



Philosophy of Religion

Philosophy's Prejudice Towards Religion

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ABSTRACT: Religion acquired a bad press in philosophical modernity after a rivalry developed between philosophy and theology, originating in philosophy's adopting the role of our culture's superjudge in all of morality and knowledge, and in faith's coming to be seen as belief, that is, as assent to propositional content. Religion, no longer trust in the face of mystery, became a belief system. Reason as judge of propositional belief set up religion's decline. But spirituality is on the rise, and favors trust over reason. Philosophy could make space for the spiritual by acknowledging a difference between belief as propositional assent and religious faith as trust, a distinction lost with the mixing of Greek philosophy and Christian faith. Artistic or religious truth disappeared as authentic forms of knowing. But Michael Polanyi reintroduced knowledge as more than can be thought. Also postmodern and feminist thought urge us to abandon autonomous reason as sole limit to knowledge. We have space again for philosophy to look at openness to the spiritual. If spirituality confronts us with the mystery of the existential boundary conditions, religion may be a form of relating to the mystery that confronts us from beyond the bounds of reason. That mystery demands our attention if we are to be fully in touch with perennial issues of human meaning.

At least philosophically speaking, religion has acquired a bad press in modernity. It may be explicitly rejected, simply not be talked about, or perhaps be discussed as an area of investigation. But religious adherents who explicitly involve their religion in doing philosophy are both rare and seldom respected. Much of this goes back to a history of rivalry. The rationally emancipated philosopher grew to regard the authoritarian faith of irrational religion as overcome. Conceived as a rival of philosophy, in providing some coherent account of things religion lost respect. Kai Nielsen is a well-known representative of this line in his thought.

I doubt whether philosophy would have dismissed religion if a rivalry between philosophy and theology had not developed. There certainly was no need for it to develop. Philosophy, as a rationally coherent account of how things, generally speaking, hang together, would not need to see a rival in stories and rituals in which people tell of and nurture their trust in our origin and destiny, search for healing in our pain and sickness, hope to be comforted in death and disaster, and find wisdom in the face of evil. Philosophy, as an endeavor in which rational argument brings us to broad conclusions intended to contribute to our power and control in the world, need not be in conflict with religion in which prophetic wisdom attempts to comfort and direct us in relation to realities over which we will never have much rational power or control. Philosophy develops the broadest possible framework of

conceptual understanding. Religion fosters attitudes towards things not understood that way at all.

Nevertheless, rivalry came about when philosophy came to be regarded as what has been called our culture's superjudge, adjudicator of all claims to knowledge or morality. In this way philosophy came to adopt some traditional functions of religion, of priests and prophets. In addition, religion in the West began to model itself on rational philosophy, began to see its stories of faith—the story of creation is a wellknown example—as rival accounts of reality.⁽¹⁾ The early church fathers are generally regarded to have been philosophers. The common terrain on which philosophy and religion competed was that of proper belief. This was possible because both the content of the rational mind and the content of faith were regarded as belief. The term belief could therefore straddle both religious faith and propositional assent. Already Augustine speaks of faith as thinking with assent.

For religious faith and propositional acceptance to become rivals, however, just a common term was not enough. The common term needed an actually shared concept. Faith needed to become understood or defined along the lines of reason, that is, in terms of acquiring a content via propositional acceptance. In this way all belief, both rational and religious, would be conceptual and propositional in kind. The only difference would be that faith blindly accepted revealed propositions on authority, while philosophy accepted rationally justified propositions based on empirical evidence and argued in the logical space of reasons.

In religion, via theology and doctrine, conceptual beliefs slowly replaced the stories of faith; stories, that is, which were trusted as forms of practical guidance. In philosophy, via the rising influence of logic, what it is proper to believe became more and more modeled on what could be rationally conceived about the empirical world. All of this is in part familiar to us as the story of secularization, naturalization, and emancipation, but less known as the story of the transformation of faith. Faith as a form of trust became a form of (propositional) belief. This story has been convincingly told by Wilfred Cantwell Smith in his classical *Faith and Belief*. Religion was deformed from a way of learning to trust in the face of mystery and became assent to theological doctrine. Once faith was seen primarily as something having a propositional content, its adjudication by educated men of reason followed. And so long as religious theologians continue to develop what they see as the propositional content of faith, namely belief, secular and particularly naturalistic philosophers will continue to expose such faith as rationally incoherent.⁽²⁾

Although I consider myself a person of religious faith, I agree with secular philosophers that rational theology is mortally vulnerable from a rational point of view. In the emancipated and enlightened world of modernity, religion as Western theology or as orthodoxy in doctrine (a rationally coherent and logically defined belief system) had nowhere to go but down. But how does this fit with the rise of spirituality in the West today. Neither philosophy nor theology have managed to turn our world so thoroughly naturalist/secularist that the human quest for spiritual meaning also disappeared from our agenda.

Why is spirituality on the rise? I think because its perennial quest is too pressing to be kept down for long. Initially, emancipating and secularizing reason needed and seemed able to deal with spirituality by denying it, given that the heart of spirituality is not accessible to reason, but only to faith. Given both the rejection of faith by reason and reason's self-allocated role of superjudge, naturalistic reason could not but deny the reality of the spiritual. In time, however, even though organised religion may decline, the reality of the spiritual will re-emerge and will recommend itself to a faith of one kind or another. But then not faith understood as a clone of reason, a container of propositional content; but

rather, faith as trust. Trust does not contain, but reaches out and holds on. It is more like an anchor rope than like a treasure chest. If reason is to be successful in giving us the final word on what we may know and do, it needs to convince the world that reality is not spiritual. But if the spiritual will not go away, the redevelopment of religion as the ritual practice of trust may again be accepted in our world.

Further, if the spiritual truly resists denial, we need to deal with the spirituality which went out the window for rationally enlightened people. Spirituality is related to questions of life-and-death significance to which we do not have any rationally adequate answers. Our unceasing struggle with such questions will stubbornly keep spirituality close to our experience. Though these questions lack definite answers, we nevertheless will not stop asking them, in the hope of getting some answer. These questions concern our origin and destiny, the lasting happiness we so bitterly miss, the meaning of life in the face of death, the comfort we seek in the midst of incurable illness and ineradicable evil, the suffering which overcomes us both as a result of our own cruelty and in the wake of natural disaster. The inescapable relation, ultimately, of all that exists and of all we experience to the urgency of these questions is what we experience as spirituality. And this spirituality traditionally acquires meaning only in stories of experiences that inspire hope and trust in the face of these questions, rather than in rational accounts of reality that are empirical, verifiable, or even coherent.

Postmodern thinkers often at least hint at this spirituality or open our awareness to its realities. Their thinking about reason in relation to power and control, about the elusiveness to thought of the other and the different, and about marginalization at the edges of rational totalization returns us to issues of spirituality, to issues that unavoidably confront us even when we rationally fail to comprehend them. Critics of modernity, including feminist thinkers, open our eyes to the experience that the more we try to gain full rational control over our lives, the more we find significant issues that escape such control, and the more life's spiritual dimensions stare us in the face. Not only Derrida or Foucault, but also Rorty hints in this direction. In *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* he already thematized the spiritual and connected it with the breakdown of normal rationality. In later writings he has spoken of our ineradicable sense of the prolongation of ourselves beyond our deaths, and of a sense of community that is not rationally founded but is only given us in hope and trust. He has, in addition, pointed to the pervasiveness of what he calls final vocabularies, language in which we refer to our deepest resources without being able to argue for them except in circles. Others, like Charles Taylor in *Sources of the Self*, have significantly explored the impossibility of eradicating spirituality. Even Nielsen, in *Naturalism without Foundations*, encourages Marxists to find some uses for religion. Indeed, at the 1988 World Congress of Philosophy in Brighton Marxists were discussing this very theme. Trudy Govier has written significant studies about trust.

If Western philosophy continues in its rationally emancipated attitude of autonomously adjudicating solely from within its own resources what is and what is not properly knowable in every dimension of reality, our congressional theme of philosophy educating humanity could amount to continued support for the decline of religion and could thereby contribute to a spiritually deadened humanity. If philosophy, however, would contribute to human education by, for example, relinquishing the unqualified totality ambitions of autonomous reason, along lines suggested by, for example, Emmanuel Levinas in *Totality and Infinity*, philosophy could in that process contribute to opening spaces for spiritual awareness. Whether in those spaces religion would be authentically practiced would much depend on whether religious communities would be open to rehabilitating faith as the practice of trust and to accepting narratives of trust as inspiring a spiritual perspective on our active lives.

So let me make some suggestions about crucial differences between faith taken as trust and faith taken as belief. In order to clarify these differences I observe that when belief is taken as faith, belief too can mean trust, as in "belief-in." So we have a complicated set of meanings here. But two of the three terms—faith, trust, and belief—can be specified in clear ways, namely by taking belief exclusively as propositional assent, and by realizing that trust usually does not mean belief in that propositional sense. Further clarity can be gained by temporarily bracketing faith as a term to be considered. Hence I will consider differences between trust and propositional belief. Later on, when meanings have been sufficiently clarified, I will return to religious faith and reclaim what is probably its original and authentic religious meaning as trust.

Trust and propositional belief differ quite clearly. For example, placing ourselves in the hands of an unknown surgeon is typically a matter of trust rather than of beliefs. Beliefs can and do play a role. But most people's relationship to a surgeon is marked by trust rather than by propositional beliefs. Similarly, our appreciation of a famous soprano will not typically be characterized by our sharing her belief system. Rather, we appreciate her voice. These two examples illustrate how bodies of belief can be tangential to the heart of significant relationships among people. For what reason did we then make propositional belief central in the religious trust known as faith?

Undoubtedly religions do inspire certain beliefs, whether implied or explicitly developed. Nevertheless, religion as way of life or as the practice of rituals is, especially outside of our culture, more prevalent than religion characterized by assent to an intellectual body of beliefs called doctrines. Where religion is life and ritual, religious teaching is an introduction to certain practices, rather than getting people to understand and assent to, for example, understandings of the deity. How might we evaluate this confusion of religion and trust with the intellectualism of assent to belief systems?

Beliefs as I speak of them here are accepted propositions, that is, intellectually or conceptually grasped states of affairs to which we assent. But beliefs are not only marked by intellectual characteristics. For example, the states of affairs we conceptually grasp usually require an abstraction from more integrally experienced reality. As Aristotle already knew, it is impossible to have an intellectual grasp of justice without abstracting from the experience of being just. Among the more than intellectual elements of belief we also find, for example, what I will call a fiduciary element. I have in mind here the assent, the acceptance, or, if you will, the trust of an understood proposition as dependably connected with a reality. Belief, therefore, has an inner connection with trust. But in the world of religion, much if not most of the intellectual grasping of states of affairs is an impossibility. Religion essentially relates us to mysteries, to the spirituality of our relation to the uncomprehended origin and destiny of life, to death and disaster beyond understanding, to suffering we cannot grasp, to lasting joy and prosperity that continue to elude us. Religion always has elements of lack of control, of letting go, of vulnerability and of lack of coherence. Precisely for that reason our primary relationship to these elements of mystery is that of trust. This trust may indeed have proposition-like elements, conceptoid configurations, belief look-alikes. We express our trust in language that has the appearance of comprehension, of intellectual grasp. But any rational-logical treatment of such language according to normal canons of reasoning gets us in trouble. The logic of divine omnipotence is a notorious example, because the word omnipotence does not name a genuine concept, but is rather an expression of trust. It can be understood only as trust language, which dissoles into incoherence when submitted to abstract logic.

I cannot take the time now to enter into the history of how the language of faith in the Christian religion came to be interpreted along the lines of the rational language of Greek philosophy, except to note that in the process religious language lost its primary trust

character and took on intellectual overtones.⁽³⁾ The shift was in part made possible, to be sure, by the fiduciary element in intellectual belief, the assent which passes mere understanding. "Pistis," with the meaning of both (intellectual) belief and faith (trust), provided a bridge between the two. Faith was increasingly interpreted as belief and moved away from trust. Religion, instead of comprising a spiritual practice vis a vis the mysteries beyond our existential boundaries, developed into the sophistication of theological understanding. Religious communities, rather than receiving spiritual direction in priestly or prophetic fashion, became controlled by elite doctrinal experts.

Undoubtedly an element in all of this was the developing Western view that knowledge, in order to be true or authentic, needed to be true belief, that is, be confined within the boundaries of rational control. Artistic truth, for example, became a victim of this, and so did religious truth. The imaginative and symbolic knowledge of the artist or the fiduciary knowledge of the religious person became suspect. For religion to maintain any claim on truth at all meant to yield to the pressure of demonstrating its rationality. Michael Polanyi, however, re-introduced philosophers to the idea that knowledge is more than we think; in the sense that not all that we know can be thought, in the sense that we think of knowledge too narrowly, and in the sense that we know more than we think we do. Knowing is not identical with propositional assent. Again, I can also not take time to go into detail here. But if our knowledge is more than our true belief, we have an opening to consider religious trust or faith as a way of knowing, even when most of it cannot be rationally assessed.⁽⁴⁾

At this point, of course, I will have to take time to consider some detail. How can we have true knowledge that cannot be rationally assessed, when by rational assessment we mean adjudicating empirical arguments in the logical space of reasons, reasoning concentrated on real-world propositional understanding and ruled by canons of logic? I will begin by reasserting that we cannot live without relating ourselves to the reality of the spiritual mystery wrapped up in what Karl Jaspers called the existential boundary conditions of our life. As soon as we try to rationally contain that mystery, reason itself becomes mysterious and adherents begin to tell myths such as that of the universal need for empirical verification. Indeed, we all try to make some sense of our lives in the face of the mystery. Myths are both inescapable and meaningful here. We catch glimpses, we imagine what it may be like, we express ourselves in metaphorical language, we have intuitions, and we have intimations. When these begin to play a role in our experience which, with some continuity, helps us make sense of our origin and destiny, comforts us in the presence of death, provides wisdom in dealing with suffering, evil, and disaster, and points to how our lives can prosper, we begin to tell and pass on stories in which these experiences become solidified. We experience a growing trust in what these stories reveal.

The word reveal here is a term of art in religion. Trust reveals what transcends intellectual comprehension. Transcends, too, is such a term of art. But they have plain meaning and "reveal" can be replaced by "make manifest" or "make known" and "transcends" can be replaced by "goes beyond" or "passes." The trust that reveals the transcendent mystery is no more than our sense that we have stories and experiences which give us some direction in life in relation to the spiritual mystery of the existential boundary conditions that strain the intellect. This is the spiritual knowledge of faith. It does not yield its secrets to rational analysis. But it does enrich life for the faithful, or at least that is their experience.

It is tempting, of course, for antagonists of religion to point to fundamentalist horror stories of intolerance to the point of genocide. Such stories are sometimes true, as are stories of rationalist intolerance and exclusion. But also true are the inspiring stories of other deaths and exclusions, such as those of Oscar Romero in El Salvador and many other heroes of faith whose trust inspired them to look for the meaning of the mystery in giving their life for justice, for the other, in protest to suffering. This means that assessing the truth of

religious knowledge can be an ambivalent affair. It is done, not by rational-empirical analysis, but by embracing or rejecting the life in which the religious trust becomes embodied. When the life which truly embodies the trusted promises and directions does not turn out as promised, we can justly unmask such religious trust as betrayal. Conversely, when the promises are fulfilled, we can trust them as true. So even though faith as trust is not propositional, is not properly speaking belief, it is nevertheless a form of knowing and it can be assessed. But the knowledge and its assessment require precisely what doctrinal faith, faith as doctrine, faith as assent to revealed propositions can do without, namely a practice.

The practice required by religious faith as trust is twofold. It needs to be embodied in a life-practice that delivers the promises and enables us to assess our faith and it also needs ritual practice to sustain it. Intellectual study of doctrine inspires very little faith. But meditation, prayer, telling the stories, and performing the ritual are all practices focused on sustaining the trust we require to continue to be spiritually in touch with the sense of the mystery which has inspired hope in our community or tradition. These practices nurture religious faith.

One of the reasons why the spirituality of North American natives is more widely respected today, while the doctrinal religion of Christianity is in such decline, may be that native spirituality has remained oriented to the practices that sustain and encourage that spirituality, while Christianity has focussed on the reasonableness of beliefs that defy understanding and thereby deformed spirituality. Native spirituality is, in some important sense, beyond the reach of rational critique, while Christian orthodoxy has set itself up for rational devastation.

It seems to me entirely plausible that when philosophy fosters an understanding of the world in which there is room for experience and knowledge beyond the bounds of reason, the West may not only return to respect for religion, but may in time witness the return of a religiously inspired civility of love for our neighbor which prioritizes the defeat of abuse, discrimination, poverty, environmental rape, and many other attitudes, which now often find support in fundamentalist doctrines of religion that people try to defend as rational. In places like Bosnia and Ireland, religious doctrines that spread hatred are not likely to be overcome by coolheaded arguments, but could be made powerless by a way of life which fosters trust in the experience that, while the pain we spread by destroying our neighbor never ends, love stops the destruction and ends the pain.⁽⁵⁾ The demands of fostering and sustaining such love, however, are very high. A contribution to meeting them is possible in embodied and ritualized life practices of people whose religion inspires them to hope, pray, and work tirelessly for a world where all people are honored, valued, respected, supported, treated justly and morally, and loved and admired because all are equally God's creatures.

Notes

(1) See the recent book by Jacob Neusner and Bruce Chilton, *The Intellectual Foundation of Christian and Jewish Discourse: The Philosophy of Religious Argument*. New York, Routledge, 1997. The authors discuss the influence of Greek philosophy (science, argument, thought) on the Jewish and Christian tradition of Scripture.

(2) A book which convincingly argues for understanding religious belief, i.e., faith, as inherently different from rational belief, is Hendrik Vroom's *Religions and the Truth, Philosophical Reflections and Perspectives*. Grand Rapids, Mich., Eerdmans and Amsterdam, Rodopi, 1989. In the series *Currents of Encounter*.

(3) See the earlier mentioned works by Neusner/Chilton and Cantwell Smith.

(4) Hans Georg Gadamer and Thomas Kuhn also contributed to the decline of identifying knowledge with only true (propositional) belief, with assent to rational understanding. Barry Allen has recently taken up this theme in various articles. See for example "The Ambition of Transcendence," forthcoming in *Religion without Transcendence?* edited by D. Z. Phillips, London, McMillen, Claremont Studies in Religion; "Forbidden Knowledge," in *The Monist*, April 1996, 79,2, pp. 294-310; and "What was Epistemology?" in *Rorty and his Critics*, edited by Robert Brandon, London, Blackwell, 1997.

(5) In the Ten Commandments sin spreads its effects for three generations, while love endures for thousands.