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Terence Cuneo, *Ritualized Faith: Essays on the Philosophy of Liturgy*, Oxford Univ. Press 2016, 228pp.

“Why would anyone think it worthwhile to think philosophically about liturgy?”<sup>1</sup> This question, posed by Terence Cuneo in the Introduction to his insightful collection of essays on liturgical practice and theology in the Eastern Orthodox tradition, is one that many scholars in Analytic Philosophy of Religion (henceforth: ‘APR’) might be inclined to ask. Despite having undergone what Cuneo calls a “renaissance” over the past 40-odd years (3), he notes that APR has largely focused its energies on religious epistemology and metaphysics, proceeding “at a very high level of abstraction” (4), one which is unfortunately “detached from the religious life in such a way that it threatens to offer a distorted picture of what is important to this way of life” (6). This diagnosis of the discipline is one with which I wholeheartedly agree, and in this respect Cuneo’s book serves both as a corrective and an exemplar: It motivates the idea that APR should expand its focus to address topics more central to lived religion “on the ground”, and it shows through its own careful explorations of liturgical practice how such philosophy can be done (and be done well). The various chapters of the book are free-standing articles published elsewhere by the author, which sometimes lends it a bit of a repetitive feel. Yet while occasionally a bit predictable and even perhaps tediously so, this repetition, like the liturgy itself, is instructive when taken as a whole. The reader sees how certain themes taken up in relation to one topic are connected and relevant to those in another context, and their repetition serves to assist the reader in achieving an increased overall understanding of the (Eastern) Christian liturgical life — a worthy goal in itself.

Several chapters in this collection have a moral-ethical dimension, reflecting Cuneo’s own interests in moral philosophy. Chapter 1 thus aims to show how liturgical participation can represent one way of fulfilling Jesus’s second commandment to love one’s neighbor, insofar as the “central pattern” of the liturgy in the Eastern Christian Church allows us, first, to recognize our collective situation of being naturally drawn to our own needs and the needs of those close to us and, second, to “help break the grip that [this] ethic of proximity can have” in favor of a more outward-looking ethic (28). Liturgically prescribed acts of, e.g., petitioning and blessing can further encourage participants to stand in solidarity both with each other and with the oppressed and marginalized (30–3), a point that connects up well with the focus of Chapter 2, which understands the Eucharistic rite in the Eastern Church as a way for participants to “regularly and corporately symbolically stand against evil by symbolically being for the good” (51).

Chapter 3, which challenges J.L. Schellenberg’s argument from divine hiddenness, doesn’t initially appear to fit with the rest of the essays in the collection, but its closing discussion of the ways in which the Eastern sacramental traditions express a “commitment to [an] understanding of God’s presence in the world” as being *manifested in* (not merely accompanied by) the aesthetic dimensions of these traditions (62–3) opens up a rich and promising direction of research for APR, especially as concerns the rather underexplored topic of materially-mediated religious experience. This emphasis on the manifestation of the divine through the sensory modalities is taken up again in Chapters 6 and 7, as Cuneo fruitfully explores the phenomena of icon veneration and liturgical singing.

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1 Cuneo (2016), 3. References to the reviewed work will henceforth be provided as in-text citations.

Chapters 4 and 5 occupy themselves with the question of what liturgical reenactment ultimately amounts to and what role such reenactments can play in the moral life. Here, Cuneo takes up the various ways in which the *imagination* is relevant to the religious life. He explains how liturgical participation can be analogous to imaginative immersion in narrative literature, and he proposes that the liturgical script calls for both a *de-stabilization* and *re-unification* of one's narrative self-conception: Liturgical reenactment thus aims “to transform the self by way of committing oneself to certain ethical and religious ideals” (104). Other forms of self-transformation — namely, those supposedly occasioned by the rite of baptism and various rites of remission — are taken up later in Chapters 9 and 10.

Chapter 8 brings Cuneo's non-doxastic approach to religious faith together with a nuanced discussion of the epistemic aspects of liturgical practice. Knowing God, he claims, is not necessarily “knowledge *that* one or another proposition regarding God is true but [rather] knowledge *how* to engage and live in communion with God” (148). Indeed, such “ritual knowledge” has less to do with “being in [some] type of doxastic state with respect to propositions about God as with conducting oneself in certain ways with respect to God that count as engaging God, and knowing how to conduct oneself in those ways” (165). This discussion anticipates Chapter 11, the immensely personal and moving culmination of the entire monograph, in which Cuneo speaks of his own gradual conversion to the Eastern Church — one marked by a gradual aesthetic, affective, and volitional-practitional re-orientation, motivated in part by the way the tradition grapples meaningfully with death. He also discusses his own doubts and lack of certainty, but contrasts this with his attraction to the “ethical vision” of the Orthodox tradition and his renewed commitment to the “central components of Christianity, as they are understood in [that] tradition” (214).

I find much in Cuneo's text — especially in its autobiographical aspects — with which I can identify: his religious disillusionment with American Evangelicalism and its deep-seated anti-intellectualism, his growing dissatisfaction with the way many Christian traditions grapple with death and dying, his aesthetic and emotional attraction to liturgy and ritual, his pervasive yet non-despairing doubt, and (perhaps most importantly) his love of jazz. Philosophically, his claim that “Christianity is not a body of propositions [whose] aim is [...] to produce agents that form warranted beliefs about God” (147) is closely aligned with my own view that religious faith is much more a matter of sincere practical commitment than straightforward cognitive belief. Indeed, I agree that “there is little to recommend a view according to which a certain high level of credence is a prerequisite for authentic Christian commitment” (214). It seems to me that a religious tradition which either implicitly or explicitly makes strong doxastic conviction (let alone certainty) a necessary condition for or constituent of faith is more likely to promote forms of unhealthy and potentially dangerous self-deception in its adherents than to foster a theologically virtuous sense of epistemic humility. I thus welcome Cuneo's proposal (channeling the author of *Hebrews*) that religious faith is less about “a person's being certain of propositions regarding God” and more about her “being practically oriented toward the world in certain ways” (147). I also very much appreciate his attention to the roles that the imagination and narrative immersion play in liturgical activity. However, I would like to briefly challenge his resistance to speaking of *pretense*, *make-believe*, or *play* with respect to liturgical reenactment.

In Chapters 4 and 5 Cuneo maintains “that pretense roles have almost no place in the liturgy” (78) and that “among the responses *not* ordinarily called for by the liturgical script [...] is that of engaging in make-believe behavior” (92). Instead, he claims, the liturgy calls for “assuming a target role” — i.e., “act[ing] the part of being some way for the purpose of [...] becoming like or identifying with that which one imitates”. He contrasts this with playing a “pretense role”, in which one “pretends to act or be some way” (78). Certainly Cuneo is correct to note that “to imaginatively extrapolate from a narrative needn't be to engage in any sort of make-believe behavior” (92). After all, not all imaginings involve pretense. Yet the claim at the end of Chapter 5 — namely, that liturgical reenactment does not ideally involve pretense because it calls for a *commitment* on the part of the assembled to “ethical and religious ideals of various sorts” (103) — is somewhat puzzling. The idea seems to be that the imaginative liturgical activities through which subjects are called to “aspire to be like” the target roles they assume could not be normatively transformative if they were a matter of make-believe. Their aim, Cuneo maintains, would thereby

no longer be “to transform the self by way of committing oneself to certain ethical and religious ideals” (104).

Now it certainly seems plausible that what is represented in an act of role-taking pretense<sup>2</sup> is, in some relevant sense, assumed by the pretender to be “unreal” or “non-actual”. A child pretending to be a T-Rex knows she is not really a dinosaur, yet by roaring and stomping around she represents herself as being one. A civilian taking part in a Civil War reenactment may reenact events that actually happened, but in pretending he acts *as if* he were a historical soldier and *as though* those events were happening now, neither of which is the case. Thus, if congregants were actually pretending *to be* Mary of Bethany in liturgical reenactment, they would be representing themselves both as if they were someone they are not (namely the narratively-embellished historical figure of Mary) and as though they were contemporaneous with a historical person with whom they are not (namely, the historical Jesus). This is an understanding of liturgical reenactment I think Cuneo is right to reject (despite a somewhat unfair treatment of Mircea Eliade’s notion of “sacred time”). Yet role-taking pretense need not involve a make-believe *shift* in identity. A child can pretend to be *herself* talking on the phone, by pretending the banana she is holding is a phone.<sup>3</sup> I can pretend in the shower to be interviewing (as my current self) for a job I have applied for. Yet Cuneo also wants to reject that the imaginative engagement involved in liturgical reenactment ideally includes “pretending to be present *in one’s own person* at the events described in the [narrative]” (80, my emphasis). So neither pretending to be someone else nor pretending to be oneself in different narrative-historical circumstances will do.

Still, I think there is another form of make-believe that might have a fitting place in some of the forms of liturgical reenactment Cuneo mentions, one which situates itself between identity-shifting and identity-preserving pretense. Let’s call it *identity-transforming pretense*. We commonly pretend we are a certain way in order to actually be or become that way. For example, a nervous speaker may simulate confidence and thereby end up speaking confidently. Or a moody party guest may intentionally pretend to be having fun with the result that he actually enjoys himself. And both of these persons may intentionally engage in pretense with these results in mind (though they need not). Although the dictum “fake it till you make it” sometimes gets a bad rap, pretense is one way in which one can set about trying to improve one’s character, cultivate particular virtues, or learn how it feels to take a certain activity seriously. In this way, liturgical reenactment can serve a *soul-making function*, insofar as it both calls participants to commit themselves to becoming like the target roles they assume and allows them to engage in such identity transformation by pretending *as themselves at this moment in time* to say the words *as the kind of person* who would display such characteristics (e.g., as someone like Mary of Bethany). Identity-transforming pretense, then, can answer the call of liturgical action for “the construction of a narrative identity” (102).

In general, I think much of the resistance in APR to speaking of pretense, make-believe, and play with respect to the religious life has to do with a fear of either maligning or trivializing religion in some way. Religious pretense in adults is automatically viewed as being somehow dissimulative or deceptive, yet pretense employed in the context of imaginative play rarely if ever involves deceitful intent. Make-believe and play, on the other hand, are often viewed as problematically frivolous or non-serious. To be sure, ritual may be “seriousness at its highest and holiest”,<sup>4</sup> but as any sports fan knows, play itself can be a matter of the utmost seriousness. “We are accustomed to think of play and seriousness as an absolute antithesis,” Johan Huizinga writes in *Homo Ludens*, yet “play-character [...] may attach to the sublimest forms of action”<sup>5</sup> Indeed, as Kendall Walton notes, it plays “a profound role in our efforts to cope with our environment”.<sup>6</sup> We might thus follow Rachel Wagner in thinking that “the most ideal form of [...] engagement in both games and religions [involves] *earnest play*” — when participants “take the experience

2 I speak of ‘role-taking’ here, as opposed to ‘role-playing’ because I think it better fits what Cuneo himself has in mind with “target roles”. See also the discussion in Currie and Ravenscroft (2002).

3 Adapted from Currie and Ravenscroft (2002), 112.

4 Huizinga (1949), 18.

5 Ibid.

6 Walton (1990), 12.

seriously” and are “fully committed” to the rule-governed structures and practices of the “experience or world view into which they have [playfully] entered”.<sup>7</sup> To put this in Cuneo’s terms, such play is not essentially a matter of believing some set of propositions, but rather involves being sincerely committed to a certain way of living.

The threat to religion, then, does not come from characterizing it as involving play, pretense, or make-believe. It comes from the possibility of *insincerity*. I thus propose that APR scholars (and Cuneo himself) would do better to drop their “anti-pretense pretensions” and instead embrace the earnest playfulness of Plato:

God alone is worthy of supreme seriousness, but man is made God’s plaything, and that is the best part of him. Therefore every man and woman should live life accordingly, and play the noblest games and be of another mind from what they are at present. [...] What, then, is the right way of living? Life must be lived as play, playing certain games, making sacrifices, singing and dancing, and then a man will be able to propitiate the gods, and defend himself against his enemies, and win in the contest.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Wagner (2014), 196–7, my emphasis.

<sup>8</sup> From Book VII of the *Laws*, quoted in Huizinga (1949), 18–19.