nihilism or anti-realism confronts Aristotle's defense of the first principle of reason, the law of non-contradiction. Following St. Thomas (just a coincidence?) McInerny argues that logical and psychological versions of this principle depend on its ontological formulation: "It is impossible for a thing to be and not to be at the same time and in the same respect" (p. 48). The connection between