UNIT 3 PHILOSOPHY OF RELIGION AND OTHER DISCIPLINES

Contents

3.0 OBJECTIVES

- To help the students to see the relationship between philosophy of religion and other disciplines.
- To be able to appreciate the relationship between myth, religion and philosophy.
- To see how contemporary sciences contribute to philosophy of religion.

3.1 INTRODUCTION

"Philosophy" means "the love of wisdom." Wisdom is the knowledge of ultimate causes, explanations and principles. It includes knowledge of values, not just facts. It gives you a "big picture," a "world-view" and a "life-view." It explores such questions as these: What is the essence of a human being? What is the meaning (value, goal, purpose) of human life? What is a good life? What is a good society? Are there higher laws than man's laws? Are we here by chance or design? Are we fated or free? How do we know what is good or evil? How do we know anything? Is anything certain? Can reason prove (or disprove) the existence of God? Why do we suffer? Why do we die? Is there life after death?

Coming to the Greek tradition: Although it may be common to speak of a Greek "religion," in fact the Greeks themselves didn't use such a term. Further, they might not have recognized it, had someone else attempted to apply it to their practices. At the same time, it is difficult to accept the idea that the Greeks where completely secular and irreligious, however. This is why a better understanding of Greek religion helps illuminate the nature of religion generally as well as the nature of religions which continue to be followed today. This, in turn, is critical for anyone who wants to engage in a sustained appreciation and critique of religion and religious beliefs.

If we mean by "religion" a set of beliefs and behavior which are consciously chosen and ritually followed to the exclusion of all other alternatives, then the Greeks didn't really have a religion. If, however, we mean by religion more generally people's ritual behavior and beliefs about sacred items, places, and beings, then the Greeks most certainly did have a religion - or perhaps a set of religions, in recognition of the great variety of Greek beliefs (Cline 2011). Perhaps when discussing religions, we should look more closely at the beliefs about what is sacred and holy as was done by leaders of comparative study like Mircea Eliade.

So in this unit we first deal with the three sciences of Aristotle, that helps us to see religion as one of the foundational disciplines. Then we see its relationship to myth. This helps us to relate philosophy of religion to theology and then later to social sciences. Then we take up two more related disciplines from science and see how they can dialogue with philosophy of religion.

3.2 THREE SCIENCES ACCORDING TO ARISTOTLE

Probably the most commonsensical and influential philosopher of all time was Aristotle. Aristotle says that there are three "whys," three purposes, ends or reasons for anyone ever to study and learn anything, in school or out of it. Thus there are three kinds of "sciences," which he called "productive," "practical" and "theoretical." (Aristotle used "science" in a much broader way than we do, meaning any ordered body of knowledge through causes and reasons.)

The purpose of the "productive sciences" (which we today call technology) is to produce things, to make, improve or repair material things in the world, and thus to improve our world. Farming, surgery, shipbuilding, carpentry, writing and tailoring were examples in Aristotle's era as well as ours, while ours also includes many new ones like cybernetics, aviation and electrical engineering (Kreeft 2009).

The purpose of the "practical sciences" (which meant learning how to do or practice anything, how to act) is to improve your own behavior in some area of your own life. The two most important of these areas, Aristotle said, were ethics and politics. (Aristotle saw politics not as a pragmatic, bureaucratic business of running a state's economy, but as social ethics, the science of the good life for a community.) Other examples of "practical sciences" include economics, athletics, rhetoric and military science.

The third kind of sciences is the "theoretical" or "speculative" (contemplative), i.e., those that seek the truth for its own sake, that seek to know just for the sake of knowing rather than for the sake of action or production (though, of course, they will have important practical application). These sciences include theology, philosophy, physics, astronomy, biology, psychology and math.

Theoretical sciences are more important than practical sciences for the very same reason practical sciences are more important than productive sciences: because their end and goal is more intimate to us. Productive sciences perfect some external thing in the material world that we use; practical sciences perfect our own action, our own lives; and theoretical sciences perfect our very selves, our souls, our minds. They make us nobler persons (Kreeft 2009).

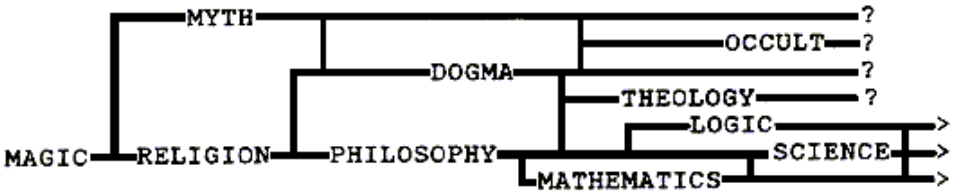
And that is the reason for pursuing philosophy in general and philosophy of

religion in particular: not to make money, or things, or even to live better, but to be better, to be more, to grow your mind as you grow your body.

3.3 MYTH, RELIGION, AND PHILOSOPHY

In this section we see the healthy relationship between myth, religion and philosophy. We need to recognize that myth is not always opposed to reason. We know to appreciate the fact that religion and philosophy emerged from myths.

Early in the 20th century, many scholars, intellectuals, and philosophers looked on the relationship of religion, philosophy, and science as an evolutionary one in which the more sophisticated ways of looking at the world simply replaced the older ways. Religion itself was often thought to arise from *magic*, and so schemes illustrating the development of human thought might look like this (Ross 2002):



According to this scheme, everything originated from magic. Only science, mathematics, and logic would *deserve* to continue. Others, including theology and myth need to fade away. Since these scholars thought of magic as a set of naive beliefs about how to manipulate nature, they thought that science ultimately fulfilled this promise by *actually* manipulating nature in the ways that magic had promised. Especially associated with this evolutionary scheme was James George Frazer, whose classic *The Golden Bough* argued for such an evolutionary view of science.

Such an understanding dismissed any *other* possible contents of religion or philosophy as something of a mistake or misdirection. Some philosophers have simply decided that philosophy also should simply end. They hold that philosophy has to give way to sciences finally.

While plenty of intellectuals retain a broad hostility towards religion, this kind of evolutionary scheme is now generally discredited in actual philosophy or history of religion studies. Today we have become wiser and we know that ancient religions did not grow out of magic, and science does not address many, or most, of the concerns that have actually been central in traditional religion and philosophy. It is possible to go to the opposite extreme and reject *any* evolutionary sense of the development of human thought, saying that all forms of thought, in all places and at all times, are simply different; but this does not address the dynamic of real changes that take place in the same places and to the same traditions. It is not much of a leap to say that those traditions, in their later forms involve levels of sophistication above what occurred earlier (Ross 2002).

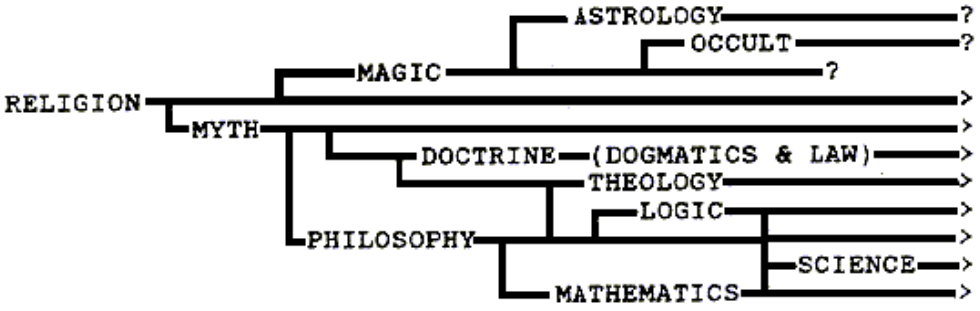
If we can see philosophy growing out of *mythic thought* in Greek history, the difficulty arises about just how we are to then distinguish *philosophy* from *religion*, as the two later coexist but are distinguished from each other. Socrates talks about the gods all the time, and it is not clear why he should not be regarded as a religious figure rather than a secular philosopher. As it happens,

the relatively easy distinction between religion and philosophy in Western history occurs because of the historical accident that the religion of people like Socrates and Plato later ceased to exist. The old gods of the Greeks, Egyptian, Babylonians, Phoenicians, Romans, Celts, Germans, Slavs, etc. were later entirely replaced by one old religion, Judaism, and two new ones from the same tradition, Christianity and Islam. It is now possible to say "religion" and mean one of those and to say "philosophy" and simply mean "that Greek stuff" where the religious side of Greek thought just need not be taken seriously.

The historical circumstances that allow for that simple pattern of distinction does not occur in India or China. A book like the *Bhagavad Gita* is a profoundly important religious document for Hinduism, yet it is also one of the fundamental documents of Indian philosophy. Indeed, the *Gita* appears to have been frist *produced* by Indian philosophy, the Sankhya and Yoga Schools. Then it been *transformed* into a religious document, and finally *used* for both religious and philosophical purposes later on. This kind of intermingling makes distinctions between religion and philosophy very difficult in the Indian tradition. In fact most of the Indian scholars do not even approve of such a distinction.

Similar difficulties exist for Chinese thought but also for Mediaeval Western thought, where philosophers are easily classified as Christian, Jewish, or Moslem. If philosophy had nothing to do with religion, then presumably it would be superfluous to identify Moses Maimonides (1135-1204) as Jewish or Avicenna (Ibn Sina, 980-1037) as Moslem. It is not, and this was a question that many such philosophers had to face at the time. The way that one of the greatest Christian philosophers, St. Thomas Aquinas (1224-1274), dealt with it was to identify different sources of *authority*: he distinguished "natural theology," which is based on reason alone, from "dogmatic theology," which is based on revelation. Jewish and Moslem philosophers had made similar distinctions, and some of them had even thought, which St. Thomas didn't, that reason could ultimately justify everything in religion (Ross 2002).

Definitions for religion and philosophy must involve similar distinctions, where the original context of all thought is mythic. Since myth does not argue, but philosophy does, a rule of thumb for religion is that it mixes in philosophic elements but always retains an *authoritative* link to a mythic context. The most important thing about that mythic context, however, is not always that it exerts a dogmatic authority, but that it is *historical*, as the American Philosopher, Kelley L Ross (2002), points out. Philosophy cannot conjure up historical particulars out of pure reason, but religion always relates its truth to historical particulars, the actual source of the religion or its received tradition. Furthermore, contrary to the earlier evolutionary schemes about human thought, it must be accepted that mythic thought, and so religion, *cannot be replaced* by philosophy, or by science. Thus a revised and evolutionary pattern, acceptable to most contemporary scholars, thus could look like this:



According to this revised scheme, the only ongoing traditions whose worth we might fundamentally question would be those of magic, astrology, and other occult "arts," although there is no doubt that serious forms of some of these continue to exist. None of the traditions really continue independently after their origin. Religion, philosophy, and even science exert influences on each other. Only theology and philosophy are shown connected below their origins because it is hard to know what to call someone like St. Thomas Aquinas, primarily a philosopher or primarily a theologian.

Here philosophy and religion are distinct and related. "What philosophy contains that science cannot are real questions about Being and Value. Science must assume the reality of its objects, so it cannot have a critical metaphysical attitude; nor can it make any judgments at all about value, since some principles of value must be *assumed* in order to judge in some predictive or experimental way the value consequences of a scientific theory. What religion contains that philosophy cannot is the actual *value* embodied in large interpretative structures concerning life, the world, etc.: philosophy is only descriptive and has difficulty justifying any first principles that it might identify." (Ross 2002).

Thus the relationship between philosophy (of religion), theology and myth is much more intimate than most of us think. In the next section we see the explicit relationship between theology and philosophy of religion.

Check Your Progress I

Note: Use the space provided for your answers.

1. Which are the three sciences according to Aristotle ?

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

2. What is the modern relationship between myth, religion and philosophy?

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

3.4 THEOLOGY AND PHILOSOPHY OF RELIGION

The above discussion leads us to the relationship between theology and philosophy of religion. As such both of them deal with the same topics. The crucial difference is that theology presupposes faith while philosophy of religion does not. As such philosophers of religion are required to bracket off their faith, in their philosophical discussion. Since the field of research of both the topics are related, many themes and insights are also shared between the two disciplines.

3.5 PHILOSOPHY OF RELIGION AND SOCIAL SCIENCES

Starting from 19th century, there have been quite much of debate among sociologists (Émile Durkheim1858 –1917, Karl Marx (1818 –1883) and psychologists (Sigmund Freud 1856 –1939; Carl Gustav Jung 1875 –1961), whose ideas has profoundly influenced philosophy of religion. As such philosophy of religion have borrowed many findings from sociology, psychology and even from (cultural) anthropology. Recently sociobiology (Edward O. Wison 1929- and Richard Dawkins 1941-) has also dialogued with philosophy of religion, on issues like the origin and evolution of altruism and evolutionary equilibrium. Further, we give two contemporary disciplines, which contribute our thinking about God. The first one studies our brain (Neurosciences or Neurotheology) and the second one the universe (Astronomy or Big Bang Theories). Both these sciences find traces of God, which may be used by philosophers of religion, to understand God and human beings better.

Check Your Progress II

Note: Use the space provided for your answers.

1. How will you see the differences and relationship between philosophy of religion and theology?

   .....

   .....

   .....

   .....

2. Are social sciences necessary to do philosophy of religion?

   .....

   .....

   .....

   .....

3.6 NEUROTHEOLOGY

Neurotheology, also known as spiritual neuroscience, is the study of correlations of neural phenomena with subjective experiences of spirituality and hypotheses to explain these phenomena. Neurotheology has been defined as "science's attempt at explaining religion within the physical aspect of the brain using rational thought."

Proponents of neurotheology, like Jacob Abraham and Augustine Pamplany from India, hold that there is a neurological and evolutionary basis for subjective experiences traditionally categorized as spiritual or religious. The subject has formed the basis of several popular science books (See For Further Reading).

Indian born Vilayanur S. Ramachandran explored the neural basis of the hyperreligiosity seen in temporal lobe epilepsy (TLE) using the galvanic skin response, which correlates with emotional arousal, to determine whether the

hyperreligiosity seen in TLE was due to an overall heightened emotional state or was specific to religious stimuli. By presenting subjects with neutral, sexually arousing and religious words while measuring GSR, Ramachandran was able to show that patients with TLE showed enhanced emotional responses to the religious words, diminished responses to the sexually charged words, and normal responses to the neutral words. These results suggest that the medial temporal lobe is specifically involved in generating some of the emotional reactions associated with religious words, images and symbols.

Andrew B. Newberg and others describe neurological processes which are driven by the repetitive, rhythmic stimulation which is typical of human ritual, and which contribute to the delivery of transcendental feelings of connection to a universal unity. They posit, however, that physical stimulation alone is not sufficient to generate transcendental unitive experiences. For this to occur they say there must be a blending of the rhythmic stimulation with ideas. Once this occurs "…ritual turns a meaningful idea into a visceral experience. Moreover they say that humans are compelled to act out myths by the biological operations of the brain on account of what they call the "inbuilt tendency of the brain to turn thoughts into actions".

Based on current neuroscientific research, Eugen Drewermann, one of today's most prominent and controversial theologians in Europe, developed in two monumental volumes (Modern Neurology and the Question of God), published in 2006 and 2007, a radical critique of traditional conceptions of God and the soul and a sweeping reinterpretation of religion in light of neurology.[1]

3.7 THE ANTHROPIC PRINCIPLE

It has recently been realised that if some of the fundamental physical constants of the universe were only slightly different then the existence of life in this universe would have been impossible (see Martin Rees's *Just Six Numbers*). There are many of these fortuitous coincidences which have led some to believe that the universe has been fine-tuned. Many explanations for this have been proposed: Is there some necessity for life to exist - sentient intelligent life which could observe and ponder the universe - or else the universe could not come into being? Can the conditions for life be set less rigidly? Is there a multiplicity of universes with the constants set differently in each universe? (Thomas 2011)

But perhaps the most famous (infamous?) interpretation of the Anthropic Principle is that we are we living in a "designer universe" (Pandikattu 2001). In other words, can Anthropic Principle point to a God, who has created this universe specifically for human beings?

Critics of the Anthropic Principle dismiss such thinking by saying that human life exists in its current form purely as a result of the nature of this particular universe. If the constants were set differently, then life might well not exist and we would not be around to ponder these questions. As Steven Weinberg says: *"To conclude that the constants of nature have been fine-tuned by a benevolent designer would be like saying, 'Isn't it wonderful that God put us here on earth, where there's water and air and the surface gravity and temperature are so comfortable, rather than some horrid place, like Mercury or Pluto?' Where else in the solar system other than on earth could we have evolved?"*

Other critics would also say that carbon-based life is not the only possible type of life: maybe an entirely different form of silicon-based life would exist, for example, if the physical constants were set differently. However, from the list of coincidences, it would appear that the majority of values which the constant could take would result in **no life** ever being possible, the universe either spreading too far too quickly, or else collapsing back on itself. According to the proposer of string theory Leonard Susskind: *"The notorious cosmological constant is not quite zero, as it was thought to be. This is a cataclysm and the only way that we know how to make any sense of it is through the reviled and despised Anthropic Principle."* (Thomas 2011)

Recent discussion of the Anthropic Principle has moved away from the "designer universe" type of interpretation towards a so-called "multiverse" interpretation. This rehabilitation has seen the Anthropic Principle come in from the cold from being perceived as a slightly cranky theory on the periphery of science towards playing a central role in the latest interpretations of string theory and cosmology (Pandikattu 2004).

The multiverse interpretation suggests that there are a vast number of different universes (infinitely many?), the collection of universes being commonly referred-to as the *multiverse*. The physical constants are set to different random values in each universe. This arrangement would require no fine-tuning: we just happen to be inhabitants of a universe in which the physical constants are suitable for life. (Thomas 2011)

Further, according to string theory in physics, elementary particles are not particles but small vibrating strings. For the equations of string theory to be mathematically consistent, a string has to vibrate in 10 dimensions, which implies that six extra dimensions exist but are curled-up too small to be detected. The laws of physics in this universe would depend on the geometry of those hidden dimensions.

But the solution to the equations is not unique as so many different geometries are possible in these extra dimensions. The bundle of curled-up extra dimensions can have many different shapes such as a sphere, a doughnut and so on. The vast collection of solutions differ in that each configuration has a potential energy associated with it called the *vacuum energy*, the energy of the space-time when the four large dimensions are completely devoid of matter and fields (Thomas 2011).

Each solution to the equations could be taken as representing a universe with different physical constants and laws of physics. We could represent each of the 10^{500} possible solutions as an abstract mathematical graph, plotting the vacuum energy against the geometrical parameters. The geometry of the small dimensions would try to adjust to minimise the vacuum energy, just as a ball placed on a slope will roll downhill to a lower position. As the physical constants and laws of physics in our universe do not appear to be changing with time, we must be sitting at a minimum in the bottom of a valley. In particular, we seem to sitting at a minimum with a slightly positive vacuum energy (Thomas 2011).

In such a scenario, can we speak of anthropic principle pointing to a Designer (God), who has helped the evolution of our particular universe, so that human beings could inhabit this planet? This is only a question posed, without a definitive answer.

Check Your Progress III

Note: Use the space provided for your answers.

1. What is the significance of neurotheolgy?

   .....

   .....

   .....

   .....

2. How does anthropic principle contribute to a better understanding of philosophy of God?

   .....

   .....

   .....

   .....

3.8 LET US SUM UP

In this unit, we first saw that right from the beginning of Western culture philosophy is related to sciences. Then we saw how religion, philosophy and even sciences stem from the myths. Then we saw in an elementary manner some modern sciences are related to philosophy of religion.

3.9 KEYWORDS

Anthropic principle **:** The cosmological principle that theories of the universe are constrained by the necessity to allow human existence. This implies that the universe evolved (was directed by an intelligence agency?) in such a way that the universe would give rise to human beings.

Neurotheology **:** It is the application of the neurological studies to theory and God-concerns. For instance, it searches for the place(s) in the brain where religious beliefs originate and studies the brain connections for spirituality. It tries to see if God can be understood better (or explained away?) using the latest neurological research.

3.10 FURTHER READINGS AND REFERENCES

Abraham, Jacob. *Essays in Neurotheology : The Completeness Theory and Progress Theology*. Delhi: ISPCK, 2006.

Cline, Austin. “Ancient Greek Mythology, Religion, Art” Religious Rituals, Festivals, Sacrifices http://atheism.about.com/library/FAQs/religion/blgrk_rituals.htm Retried on August 13, 2011.

D'Aquili, Eugene G., and Andrew B. Newberg. *The Mystical Mind : Probing the Biology of Religious Experience*. Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1999.

Drewermann, Eugen, and Jürgen Hoeren. *Wozu Religion? : Sinnfindung in Zeiten Der Gier Nach Macht Und Geld*. 3. Aufl. ed. Herder Spektrum. Freiburg: Herder, 2001.

Kreeft, Peter 2009 "Why Study Philosophy and Theology?" Cardinal Newman Society, http://www.catholiceducation.org/articles/education/ed0392.htm

Newberg, Andrew B. *Principles of Neurotheology* Ashgate Science and Religion Series. Farnham, Surrey, England ; Burlington, VT: Ashgate Pub, 2010.

Newberg, Andrew B., and Mark Robert Waldman. *Born to Believe : God, Science, and the Origin of Ordinary and Extraordinary Beliefs*. 1st Free Press trade pbk. ed. New York: Free Press, 2007.

Newberg, Andrew B., and Mark Robert Waldman. *How God Changes Your Brain : Breakthrough Findings from a Leading Neuroscientist*. 1st ed. New York: Ballantine Books, 2009.

Newberg, Andrew B., Eugene G. D'Aquili, and Vince Rause. *Why God Won't Go Away : Brain Science and the Biology of Belief*. 1st ed. New York: Ballantine Books, 2001.

Pamplany, Augustine. *Evolution & Theology*. New Delhi: Serials Publications, 2011.

Pandikattu, K. *Religion@Scientist.Com: Science and Religion in Interaction*. Pune: Jnanam, 2001.

Pandikattu, K. *The Bliss of Being Human: Science and Religion for Self-Realisation*. Pune: Jnanam, 2004.

Ramachandran, V. S. *A Brief Tour of Human Consciousness : From Impostor Poodles to Purple Numbers*. New York: Pi Press, 2004.

Ramachandran, V. S., and Sandra Blakeslee. *Phantoms in the Brain : Probing the Mysteries of the Human Mind*. 1st ed. New York: William Morrow, 1998.

Rees, Martin J. *Just Six Numbers : The Deep Forces That Shape the Universe*. New York: Basic Books, 2000.

Ross, Kelley L. 2002 "Myth, Religion, and Philosophy" http://www.friesian.com/myth.htm, retrieved on August 12, 2011.

Thomas, Andrew. "The Anthropic Principle" http://www.ipod.org.uk/reality/reality_anthropic_principle.asp, retrieved July 23, 2011