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## Why is the Philosophy of Religion Important?

Religion — whether we are theists, deists, atheists, gnostics, agnostics, Jews, Christians, Muslims, Hindus, Buddhists, Taoists, Confucians, Shintoists, Zoroastrians, animists, polytheists, pagans, Wiccans, secular humanists, Marxists, or cult devotees — is a matter of ultimate concern. Everything we are and do finally depends upon such questions as whether there is a God, whether we continue to exist after death, whether any God is active in human history, and whether human ethical relations have spiritual or supernatural dimensions. If God is real, then this is a different world than it would be if God were not real.

The basic human need that probably exists for some sort of salvation, deliverance, release, liberation, pacification, or whatever it may be called, seems to be among the main foundations of all religion. There may also be a basic human need for mystery, wonder, fear of the sacred, romantic worship of the inexplicable, awe in the presence of the completely different, or emotional response to the “numinous,” which is the topic of *The Idea of the Holy* by German theologian Rudolf Otto (1869-1937) and *The Sacred and the Profane* by Romanian philosopher and anthropologist of religion Mircea Eliade (1907-1986). This need also may be a foundation of religion. Yet doubt exists that humans feel any general need *for* mystery. On the contrary, the human need to *solve* mysteries seems to be more basic than any need to *have* mysteries. For example, mythology in all known cultures has arisen from either the need or the desire to provide explanations for certain types of occurrences, either natural or interpersonal, and thus to attempt to do away with those mysteries. Moreover, if any basic human need exists for deliverance, salvation, etc., then it may be manifest in part as a need for deliverance from mystery, salvation from ignorance, etc.

Even in the post-Enlightenment era, the primeval feeling of

a need for mystery continues. Those who still feel this need seem to be seduced both by tradition itself and their own uncritical approach to tradition. Immanuel Kant (1724-1804), the founder of German critical philosophy, wrote *Sapere aude!* (“Dare to know!”) in *What is Enlightenment?* — but they will not take this dare. Many remain sincere and unabashed about feeling a deep need for mystery in their lives. Such people are generally members of some kind of religious group.

Many intelligent, well educated people still say such things as: “Whatever the controversy, and however strong the scholarly arguments against it, I choose to believe in the supernatural aspects of my faith, simply because it is very important for me in the life of my faith to be radically aware of sacred mysteries.” If one chooses to make the supernatural element a central aspect of one’s religion, scripture and tradition will certainly support such a set of beliefs. However — and this is well worth noting — the various scriptures, without adding more internal contradiction than is already present in their pages, will also support commonsensical, naturalistic, non-supernatural, metaphorical, allegorical, or symbolic interpretations of their texts and theologies. Such a plurality of defensible interpretations is possible, not because the texts are vague, for indeed they are usually not, but because the content of these texts is typically universal in its domain of application and ambivalent rather than ambiguous in its language. Thus it is a strength, not a weakness, of most scriptures that they speak to otherworldly as well as thisworldly interests, for in that way they assure that they will continue to speak to every era, nation, and successive *Zeitgeist* in world history.

German-British philologist Max Müller (1823-1900), one of the founders of the modern scholarly study of comparative religion, asserted in 1873 that whoever knows only one religion knows none. Against this claim, German theologian Adolf von Harnack (1851-1930) responded in 1901 that whoever knows one religion knows them all. These assertions are not contradictory. Both are correct. They equivocate on two kinds of knowledge. The distinction remains ambiguous in English, but is clear enough for French and German speakers, who have at their service the respective juxtapositions of *savoir* / *connaître* and *wissen* / *kennen*. Müller means the scientific or objective knowledge (*savoir* or *wissen*) of a religion, which naturally entails scrupulous comparisons with the data of other religions; while Harnack, on the other hand, means the subjective acquaintance or familiarity (*connaître* or *kennen*) that only

an insider, i.e., a devout believer, can achieve. Moreover, Harnack refers specifically to Christianity, claiming that it is the only religion worth knowing, and that to know it intimately, i.e., to believe it, is in effect to know and believe the true essence and meaning of all religions, since they all aim at the same spiritual goal, though all except Christianity fall short. In short, Müller speaks as a philosopher; Harnack as a theologian.

Religion must make sense to the believer, not necessarily common sense, but some sort of sense; i.e., believers ought to be able at some level to justify their beliefs. At the lowest level, such defense is accomplished by appeal to authority or tradition; at the highest level, it is done either through philosophy or through philosophical or systematic theology. The preeminent German idealist philosopher, Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel (1770-1831), believed that religion in its highest form is philosophy, that philosophy in its true form is religion, and that the true content of each is the same, even though their respective expressions may differ. In their development they move toward each other, since in the historical development of culture, the concept of God moves toward the philosophical, i.e., away from the anthropomorphic and toward the ever more comprehensively spiritual.

A few definitions of key terms are necessary at the outset:

Theism, from the Greek word for “God,” *theos* (θεός), is belief in a God who is active in human affairs. Deism, from the Latin word for “God,” *deus*, is belief in a God who created the world and then left it alone. Atheism, from the Greek meaning “no God,” is belief in just that. Atheism, theism, and deism are each claims to knowledge. Agnosticism, from the Greek meaning “not knowing,” *agnōstos* (ἄγνωστος), is a refusal to decide.

Monotheism, from the Greek for “alone, “single,” or “unique,” *monos* (μόνος), and henotheism, from the Greek for “one,” *hen* (ἓν), each denote belief in one God, but monotheism means one God in and for the entire universe, while henotheism means one God for us, e.g., for our tribe, not denying the possibility that other tribes might have their own equally valid Gods.

Pantheism is the belief that everything is God. Animism is the belief that everything is spiritual, or that even apparently inanimate objects have souls. Panentheism is the belief that God completely permeates everything, like water in a saturated sponge.

Polytheism is the belief in many irreducible Gods, perhaps two, perhaps three, usually more. The Christian trinity is monothe-

istic, not polytheistic, because Yahweh the Father, Jesus Christ the Son, and the Holy Spirit are each recognized as aspects of one God, not as three separate Gods, just as ice, liquid water, and water vapor are each recognized as aspects of a single substance, H<sub>2</sub>O, not as three separate substances. The Hindu trinity of Brahma, Vishnu, and Shiva, on the other hand, is part of a gigantic polytheistic order.

As for a definition of religion itself, that is very controversial. The word comes from the Latin *religare* (“to tie” or “to bind”) and *religio* (“conscientiousness,” “respect,” “awe,” or “sanctity”). The idea is that the soul is bound to God. Religion has been defined as everything from the immediate awareness of identity with the absolute, to the passionate striving (*eros*) for the transcendent, to the psychological projection of the idealized human self onto the infinite, to the consciousness of the highest social values. For German theologian Friedrich Daniel Ernst Schleiermacher (1768-1834), religion is the feeling of utter dependence; for Danish philosopher Harald Höffding (1843-1931), the individual’s desire to conserve value; for Kant, the recognition of moral duties as divine commands; for Dutch-American anthropologist Annemarie de Waal Malefijt (b. 1914), any system of actions and interactions based on culturally shared beliefs in sacred supernatural powers; for Müller, the intuitive faculty of apprehending the infinite; for British historian Arthur Darby Nock (1902-1963), the human refusal to accept helplessness; for ancient Greek philosopher Plato (427-347 B.C.E.), the science of begging and getting gifts from the Gods; and for German socialist philosopher Karl Marx (1818-1883), the opiate of the people.

In essence, religion is an attitude, or a sum of attitudes, constituting a way of life. Religion may thus be the total of an individual’s sincere attitudes and predispositions toward that which serves as the final expression of his or her particular primary interest or goal. The various institutions of religion would arise only after a group shares certain attitudes that were first felt by an individual, and as a result of this sharing.

Perhaps the most accurate definition combines the ideas of two German-Americans, liberal theologian Paul Tillich (1886-1965) and psychologist Erich Fromm (1900-1980): any system of thought, feeling, and action, typically shared by a group, which gives the individual a frame of orientation, a meaning of life, and an object of devotion, which is regarded as a matter of ultimate concern.

British-American philosopher Alfred North Whitehead

(1861-1947) wrote in *Religion in the Making*: “Religion is what the individual does with his [or her] own solitariness.” But what the individual actually does with true solitariness, that curious amalgam of loneliness and reflectivity, is philosophize. In the same book Whitehead wrote, “Religion is force of belief cleansing the inward parts. For this reason the primary religious virtue is sincerity, a penetrating sincerity.” But similarly, philosophy is force of thought cleansing the inward parts. Thus the primary philosophical virtue is precisely the same penetrating sincerity.

Algerian-French novelist and philosopher Albert Camus (1913-1960) wrote in *The Myth of Sisyphus* that there is only one truly philosophical question: suicide. His focus was perhaps too narrow, but he was on the right track. The same question, more broadly stated, is whether life is worth living. Philosophers have asked this broader version at least since Socrates in the fifth century B.C.E. If life turns out not to be worth living, then that in itself is not sufficient reason to commit suicide. We may prefer just to endure life. Conversely, if we judge that life is worth living, then that alone is not sufficient reason to avoid suicide. Socrates himself, who believed quite firmly that life, especially a philosophically examined life such as his own, was worth living, fell afoul of a moral dilemma and had to commit suicide to preserve his moral integrity.

So the central question is life. What, beyond the obvious physical and biomedical aspects, is life? What does it mean? Why live? Why persist? Why surrender? Why bother? Why care? Why strive? Why have children? Why laugh? Why cry? Reason seems sometimes at a loss. The devout churchgoers who deliberately reject any scholarly conclusions about the content of the Christian faith because of the great comfort and sense of importance they gain by believing that Jesus is the Son of God cannot risk anything, even reason, shaking that belief.

The historical development of religion proceeds in stages which can be analyzed in terms of dialectical progress or unfolding. Such is the case both with individual religions and with religion in general. Anthropologists, psychologists, and sociologists, especially those who study folklore and oral traditions, have done much good work in classifying such stages, all the way from the most primitive animism to the most sophisticated philosophical monotheism. But their classification is in general only formal. What they have largely failed to do is to discover and define precisely the reasons why a given stage passes over into another. They have failed in

general to see the progressive development of religion and religions as a unified and deliberate series of God's revelations of reason designed specifically to lead us gradually toward the most adequate and profound understanding and appreciation of God which is humanly possible. This is a task which only a philosopher can achieve. Hegel conceived and attempted such a project — to learn the ultimate, divinely sanctioned reasons why one religious stage passes over into another — but that movement, plagued from the start by bad anthropological data, died out in the mid-nineteenth century, and was only revived in the late twentieth century.

The narrative of Elijah (fl. 860 B.C.E.) overcoming the prophets of Baal on Mount Carmel in I Kings 18 tells of the supersession of the God(s) of fertility by the God of historical intervention. Likewise, the whole New Testament can be seen as the tale of the supersession of the God of historical intervention by the God of supernatural salvation. The Roman Catholic Church gradually came to see this God as the God of supernatural salvation by priestly intermediation. The Protestant Reformation was in the main a movement to replace this Catholic God with the God of supernatural salvation by direct faith. All of these were rational transitions, demanded by and right for their times, and each unable to have happened at any other time. Each successive stage must make more sense in its time than each supplanted stage. For example, Augustinian Christianity survived its Pelagian, Manichaean, and Donatist rivals chiefly because, in its time, it made more philosophical sense than they did.

Progress in religion is not characterized by mere iconoclasm. Rather, as human civilization gains through history a more adequate self-awareness, the concepts of God which were once adequate for individual cultures are successively replaced by more adequate concepts of God. The ancient Hebrew transition from henotheism to monotheism is an excellent example of such development. The God of Israel was adequate for the confrontation between Israel and Egypt, but the God who could intervene in the long struggle among Israel, Assyria, and Babylon had to be the God of the whole world. Such a transition from a particular God to a universal God is a mark of genuine progress in culture, religion, and world-view (*Weltanschauung*). The development of more adequate concepts of God is a mirror of the development of civilization itself.

The historical evolution, on the scale relative to culture, of more adequate concepts of God must also be seen as the evolution on the absolute scale, or *sub specie aeternitatis*, of ever more nearly true

concepts of God. That of Deutero-Isaiah (fl. 540 B.C.E.) more nearly approached the true nature of God than did that of Moses (fl. ca. 1300 B.C.E.). Similarly, that of Augustine (354-430) was more highly developed and thus more accurate than Isaiah's. This means, not that Isaiah was either more intelligent or more devout than Moses, or Augustine more than Isaiah, but that their respective theologies are to a significant degree products of the total of learned culture in their respective times, and thus that these theologies themselves reflect these several levels of cultural development and philosophical refinement.

As the early twenty-first century has scientific, epistemological, and even metaphysical reasons to abandon former beliefs in the supernatural, the time may have come for another rationally ordained supersession of an old God. The God of supernatural salvation, in whatever form, may be ripe for replacement by the God of what might be called in English "earthly peace," "cohesive social order," "social coherence," "ethical solidarity," "the order of ethical life," or, in Tillich's vocabulary, "theonomy," the law of God written in human hearts. But this social ideal of philosophical religion is better expressed by untranslatable terms such as *Sittlichkeit* in Hegel's nineteenth-century German, *koinônia* (κοινωνία) in New Testament Greek, or *chesed* (חֶסֶד) in ancient Hebrew. It is a goal toward which philosophy, religion, and politics must all cooperate.

The difference — or bifurcation — between the many subjective worlds that involve God and those conceived without God drives immediately to the root of human existence. The various doctrines and traditions of established religions — particularly because they are so often uncompromisingly at odds with one another — are not adequate to answer the most serious and basic questions of human existence, life, and meaning. Theology does a better job of answering them than doctrines or traditions do, but to address them in a fully satisfying way we need philosophy. Either French Prince Charles Maurice de Talleyrand or French prime minister Georges Clemenceau is supposed to have said that war is too important to leave to the generals. Similarly, religion is too important to leave to the priests. A more detached, objective, bird's-eye view is needed.

Philosophy is the science that sits in judgment of all matters of concern. "Science" is any rigorous discipline that uses impartial powers of reason and logic. The tribunal of reason weighs topics of inquiry on their own merits, according to their own logic, and in relation to other topics, then completes its analysis without prejudice on the basis of wherever reason leads, according to its own logic.

The goal of philosophical scrutiny is clarity, accuracy, and truth.

Given this mission of philosophy, its highest duty is to sit in judgment of the most important matters, with a view toward improving human life, ethical relations, and the world in general by injecting reason into our judgments and by identifying, describing, and communicating what makes sense and what does not. Philosophy thus promotes intelligence, clear understanding, and civilization but condemns stupidity, ignorance, and barbarity. This is the normative or prescriptive aspect of philosophy, which is most effective when done implicitly. Philosophy aims to become the architecture of ethical, meaningful life, not by preaching or by being dogmatic, but just by discovering the facts and displaying them in clear light to intelligent minds who will then make their own decisions.

The philosophy of religion is not the same as theology. While theologians examine a particular religion from within and interpret it for its own community of believers, philosophers of religion analyze religion in general, from external or non-sectarian points of view, and evaluate it systematically. Theology is part of the data for philosophy of religion.

The philosophy of religion was originally subsumed under metaphysics, the philosophical science of first principles. Its central issue, the reality and nature of God, was considered a metaphysical question. But in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries philosophers began to consider questions about God separately from other metaphysical questions and to ask about ethics in religious contexts. As a result of these new lines of inquiry, especially in Britain and Germany, the philosophy of religion had become an independent discipline within philosophy probably by the end of the eighteenth century and surely by the beginning of the nineteenth.

The philosophy of religion, like most philosophy, is not a linear discipline. That is, its concepts cannot be learned sequentially, but must be gradually fitted together like the pieces of a jigsaw puzzle. In whatever order they are presented, some concepts presented earlier will remain obscure until other concepts are presented later. This is unavoidable. Readers should therefore be patient and try to avoid frustration as they wade through difficult material in the first few chapters, confident that as they subsequently approach equally difficult material in later chapters, their understanding of the whole will suddenly and dramatically increase as they begin to grasp the interrelationships among these concepts. The reward is at the end.