

Philosophy of Religion

Introductory Remarks

To take a purely intellectualist approach to the philosophy of religion, to treat religion as consisting of various doctrines, sets of propositional claims whose meaning and rational justifiability are to be examined would, by itself, be too limited and would be unsatisfying. Religion also consists of social and behavioral phenomena, of historical patterns and institutions and of non-cognitive psychological states. Yet, as philosophers interested in religion, we cannot leave doctrines unexamined either, even if we must acknowledge the need of placing particular religious doctrines in their proper social and historical contexts.

This point will be better appreciated if we compare philosophy of religion to another area of philosophy, i.e. philosophy of science. A philosopher who wanted a good understanding of what science is, of the difference between science and pseudo-science, of the value of science, of the proper methods of scientific investigation and reasoning would be guilty of a kind of narrow-mindedness, irrelevance and artificiality if she were to study only an abstract, ideal model of science and discuss nothing else but that model. Philosophers of science ought to keep one eye on the real events of science and on the actual thinking and achievements of real scientists and their historical and social contexts. These realities are much messier and harder to make sense of than ideal, abstract models, but our philosophy of science won't be worth much unless it helps us understand those living realities.

Yet, this point should not be taken to deny the importance for philosophy of science of aiming at an understanding of general, essential features of science like Explanation, Inductive Inference, Theory Construction, Natural Laws and Causation. One needs to know something about the current state of science, what physicists presently claim to know about matter or what biologists claim to know about photosynthesis, for example, in order to be competent to philosophically

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analyze the nature and significance of science. It may help to know about the parts of the history of Biology that led up to the discovery of photosynthesis, but we also need to understand general biological concepts like photosynthesis in order to say anything philosophically competent about the nature and methods of Biology. For that, we have to go beyond studying just the social and historical context in which that concept was developed by scientists. We need to analyze the meaning of that concept and to understand how it is related to other biological, chemical and physical concepts on a theoretical level. We need to be familiar with the kinds of inferences that led to the concept of photosynthesis, about the way that concept explains various biological phenomena and how it fits into a general theory of plant life before we can get clear about the general essential features of biological science. But an understanding of those general essential features is an indispensable part of the philosophy of science. In philosophy of science, the abstract and the concrete, the theoretical and the practical need to be examined together.

Much the same sort of point can be made about the philosophy of religion. Unfortunately, philosophers have in recent times concentrated almost exclusively on issues related primarily to a limited number of religious traditions, those traditions in which belief in a single supreme deity is the central belief. Examples of these religious traditions are Judaism, Christianity and Islam. Western philosophy originated in southern Europe. So, it is not very surprising that western philosophers

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who study issues related to religion have been preoccupied with those religious traditions which are historically dominant in Europe and which have spread from Europe to other parts of the world as European and Near-Eastern cultures expanded their influences over the world in the last 1500 years.

As a result, little or no attention has been paid to issues raised by the examples of non-western religious traditions like those of Hinduism, Buddhism, Taoism and the religions of pre-historic or contemporary non-industrial peoples. Moreover, western philosophers have tended to concentrate on some highly technical issues of monotheistic religious belief. Now, there is nothing illegitimate about philosophers' discussing these issues. But the effect of this preoccupation with these issues has been that western philosophers have tended to identify religion with a relatively small number of *doctrines* that are associated with monotheistic western religion.

This is like the mistake of identifying science with an abstract artificial model of "the scientific method", while ignoring the real social and historical context of science. It would be better to be equipped with some familiarity with this context before trying to talk about the essential features of science. If there is a central problem in Philosophy of religion, it is to investigate the meaning of the general concept of religion, just as the meaning of the general concept of science is the central problem in the philosophy of science. Similarly, it would be better to be somewhat acquainted with the particulars of the great diversity of religious lives of real people in order to do a competent job of defining the general concept of religion.

In philosophy of science, attention to the social and historical context of science has greatly increased in the last fifty years and the effects of this increased attention have been very impressive.

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Philosophy of science has changed dramatically because of it. No one, now, would say that the essential features of scientific reasoning can be captured in a few, simple abstract principles. No one, now, would say that the idea of scientific observation is a simple, straightforward concept. Similarly, once we turn our attention to the great diversity of religious phenomena in the lives of real people in many traditions, we will find that it is no easy or simple thing to explain such concepts as worship, the supernatural, faith, holiness, spirit, etc. But, if we have any hope of arriving at an explanation of the general concept of religion, we must find a way of applying it so that it makes sense of the many instances of these phenomena. Even if we don't succeed in this attempt, we are bound to learn a lot about religion in the attempt itself.

But in recognizing our obligation as philosophers to familiarize ourselves with the particulars of religious life, we immediately encounter some problems. What is to be included in religious life? Religious life is surely a social phenomenon. It includes such outward behaviors as praying, music-making, wearing of specific sorts of clothing, marriage ceremonies, reciting creeds, reading scriptures, confession of sins, pilgrimages, making sacrifices, etc. We have said that understanding religion requires familiarity with a variety of such social phenomena.

But religion is more than outward behaviors. These outward behaviors are, so to speak, the "surface" of religion. Religious life also has an "inside" aspect of psychological states. We may think of examples of such psychological states associated with religious life: adoration, awe, rapture, fascination, bliss, fear, devotion. Many others could be listed. But we may notice quickly that neither familiarity with these nor familiarity with the outward behaviors nor familiarity with the sum of the two would be adequate to understand religion. Here are some arguments for this claim.

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Just a familiarity with the kinds of outward behaviors we have mentioned would be inadequate for understanding the difference between religious parts of life and the non-religious parts of life. People often sit quietly and sometimes mutter wishes or hopes to themselves but they may not be praying. What they are doing may not be at all religious. What is the difference? People often make music but there may in some cases be nothing religious about their music-making. What's the difference? People can get married in a civil ceremony or recite nonreligious poetry or studiously read nonreligious philosophy, go on long nonreligious sight-seeing trips, share some of their food without any religious attitude etc. What's the difference between nonreligious outward behaviors like these and the outward behaviors that are religious? From a strictly external point of view, religious and nonreligious forms of behavior may be quite similar.

Suppose we said that the inside aspect is all that counts; private feelings and experiences like awe, reverence, adoration, etc. To be religious, we might say, is to have feelings like that. Certain kinds of outward behavior may be associated with such private psychological states but it's the latter that are really essential to religion. Outward behaviors, whatever they may be, are religious behaviors only if they are expressions of such private psychological states. The outward expressions can vary widely. It's the inner part that matters. As long as it's the same, the behaviors expressed are part of religious life.

The problem with this option is just like the problem with the first option. Many nonreligious private psychological states are closely similar to those we have associated with religious life in the last paragraphs. A student may stand in awe of a great scholar. A young person may deeply revere one of his elderly relatives. A little boy may adore his teacher. But these are probably not to be classified as religious feelings. Why not? The most likely explanation that comes to mind is that these psychological states are either religious or non-religious

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depending on what they are about; on the nature of their objects. We may stand in awe before a great scholar, but this is not religious awe because the object of religious awe is something absolutely extraordinary whereas, scholars, however great or rare, are just human beings and cannot be properly described as absolutely extraordinary, whereas God, Krishna, the Eternal Tao or the perfect enlightenment of the Buddha, as objects of one's awe would be incomparably extraordinary.

Religious feelings and experiences, accordingly, are religious in character just in case the objects of these religious feelings and experiences are objects of a very special type we have called absolutely extraordinary. We will return to this topic later.

One important matter to bring in at this point is that every experience, except for the lowest sort of sensation or feeling has some sort of conceptual structure or intentional content. Religious experience is no exception. Even though the "object" of religious experience is something extraordinary and, many say, cannot be adequately expressed in words, attempts at description are made and they almost always are made in terms related to some specific religious doctrine. Though some similarities may be noted when comparing religious experience in Buddhism and Religious experience in Christianity, for example, it is no accident that Buddhists use terms based in the concepts of Buddhism and Christians use terms based in the concepts of Christianity to describe their religious experiences. This means that religious experience is not something that can be understood independently of the concepts and doctrines of the particular religious backgrounds of those who report such experiences.

We are back to the intellectual part of religion. I have argued that religion cannot be understood as consisting simply of a set of doctrines or truth-claims or as certain kinds of external behaviors or as certain

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kinds of private experiences. And I am arguing that it should not be identified with the sum of these either. There is also what I would argue is the vitally important element of Believing. Believing is a kind of psychological attitude and is not to be confused with private, internal feelings, or experiences.

Believing is a kind of general disposition of a person and, in the context of religion, I argue it is to be distinguished from something like having an opinion or a theory.

This is not easy to see unless one distinguishes between believing in the sense I have in mind here and believing of a more general type. The kind of believing I want to say is essential in religion might be called believing-in, whereas the more general type of believing might be called believing-that. The doctrines or truth-claims of a particular religion may be said to be the objects of both sorts of believing. But believing that a certain claim is true is quite different from believing in what that claim refers to.