

Why study philosophy of religion?

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The author is on the staff of Trinity College, Bristol. In this article he introduces the subject of philosophy of religion, looking particularly at the question of religious language.

This article attempts to explore how we may understand the place of philosophy within theological studies, and especially its place in first degree courses in theology and related studies. Many theology undergraduates find it difficult to appreciate what significance, if any, philosophy has for their theology; hence the need for an article of this sort.

Let us first define our terms and try to assess why there is a problem. Different theological courses have different philosophical components: in this article we shall confine ourselves to those courses which are usually termed 'philosophy of religion' and which typically require the student to examine issues such as: the nature of faith, faith and reason, arguments for and against divine existence, the problem of evil, miracles, selfhood and immortality, the concept of God, human freedom, the relationship between morality and religion, religious language, religious experience, *etc.*, *etc.* Thus our primary concern will not be with courses in the history of philosophy, nor with a phenomenological approach to religion (though there are of course many related areas of interest in this approach) nor with another area of academic growth, the use of philosophical categories and concepts in biblical interpretation.

It has been said that philosophy is essentially about those children's questions which society conditions us to ignore in adulthood. Certainly philosophy is about big questions, ultimate questions: Who am I? What is life? What is death? Is there any sense to human existence? Is there a transcendent power governing all? What is good? What is bad? What is the relationship between individual and society?

It may appear that much modern philosophy, with its clinical concern to analyse concepts and linguistic rules, has deserted these big questions. But those who feel a sense of disillusionment with modern philosophy for this reason may be making a judgment which, in over-all terms, is far too superficial. For the continuing interest in language amongst philosophers often arises out of the conviction that language is itself a formative factor determining how we perceive and classify (organize) reality: that language is the spectacle through which we 'constantly' come to the world.

Thus if we can describe philosophy as a concern for the ultimate questions of human existence, then philosophy of religion should presumably be defined as a concern for those ultimate questions which are about the existence, or non-existence, of god (or gods) and about his (or their) dealings with the world. And it is perhaps here that

the student once more has qualms of disorientation and doubts of this sort: 'Surely man does not reach up to God in a proof. Man cannot explore and find God in argument. Rather God graciously discloses himself to man. Man is not to put the revelations of God to the evaluation of his own finite and fallen understanding. He is to walk by faith and obedience: not proudly seeking to assert the autonomy of human reason, but consciously drawing meaning and strength from his Creator. Let us make sure' (says somebody, wholly ignoring the biblical context) 'that no-one makes a prey of us by philosophy and empty deceit.' And if, in addition to these doubts, the student also finds the subject extremely intellectually taxing, then perhaps the temptation 'not to give it his or her all' is doubly powerful.

But do these particular doctrinal assertions represent the whole story? More to the point, don't they themselves make certain philosophical assumptions, assumptions which at the end of the day the student may not be very happy to live with? I want to take this further by simply listing some very basic questions about the nature of faith itself (although at this point we must constantly beware of confusing philosophical questions, *e.g.* What is the rational status of Christian beliefs?, with psychological ones, *e.g.* Why do people come to faith?).

1. Is faith distinct from credulity?
2. Are there any 'independent' evidences of any kind which indicate the reasonableness of Christian belief? OR
3. Is the notion of independent evidence in this context a logical nonsense?
For does not our understanding of 'what counts as evidence' always logically depend on the presuppositions which we have made in the first place? (Fred and Jim both receive cheques for £100 in times of dire financial need. By Fred, this is 'seen as' sure evidence of God's good hand upon him. But by Jim, it is 'seen as' an outstanding piece of good luck.)
4. (The fourth question is to be understood strictly as a theological one.) What is the place of the mind (that is in terms of critical scrutiny and intellectual assent) in Christian commitment? If little place is ascribed to it, then does this not introduce a dualism into Christian experience – a dualism which appears to violate our doctrine of creation?
5. Can Christian beliefs be viewed as constituting an internally coherent whole? If so, would this be a sufficient basis for commending them to the minds of men?
6. What is the locus of revelation? Is it historical events or words about events or both or . . . ?

The student of philosophy of religion will come upon these questions in a direct way in his studies, and in relation to a great range of philosophical minds from

Aquinas through Locke, Newman, Kierkegaard and many others to John Hick. But these questions are also implicit in much of the twentieth-century debate about the nature of religious language.

Religious language: anthropomorphism and analogy

Perhaps the best place to start here is with the question of anthropomorphism. Most of the words which we use to describe God and his relationship to man are words which we usually use to describe human actions, attitudes and roles: king, shepherd, judge, potter, forgive, redeem, reconcile. The question thus arises: how can we speak of God thus without making him human – without making God in our own image? Since St Thomas Aquinas, many theologians have wanted to approach the problem of anthropomorphism through the concept of analogy (though treatments of analogy differ significantly from one theologian to the next. Indeed the approach to analogy in a modern Protestant such as Pannenberg has theological presuppositions which are so different from those operating in Thomas that we effectively end up with a rival doctrine.¹)

Take the following two statements: (a) God loves us. (b) Dad loves Tom.

To put it in very bald terms, traditional doctrines of analogy declare that love in (a) does not have exactly the same meaning as love in (b); for such literalism would reduce theology to anthropomorphism. Nor does love in (a) have a radically different meaning to love in (b), for that would create the real danger of emptying theology of meaning altogether. Rather it is said that while love in (a) does not have exactly the same sense as love in (b), there is a fundamental analogy between their meanings: a fundamental analogy between God's love for us and a father's love for his children. In this sense analogy is usually regarded as a middle way between anthropomorphism on the one hand and emptiness on the other.

This of course still leaves us with a great many questions unanswered. Exactly how is God's love 'like' human love and exactly how is it different? If questions such as this are left unanswered, theological language must for ever remain imprecise. There are also crucial theological issues at stake here. How can we talk about the infinite in terms drawn from the finite? Does not an analogy of meaning entail a real analogy of being between man and God? Traditional Catholic thought has been happy to defend this analogy of being on the ground of incarnation and the divine image. But some modern Protestant theologians have drawn back here because they believe that this way of thinking violates the transcendence – the 'holy otherness' – of God.

Logical positivism and responses to it

The need to respond to the central question of anthropomorphism opens up a great many issues. One of these

¹See, W. Pannenberg, 'Analogy and Doxology' in *Basic Questions in Theology 1* (London: SCM, 1970).

relates to the critique of religious language made by the logical positivists.

If we accept that there is a fundamental analogy between the meaning of words when they are used of people (words like love, care, answer, etc.) and the meanings of these words when they are used of God, then does not consistency urge that these words follow the same linguistic rules in their religious usages as in their 'personal relationship' usages? The fundamental complaint of the positivists is that the talk of believers is just not as consistent as it should be in this respect. Thus A. J. Ayer makes his basic charge against the users of metaphysical and religious language as follows: 'We accuse them of disobeying the rules which govern the significant use of language.'² Anthony Flew's equally famous attack reaches its emotional, if not intellectual, climax in the following words:

Someone tells us that God loves us as a father loves his children. We are reassured. But then we see a child dying of inoperable cancer of the throat. His earthly father is driven frantic in his efforts to help, but his Heavenly Father reveals no obvious sign of concern. Some qualification is made – God's love is 'not a merely human love' or it is 'an inscrutable love,' perhaps – and we realize that such sufferings are quite compatible with the truth of the assertion that 'God loves us as a father (but, of course . . .).' We are reassured again. But then perhaps we ask: what is this assurance of God's (appropriately qualified) love worth, what is this apparent guarantee really a guarantee against? Just what would have to happen not merely (morally and wrongly) to tempt but also (logically and rightly) to entitle us to say 'God does not love us' or even 'God does not exist'? I therefore put to the succeeding symposiasts the simple central questions, 'What would have to occur or to have occurred to constitute for you a disproof of the love of, or of the existence of, God?'³

It is not very difficult to see the point being made here. The force of much of our Christian proclamation requires that there is this fundamental analogy between God's love and the love of a father for his child. But, as against this, there seems in practice, to be a qualitative difference between the rules governing the use of 'love' in religious usages, and those which govern its use in person-to-person talk. Thus 'Dad's love' is only affirmed if some very definite states of affairs obtain; and if other states of affairs obtain it is unequivocally denied. But God's love appears to be different to this. For the proposition 'God is love' is affirmed by believers to be true, whatever happens. Its truth appears to be compatible with all possible experimental (experienc-able) states of affairs.

If we generalize from this single example, we come to what is an essential part of the logical positivists' concern with religious language. They want to suggest that all statements which are genuinely of factual significance (that is which belong to the family of fact stating discourse: whether actually true or false) are statements which can in principle stand or fall in relation to

²A. J. Ayer, *Language, Truth and Logic* (London: Gollancz, 1967), p. 27.

³A. Flew, 'Theology and Falsification' in *New Essays in Philosophical Theology* (London: SCM, 1955).

experience. There are of course many meaningful statements which do not meet this test. Some philosophers would suggest that one type of such statements is, '2+2=4.' 'All triangles have three sides.'

Here, it is suggested, are examples of statements which are not derived from experience, and which can never, in principle, be falsified by our experience of the world. These statements do not inform us about the nature of reality, and they are in this restricted sense not facts. Rather they are a mode of classification and order which we impose onto reality. Thus the central question which logical positivism urges upon Christian theology is: Are our theological claims about God more like the former class of statements (their truth or falsity being dependent upon experience: past/present/future)? Or are they more like the latter class ('truths'/doctrines which we impose onto experience)? Or do we ultimately need a much more sophisticated network of distinctions and categories to make a satisfactory response here? The student should not duck these first order questions or dismiss them as irrelevant. For they challenge us with profound questions about the nature of the faith which we cherish and proclaim: ones which can enhance and enrich our spirituality and promote Christian growth and maturity. Thus another example here might be: Is the proposition (suitably theologically qualified), *God always answers our prayers*, (a) a truth derived from experience (and so in principle open to falsification by experience), or (b) a doctrinal truth which we impose onto our daily experience, or (c) . . . ?

This makes the issue clear. We are in final terms here being asked to make judgments about the inter-relationships between revelation, history and experience in the formation of Christian belief, and about the inter-relationship between belief and experience in our ongoing day-to-day lives.

A great variety of responses have been made to the probings of the positivists. In response, we should, I believe, be searching for understandings of religious language which are characterized by full intellectual integrity, and which also do justice to biblical self-understandings. Perhaps it is pertinent to reflect here that in the Scriptures, 'word' and 'explanation' sometimes precede experience and are to be imposed onto it – to be used to interpret and order it (e.g. the prophetic warnings about judgement; the Old Testament anticipation of the Messiah and the kingdom). But at other times 'word' is apparently made logically dependent upon experience (e.g. 1 Cor. 15:3-19).

One of the most sustained and serious responses to the positivistic critique arose out of the later philosophy of Ludwig Wittgenstein.⁴ Certain philosophers now want to argue that it is not the case that uniform linguistic rules are violated in religious usages. Rather, they say, religious talk has its own distinctive concepts governed by their own distinctive language rules. Thus it is not that

⁴We are talking here of 'creative applications' of Wittgenstein's own philosophy to specific questions within the philosophy of religion. Probably the most well-known text here is D. Z. Phillips, *The Concept of Prayer* (London: RKP, 1965).

the concept of love is misused by believers when they talk about God; it is that religious language has its own distinctive concept of love. (Here therefore the doctrine of analogy is substantially watered down: reduced to a theory of mere 'family resemblance'.) Or, to put exactly the same point in a much more generalized way: Christian religion is an autonomous, self-governing mode of talk (or universe of discourse, language game) with its own distinctive and internal criteria of meaning, intelligibility, reality and truth. If you want to understand what is meaningful, what is rational (what counts as a reason), what counts as real, within Christian religion, then you must look within Christianity. You must look and see. You must observe how believers actually use words in ordinary religious contexts. Thus here religion becomes immune to criticism from external criteria, invulnerable to attack and rebuttal by reference to any non-religious standards of truth, meaning and rationality. And of course, by exactly the same token it also becomes insusceptible to confirmation from any sources outside of its own distinctive presuppositions and dogmas. In short the possibility of rational dialogue with unbelief is 'logically' precluded.

I do not need to point out that this motivation to render Christian belief immune (that is, immune in principle) to all external criticism – to make it a total epistemological island – already finds its place in a good deal of Christian thought and apologetic. But once again, the student needs to be fully aware of what is going on here. Any positions which imply a variety of different rationalities (which isolate 'the truth', say, of science from that of religion, or 'the truth' of one religion from that of another) are highly relativistic. They repudiate the notion of 'the truth' and replace it with the notion of 'different approaches to truth', there being no way of deciding between the approaches on rational grounds.

Now of course relativism is both a serious and a contemporary doctrine. Many see it as the appropriate cultural response to the social needs of the pluralist society. But if the student is to adopt an isolationist understanding of the faith – and the weakening of the doctrine of analogy that accompanies it – then he must understand fully the relativistic and the theological implications of what he is doing.

I have taken up such a large proportion of this article on these areas because I believe that they are the very heartland of the discipline. The relationships between presupposition and proof, presupposition and evidence, revelation and historical event, doctrine and experience: our understandings here constitute an essential part of the theoretical foundations of our theology. Always to be dodging these questions is to be interested in the superstructure of theology but never in the foundation. Let us be clear, it is theology as an academic discipline which we are considering here. I am not saying that these profound questions have to be pursued and agonized over by every person who graces a pew . . . or whatever. But I am saying that they cannot be ignored by the serious student of theology.

Arguments for the existence of God

It is also the case that our judgments in these areas will determine our approaches to many other questions within philosophy of religion itself. This is obviously true, for example, in respect of an area of study which most students will meet at some point in their syllabuses: arguments for the existence of God. Thus those who hold to the relativistic positions outlined above view the notion of independent evidence/proof for a particular world-view (which here means 'for the existence of God') as, in principle, misconceived. This position entails that all arguments for divine existence must, even if they are not deficient in other ways, be ultimately based on presuppositions which are essentially religious in character, such as (it is alleged) the existence of order in the universe or the intelligibility of existence (of being) itself. In stark contrast, those who argue for the existence of God (or who wish to commend the claims of Christianity to unbelief on rational grounds, and other than by 'merely' appealing to its internal consistency) are batting on a different sort of wicket altogether. They are, at least implicitly, assuming that there is a common human rationality, one which in final terms transcends different world-views and the sorts of distinction which exist, for example, between religious and scientific approaches. And they are arguing that within the boundary of this common human rationality there are some pointers God-ward.

A variety of other examples could be furnished here. Take for instance the question of evidence for the miraculous. Is rational belief in the miraculous dependent upon the prior (prior; that is, in a logical sense) adoption of a world-view in which miracles are possible – or even to be expected? (Thus here rational is clearly being used in a relativistic sense.) Or can there be independent evidence for miraculous occurrences? Obviously much will depend on how one has defined miracle in the first place. In his excellent book on the subject, Swinburne discusses both of these approaches to the question of evidence, as well as the prior subject of definition – the latter being a question which itself raises many highly significant issues, from the nature of scientific law to the psychosomatic dimension of human health.

The problem of evil

The final example to be given here concerns a problem which in some form we all face constantly: How are the undeniable facts of evil and suffering reconcilable with a God of omnipotent love?

We need not deny that there will always be some degree of mystery here: that God's ways and thoughts are never fully open and comprehensible to finite intel-

lects. But we cannot I think, affirm that God's love is totally mysterious, for then we would find ourselves faced with the serious question, How is a love which is totally mysterious different from no love at all?

In orthodox terms, the intellectual challenge implicit in the problem – and of course it has to be approached other than intellectually as well – is to give some defence of the claim that, even given a world such as this, there is an omnipotent God whose love towards man is analogous to a father's tender love towards his children. To concede that God's love is wholly inscrutable, or to affirm that it is qualitatively different to any form of human love, is to deny the concept of analogy; and thus to denude our preaching of its biblically rooted force – and to leave the notion of divine love hopelessly vague and vacuous. Once more the concept of analogy would have been reduced to family resemblance. The obligation upon us is to so expound and unpack 'the faith' that the Abba Father of the gospel is no empty, unintelligible and cruel jibe in the face of human anguish and hurt.

Thus a familiar pattern has emerged once more. The extent to which we are willing to defend analogy – or something logically akin – will always determine our basic philosophical and epistemological approaches: whether we are talking about our approach to relativism and the nature of truth or to the problem of evil.

Conclusion

In this article, I have deliberately emphasized the more epistemological aspects of the philosophy of religion. I have done this because it is often here that students find it most difficult to find their way about and to make links with other parts of their studies and with their daily walk with God. But whatever aspects of the philosophy of religion we are concerned with, I do want to suggest one further, and much more general reason, why the student should not just see his philosophy as a distraction from the 'real' tasks of biblical studies and confessional/ecclesiastical doctrine. It was said at the very start of this article that philosophy expresses a concern for the most ultimate questions of human existence, the ones which society so often conditions us to ignore. What we should never forget is that theology is about ultimate questions also. And yet there can be a temptation even within theology (though it is perhaps stronger at a post-graduate level than at the undergraduate one) to become so immersed in highly specific questions of biblical history, language, church history or pastoral theology that we lose sight of theology as having to do with big questions. An ongoing commitment to the issues of philosophy of religion and philosophical theology is as healthy an antidote to this as one can have.