

# **The Enigma of Belief and Integrity in the Philosophy of Religion**

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Many philosophers of religion are unaware of research done on comparative religions, and continue to use language and to address issues that distort the nature of human religious endeavor. Despite work by Cantwell Smith, Ludwig Wittgenstein, Wittgensteinians, and their critics, these scholars continue to confuse faith with (propositional) belief, and miss the significance of

the dynamic nature of religious culture in historic context. In this paper, I defend Walter Kaufmann's view that religion addresses an essential human ontological need, on the grounds that it makes sense of the immense diversity of religious expression and endeavor.

In consideration of the theme of this World Congress, "Philosophy Solving World Problems," those of us interested in philosophy of religion as an integral part of a broader philosophy of culture may be dismayed by the persistently narrowed focus of conventional philosophy of religion. To some, it may appear limited to topics and issues modeled on contemporary western Christianity. Michael Levine has recently argued that "contemporary Christian analytic philosophy of religion", suffers a "lack of vitality, relevance and 'seriousness'."<sup>1</sup> Fifty years ago, Ernst Benz, a Christian scholar and missionary, observed critically that "Western Christian thinking is the common preference we attribute to theology, the doctrinal part of religion" in interpreting "forms of religious expression."<sup>2</sup> Benz warned against misrepresenting nonwestern religions by over-emphasizing their doctrinal aspects. The problem is magnified in cases such as Native American religions for which there is no doctrinal component.<sup>3</sup>

In a world troubled with problems of cultural diversity, and confronted with political distortion and manipulation of religious traditions, scholars of religion have an important service to perform in supporting the understanding of religious diversity and in promoting constructive dialogue regarding religious difference. It is irresponsible of philosophers to contribute to obfuscation and confusion in such a vital realm of human culture. It is incumbent on us especially to clarify conceptual distinctions in the study of world religions, and to guide ethical reflection regarding religious culture in a complex world.

I am sympathetic with Levine's complaint about contemporary philosophy of religion. I am also critical, however, of philosophy of religion in its failure to take seriously the insights of religious studies and comparative religion. To be sure, there are recent exceptions, such as Eugene Thomas Long's reassuring discussion of the concept of transcendence.<sup>4</sup> But many philosophers of religion continue to use

language and to address issues that have little to do with religious traditions or ways of life.

Largely through the influence of Wittgenstein in the mid-twentieth century, philosophy of religion began to free itself from the positivistic shadow of Humean skepticism, even earlier than did the philosophy of science. Ironically, unlike philosophy of science, which has for three decades taken seriously the history and sociology of science, philosophy of religion has yet to be seriously attentive to comparative religion.

Two decades ago Gary Gutting proposed a revision of philosophy of religion, or, rather to “*refocus... the project of a philosophical critique of religion.*”<sup>5</sup> Gutting intended to avoid what he regarded as a conventional division between those philosophers of religion who are religious believers (apologists) and those who are nonbelievers (skeptics), by explaining how, in principle, there can be a justification for religious belief by means of its holistic explanatory power. Yet, even Gutting’s work is preoccupied with what has come to be known as “the epistemology of religion.” Gutting perpetuates the notion that religious belief is central to the philosophical understanding of religious faith.

Perhaps it is not surprising that much of the conventional dialogue in philosophy of religion is still directed by an interest in Western theological apologetics, with focus upon conscious, propositional belief. Within those religious cultures that are especially theological – wherein rational reflection upon doctrine is a principal aspect of religious faith – philosophical discussion of belief seems unavoidable *as part of such religious culture*. Consequently, I am loath to criticize philosophers for addressing issues concerning propositional belief, within their own respective religious tradition. There is a long history of such philosophical activity within some religious cultures. Classical topics such as the problem of evil and the demonstration of God’s existence are directly concerned with propositions as objects of conscious belief.

Furthermore, epistemological discussion within a religious intellectual tradition is by no means confined to Christianity. Islamic philosophers have long focussed attention on doctrinal belief. Averroes, for example, construes religion as manifesting conscious, propositional belief essentially: “Scripture has to contain every method of [bringing about] judgments of assent and every method of forming concepts”.<sup>6</sup> Strongly influenced by Aristotle, as Aquinas was in the next century, Averroes distinguished between those who can infer by demonstration (i.e., rational proof), those who can infer by dialectical method, and those who can infer only by rhetorical means. The philosophical purpose for Averroes, and Algazali before him, was to explain the relation between conscious understanding of the Holy *Qur’an* and Islamic faith.

A serious problem in philosophy of religion remains, however, very much as Ernst Benz had described for Western religious thinkers seeking to understand nonwestern religions half a century ago. Because religious doctrine is of central importance in Christianity, Western philosophers have approached religion as if it were characteristically a matter of doctrine. Since doctrine entails the manifestation of conscious belief expressed in propositions, consequently, in the context of modern philosophy, conscious, propositional belief has been regarded as the essential characteristic of religion. Wilfred Cantwell Smith, a prominent scholar of the history of comparative religions, developed a critical distinction between the concepts of *faith* and *belief*, shared to a considerable degree by the Catholic theologian Bernard Lonergan. Smith's conceptual analysis has significant ramifications for the critique of contemporary philosophy of religion. His work explains that conscious, propositional belief is only one among various means by which religious faith is expressed: "What theology [as the study of doctrinal belief] is to the Christian Church, a ritual dance may be to an African tribe: a central formulation of the human involvement with final verity."<sup>7</sup> Conscious propositional belief is not manifested in most religious cultures throughout history and around the world.

In the Christian case, the role of belief has been quite major, at times decisive. Doctrine has been a central expression of faith, has seemed often a criterion of it; the community has divided over differences in belief, and has set forth belief as a formal qualification of membership. No other religious community on earth has done these things to the same degree, and some have not done them at all.<sup>8</sup>

In Western Christianity, where orthodoxy historically has been stressed, doctrine – and consequently belief – have come to be regarded as characteristic of religion.

Wittgenstein is often thought to have shed light upon the nature of religious belief. Dallas High has interpreted Wittgenstein as regarding religious belief as having both an "explicit or focal" propositional function, and a tacit non-propositional function. It is important, High emphasizes, "that any propositional (doctrinal) expression of belief is dependent on an antecedent tacit or indwelt network of beliefs."<sup>9</sup> Wittgenstein's writings are laced with intriguing comments about religious belief, but without any substantial development – only glimpses of insight. Very little is coherently developed. As Wittgenstein himself admits, "If I am thinking about a topic just for myself... I jump about all around it; that is the only way of thinking that comes naturally to me. Forcing my thoughts into an ordered sequence is a torment for me."<sup>10</sup> Understandably, Wittgenstein resisted theory development in philosophy, but in doing so he established something of a dogma regarding the function of language. In his critique of the

alleged philosophical advantage of religious principle over religious belief, John Churchill points out that "Wittgenstein's refutation of vulgar skepticism" entails regarding "doubt as moves [made] in a language-game."<sup>11</sup>

The notion of "language-game" is supposed by some Wittgensteinians, such as Peter Winch<sup>12</sup>, to provide a means of understanding the distinct character of religious belief in a manner that is not conventionally epistemological. John Cook has rather thoroughly criticized this view, first by attacking the very notion of a "language-game" and, furthermore, by charging that it reduces religious belief to vacuous behavior. On Cook's analysis, Wittgenstein's notion of a language-game is based upon a sort of neo-Humean view, according to which "our concepts, and hence our language-games, have their origin in our primitive reactions."<sup>13</sup> On this account, a language-game is simply a pattern of behavior, and a fantasy language-game is as plausible as an actual one. In neither case is it appropriate to ask "Why?" or "What do they mean by that?" The participants in a language game become like circus animals.<sup>14</sup>

Wittgenstein, as High observes<sup>15</sup>, fails to distinguish faith from belief. This is due, I think, to the fact that German has the same ambiguity in *Glaube* as English does in *belief*. Wittgensteinians and their critics alike seem trapped by this confusion. What otherwise might prove to be a revolutionary direction in philosophy of religion, initiated by David Basinger, is currently infected by this conventional fixation on epistemology. Basinger has called philosophical attention (quite rightly, I think) to the pervasive encounter with religious diversity in religious culture. The fact that "syncretistic realism" (to use Ninian Smart's term) is manifestly echaracteristic of religious culture, has been an important phenomenon in the study of comparative religions for several decades, but virtually ignored by philosophers of religion. Unfortunately, Basinger's notion of religious diversity, with all the subtlety of a positivist reduction, is predicated upon epistemic conflicts in conscious belief.<sup>16</sup>

Under the legacy of Western philosophy's preoccupation with epistemology, Westerners are apt to ask, "What do they believe?", in seeking to understand the religious faith of others. Thus, in Western culture generally the notion of religious *faith* has been conflated with *belief*. In contemporary philosophy, the entire enterprise of the "epistemology of religion" appears subject to this conceptual oversight. In their approach to religious thought, Western analytic philosophers have tended to gloss over the significance of the dynamic nature of culture in historic context. (John Wisdom and Richard Braithwaite were notable exceptions.) Even within orthodox traditions, faith is distinct from belief as shown in conversion, which is not simply a matter of bringing someone to conscious, doctrinal assent. It is, I

suggest, phenomenologically analogous to revelation. Averroes and Aquinas, in emphasizing the propositional belief, never confused it with faith; instead, they regarded propositional belief as a means of manifesting, or perhaps fulfilling, their faith, rather in the way a religious composer or poet, or a religious care-giver or leader would regard their work as an expression of faith.

The epistemology of religion runs the same risk as rational choice theory in the sociology of religion<sup>17</sup>: a superficial reduction of religious culture, value and experience. In contrast, Walter Kaufmann, nearly a half century ago, maintained that through religion and art, we address our *ontological* needs to create, to express love, compassion, and empathy, to identify with something greater than ourselves and our immediate environment.<sup>18</sup> Unlike the fixation on religious belief, Kaufmann's view affords a philosophical approach to religion that makes sense of the immense diversity of human endeavor and expression that has been generally recognized as religious.

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## NOTES

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- 2 Ernst Benz, "On Understanding Non-Christian Religions", in *The History of Religions: Essays in Methodology*, ed. Mircea Eliade and Joseph M. Kitagawa (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1959), pp. 122-134.
- 3 Leroy N. Meyer, "Wakan Kin Ode [In Search of the Sacred]: Stephen Return Riggs & Dakota World View," *The Bulletin of the Institute of American Indian Studies*, News Report 125 (ISSN. 0042-0069) (Spring 1991), pp. 4-11; Leroy N. Meyer and Tony Ramirez, "Wakinyan Hotan [The Thunder Beings Cry Out]: The Inscrutability of Lakota/Dakota Metaphysics," in *From Our Lives: Learning from Indigenous Peoples*, ed. Sylvia O'Meara and Douglas West (Toronto: Garamond Press, 1996), pp. 89-105.
- 4 Eugene Thomas Long, "Quest for Transcendence," *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion*, 45:1 (February 1999): 51-65.
- 5 Gary Gutting, *Religious Belief and Religious Skepticism*, (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1982), p. 3.
- 6 Averroes, "The Decisive Treatise Determining the Nature of the Connection Between Religion and Philosophy," tr. G.F. Hourani, reprinted in *Philosophy in the Middle Ages: the Christian, Islamic, and Jewish Traditions*, ed. Arthur Hyman and James J. Walsh (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1973), pp. 301-302.
- 7 Wilfred Cantwell Smith, *Faith and Belief* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1979), p. 15.
- 8 Smith, *Faith and Belief*, pp.13-14.
- 9 Dallas M. High, "On Thinking More Crazy Than Philosophers: Wittgenstein, Knowledge and Religious Belief," *Philosophy of Religion*, vol. 19, no. 3 (1986), p. 171.

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- 10 Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Culture and Value*, ed. G.H. von Wright; tr. Peter Winch (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980), p. 28c.
- 11 John Churchill, "Beliefs, Principles, and Reasonable Doubts," *Religious Studies*, vol. 23 (1987), p. 225. See also Churchill's earlier "Wittgenstein on the Phenomena of Belief," *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion*, vol. 16 (1984): 139-152.
- 12 Peter Winch, "Meaning and Religious Language," in *Reason and Religion*, ed. Stuart C. Brown (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1977).
- 13 John W. Cook, "Wittgenstein and Religious Belief," *Philosophy*, vol. 63 (1988), p. 433.
- 14 Cook, "Wittgenstein and Religious Belief," p. 441.
- 15 High, "On Thinking More Crazily Than Philosophers," p. 173.
- 16 David Basinger, "Religious Diversity: Where Exclusivists Often Go Wrong," *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion*, 47:1 (2000): 43-55.
- 17 Lawrence R. Iannaccone, "Rational Choice: Framework for the Scientific Study of Religion," in *Rational Choice Theory and Religion: summary and assessment*, ed. Lawrence A. Young (London: Routledge, 1997), pp. 25-45.
- 18 Walter Kaufmann, *Critique of Religion and Philosophy*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1978), section 98.