
UNIT 2 IMPORTANCE OF THE PHILOSOPHY OF RELIGION

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2.0 OBJECTIVES

- To see the significance and importance of philosophy of religion.
- To have a deeper understanding of philosophy of religion and its relationship to theology/metaphysics.
- To understand evolution in the human understanding of God and its importance.

2.1 INTRODUCTION

In this unit we make an attempt to understand the importance of philosophy of religion both theoretically and practically. After seeing some of the basic features of religion, we attempt to define both religion and philosophy of religion. Then we see its relationship to theology and metaphysics, emphasizing all the time its significance for human beings. For this unit we are deeply indebted to the significant work of the American Philosopher, Eric v d Luft (2004).

2.2 THE MYSTERY OF RELIGION

Religious people — understood broadly as theists, deists, atheists, gnostics, agnostics, Jews, Christians, Muslims, Hindus, Buddhists, Taoists, Confucians, Shintoists, Zoroastrians, animists, polytheists, pagans, Wiccans, secular humanists, Marxists, or cult devotees — regard religion as a matter of ultimate concern. Everything they are and do finally depends upon such questions as whether there is a God, whether we continue to exist after death, whether any God is active in human history, and whether human ethical relations have spiritual or supernatural dimensions. If God is real, then this is a different world than it

would be if God were not real. So our belief in God affects our commitment to the world.

In all of us there is a basic human longing for a better life – expressed as a search for salvation, deliverance, release, liberation, sunyata, nirvana, etc.. Such a longing seems to be among the main foundations of all religion. There may also be a basic human need for mystery, wonder, fear of the sacred, romantic worship of the unknown, awe in the presence of the completely different, or emotional response to the “numinous.” The “numinous,” a mysterious, awe-inspiring feeling, is the topic of *The Idea of the Holy* by German theologian Rudolf Otto (1869-1937) and *The Sacred and the Profane* by Romanian philosopher and anthropologist of religion Mircea Eliade (190-1986) and it may also be a foundation of religion (Luft 2004).

Do we really need mystery? It appears that the human need to *solve* mysteries seems to be more basic than any need to *have* mysteries. For example, mythology in all known cultures has emerged from either the need or the desire to provide explanations for certain types of occurrences, either natural or interpersonal. Thus they try to solve mysteries, rather than perpetuate them. Moreover, if any basic human need exists for deliverance, salvation, etc., then it may be manifest in part as a need for deliverance from mystery, salvation from ignorance, etc. As an answer we may claim that when some mysteries are solved, other deeper mysteries emerge.

Even after Enlightenment, the primeval feeling of a need for mystery continues. Immanuel Kant (1724-1804), the founder of German critical philosophy, wrote *Sapere aude*. (“Dare to know.”) in *What is Enlightenment?* — but “Daring to know” does not wipe away the genuine mystery from the face of the universe. Many remain sincere and unabashed about feeling a deep need for mystery in their lives. Such people are generally members of some kind of religious group.

The Supernatural –called by various names like God, Allah, Ishwara, Sunyata, etc. — form the basis of such a mystery. If one chooses to make the supernatural element a central aspect of one’s religion, scripture and tradition will certainly support such a set of beliefs. However — and this is well worth noting, according to the American Philosopher of Religion, Eric v d Luft (2004), — the various scriptures, “without adding more internal contradiction than is already present in their pages, will also support commonsensical, naturalistic, nonsupernatural, metaphorical, allegorical, or symbolic interpretations of their texts and theologies.”

Such a plurality of interpretations is possible, not because the texts are vague. In fact indeed they are usually not vague. Plurality of interpretations is possible because the content of these texts is typically universal in its domain of application. :They are ambivalent rather than ambiguous in its language. Thus it is a strength, not a weakness, of most scriptures that they speak to otherworldly as well as this worldly interests” (Luft 2004). Thus they assure us that they will continue to speak to every era, nation, and successive *Zeitgeist* in world history.

Check Your Progress I

Note: Use the space provided for your answers.

1. What is “numinous”?

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2. What is the basis of the ‘mysterious’ in religions?

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2.3 MAKING SENSE OF LIFE

German British philologist Max Müller (1823-1900), one of the founders of the modern scholarly study of comparative religion, asserted that whoever knows only one religion knows none. Against this claim, German theologian Adolf von Harnack (1851-1930) responded in 1901 that whoever knows one religion knows them all. These assertions are not really contradictory though they sound to be. Both are correct. They use the word knowledge in two ways. The distinction remains ambiguous in English, but is clear enough for French and German speakers, who have at their service the respective juxtapositions of *savoir* / *connaître* and *wissen* / *kennen*. Müller means the scientific or objective knowledge (*savoir* or *wissen*) of a religion, which naturally entails scrupulous comparisons with the data of other religions; while Harnack, on the other hand, means the subjective acquaintance or familiarity (*connaître* or *kennen*) that only an insider, i.e., a devout believer, can achieve. Moreover, Harnack refers specifically to Christianity, implying that to know it intimately, i.e., to believe it, is in effect to know and believe the true essence and meaning of all religions, since they all aim at the same spiritual goal. In one word, Müller speaks as a philosopher; Harnack as a theologian (Luft 2004).

Religion must make sense to the believer, not necessarily easy common sense, but some sort of sense. In other words, believers must be able to justify their beliefs, at least to themselves. At the lowest level, such defense is accomplished by appeal to authority or tradition; at the highest level, it is done either through philosophy or through philosophical or systematic theology. Here lies the primary significance of philosophy of religion. That is the reason the preeminent philosopher, Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel (1770-1831), held that “religion in its highest form is philosophy, that philosophy in its true form is religion.” This led him to hold that “the true content of each is the same, even though their respective expressions may differ.” He elaborates this notion: “In their development they move toward each other, since in the historical development of culture, the concept of God moves toward the philosophical, i.e., away from the anthropomorphic and toward the ever more comprehensively spiritual” (Luft 2004).

2.4 FEW BASIC DEFINITIONS

A few definitions of key terms are necessary at the outset:

Theism: It comes from the Greek word for “God,” *theos*, is belief in a God

who is active in human affairs. Deism, from the Latin word for “God,” *deus*, is belief in a God who created the world and then left it alone. Atheism, from the Greek meaning “no God,” is belief in just that. Atheism, theism, and deism are each claims to knowledge. Agnosticism, from the Greek meaning “not knowing,” *agnôstos*, is a refusal to decide.

Monotheism: it is derived from the Greek for “alone,” “single,” or “unique,” *monos*, and henotheism, from the Greek for “one,” each denote belief in one God. Monotheism means one God in and for the entire universe. But henotheism means one God for us, e.g., for our tribe, and it does not deny the possibility that other tribes might have their own equally valid Gods.

Pantheism: It is the belief that everything is God. Animism is the belief that everything is spiritual, or that even apparently inanimate objects have souls. Panentheism is the belief that God completely permeates everything, like water in a saturated sponge. This term has become very popular in contemporary discussions.

Polytheism: This is the belief in many irreducible Gods, perhaps two, perhaps three, usually more. The Christian trinity is monotheistic, not polytheistic, because Yahweh the Father, Jesus Christ the Son, and the Holy Spirit are each recognized as aspects of one God, not as three separate Gods, just as ice, liquid water, and water vapor are each recognized as aspects of a single substance, H₂O, not as three separate substances. The Hindu trinity of Brahma, Vishnu, and Shiva, may be regarded as part of a polytheistic tradition.

Check Your Progress I

Note: Use the space provided for your answers.

1. Is “mystery” something necessary for modern human beings?

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2. What is the etymological meaning of “monotheism”?

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2.5 DEFINITIONS OF RELIGION

As for a definition of religion itself, that is very controversial. The word might have come from the Latin *religare* (“to tie” or “to bind”) and *religio* (“conscientiousness,” “respect,” “awe,” or “sanctity”). The idea is that the soul is bound to God. Religion has been defined as everything from the immediate awareness of identity with the absolute, to the passionate striving (*eros*) for the transcendent, to the psychological projection of the idealized human self onto the infinite, to the consciousness of the highest social values. For German

theologian Friedrich Daniel Ernst Schleiermacher (1768-1834), religion is the feeling of utter dependence; for Danish philosopher Harald Höffding (1843-1931), the individual's desire to conserve value; for Kant, the recognition of moral duties as divine commands; for Dutch American anthropologist Annemarie de Waal Malefijt (b. 1914), any system of actions and interactions based on culturally shared beliefs in sacred supernatural powers; for Müller, the intuitive faculty of apprehending the infinite; for British historian Arthur Darby Nock (1902-1963), the human refusal to accept helplessness; for ancient Greek philosopher Plato (427-347 B.C.E.), the science of begging and getting gifts from the Gods; and for German socialist philosopher Karl Marx (1818-1883), the opiate of the people. For Søren Kierkegaard (1813-1855), the father of existentialism, religion is a matter of individual subjective passion and is a "leap" involving also "dread and fear".

In essence, religion is an attitude, or a sum of attitudes, constituting a way of life. Religion may thus be the total of an individual's sincere attitudes and predispositions toward that which serves as the final expression of his or her particular primary interest or goal. The various institutions of religion would arise only after a group shares certain attitudes that were first felt by an individual, and as a result of this sharing.

Perhaps the most accurate definition, according to Luft combines the ideas of two German Americans, liberal theologian Paul Tillich (1886-1965) and psychologist Erich Fromm (1900-1980): "any system of thought, feeling, and action, typically shared by a group, which gives the individual a frame of orientation, a meaning of life, and an object of devotion, which is regarded as a matter of ultimate concern."

Check Your Progress II

Note: Use the space provided for your answers.

1. What is panentheism?

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2. What could be the most accurate definition of religion?

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2.6 PHILOSOPHY AND RELIGION

British American philosopher Alfred North Whitehead (1861-1947) wrote in *Religion in the Making*: "Religion is what the individual does with his [or her] own solitariness." But what the individual actually does with true solitariness, that curious amalgam of loneliness and reflectivity, is philosophize. In the same book Whitehead wrote, "Religion is force of belief cleansing the inward parts.

For this reason the primary religious virtue is sincerity, a penetrating sincerity.” But similarly, philosophy is force of thought cleansing the inward parts. Thus the primary philosophical virtue is precisely the same penetrating sincerity, that is demanded of religion. Here we see another relationship between genuine philosophy and religion.

Algerian French novelist and philosopher Albert Camus (1913-1960) wrote in *The Myth of Sisyphus* that there is only one truly philosophical question: suicide. His focus was perhaps too narrow, but he was on the right track. The same question, more broadly stated, is whether life is worth living. Philosophers have asked this broader version at least since Socrates in the fifth century B.C.E. If life turns out not to be worth living, then that in itself is not sufficient reason to commit suicide. We may prefer just to endure life. Conversely, if we judge that life is worth living, then that alone is not sufficient reason to avoid suicide. Socrates himself, who believed quite firmly that life, especially a philosophically examined life was worth living, unfortunately, had to commit suicide to preserve his moral integrity (Luft 2004).

So the central question is life. What, beyond the obvious physical or empirical aspects, is life? What does it mean? Why live? Why persevere? Why surrender? Why bother? Why care? Why strive? Why have children? Why laugh? Why cry? What can I hope for? Reason seems sometimes to be at a loss to answer these penetrating questions. The devout religious believers who deliberately reject any scholarly conclusions about the content of their religious faith because of the great comfort and sense of importance they gain by believing in their own god cannot risk anything, even reason, shaking that belief. Thus there may exist a healthy tension between the need to believe wholeheartedly and need to raise critical and penetrating questions, both of which are basic human needs.

The historical development of religion proceeds in stages which can be analyzed in terms of dialectical progress. Such is the case both with individual religions and with religion in general. Anthropologists, psychologists, and sociologists, especially those who study folklore and oral traditions, have done much good work in classifying such stages, all the way from the most primitive animism to the most sophisticated philosophical monotheism. But their classification is in general forms only. What they have largely failed to do is to discover and define precisely the reasons why a given stage passes over into another, according to Eric v d Luft (2004). They have failed to see the progressive development of religions as plan of God to lead us gradually toward the most adequate understanding of God. In other word, can we show that humanity has been led gradually to a more perfect idea of God, by God himself? This is a question which only a philosopher can try to answer. Hegel conceived and attempted such a project — to learn the ultimate, divinely sanctioned reasons why one religious stage passes over into another — but that movement died out in the mid-nineteenth century (Luft 2004).

2.7 EVOLUTION OF GOD

The historical evolution of our understanding of God must also be seen as the evolution of human beings on the absolute scale, or *sub specie aeternitatis* (from the view-point of eternity). If we compare our understanding of God, it is quite different from that of the early primitives. That of DeuteroIsaiah (540 B.C.E.) more nearly approached the true nature of God than did that of Moses (ca. 1300 B.C.E.). Similarly, that of Augustine (354-430), it is claimed, was

more highly developed and thus more accurate than Isaiah's. This means, not that Isaiah was either more intelligent or more devout than Moses, or Augustine more than Isaiah, but that their respective theologies/philosophies are to a significant degree products of the total of learned culture in their respective times (Luft 2004). Thus that these theologies themselves reflect these several levels of cultural development and philosophical refinement.

In the beginnings of twenty-first century many scientific, epistemological, and even metaphysical reasons to abandon former beliefs in the supernatural (or God) have been proposed. At the same time contemporary philosophers (e.g.: George Karuvelil) and theologians (e.g.: Sebastian Kappen) who believe in religion try to propose new understandings of God that is more conducive to the general world-view of the times. True, the time may have come for another rationally ordained supersession of an old God. Today the God of eternal punishment and cruelty needs to give rise to a God who is with the poor and with everyone and everything. At the same time some atheistic thinkers urge that God be replaced by "earthly peace," "cohesive social order," "social coherence," "ethical solidarity," "the order of ethical life," or "theonomy," (Paul Tillich) the law of God written in human hearts. But this social ideal of philosophical religion a goal toward which philosophy, religion, and politics must all cooperate.

One must acknowledge that in spite of the social solidarity that religions and non-religions foster, there is an essential difference between those who believe in God and those who do not. The difference between the many subjective worlds that involve God and those conceived without God drives immediately to the root of human existence. The various doctrines and traditions of established religions may not be adequate to answer the most serious and basic questions of human existence, life, and meaning. Contemporary theologies do a better job of answering them than doctrines or traditions do, but to address them in a fully satisfying way we need philosophy. Just like "war is too important to leave to the generals" religion is too important to leave to the priests. A more detached, objective, bird's eye-view is needed. There lies the philosophical importance of studying religion.

Philosophy is the science that sits in judgment of all matters of concern. "Science" is any rigorous discipline that uses impartial powers of reason and logic. In fact, reason weighs topics of inquiry on their own merits, according to their own logic, and in relation to other topics, then completes its analysis without prejudice on the basis of wherever reason leads, according to its own logic.

The goal of philosophical scrutiny is clarity, accuracy, and truth. Given this mission of philosophy, its highest duty is to sit in judgment of the most important matters (not with arrogance or hubris), with a view toward improving human life, ethical relations, and the world in general by injecting reason into our judgments and by identifying, describing, and communicating what makes sense and what does not. Philosophy thus promotes intelligence, clear understanding, and civilization but condemns stupidity, ignorance, and barbarity. "This is the normative or prescriptive aspect of philosophy, which is most effective when done implicitly. Philosophy aims to become the architecture of ethical, meaningful life, not by preaching or by being dogmatic, but just by discovering the facts and displaying them in clear light to intelligent minds who will then make their own decisions" (Luft 2004).

2.8 PHILOSOPHY OF RELIGION AND METAPHYSICS

The philosophy of religion is not the same as theology. While theologians examine a particular religion from within and interpret it for its own community of believers, philosophers of religion analyze religion in general, from external or objective points of view, and evaluate it systematically. Theology is part of the data for philosophy of religion. Theology may inspire philosophy of religion and vice-versa. But they are distinct disciplines.

The same is the case with philosophy of religion and metaphysics. The philosophy of religion was originally subsumed under metaphysics, the philosophical science of first principles. Its central issue, the reality and nature of God, was considered a metaphysical question. But in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries philosophers began to consider questions about God separately from other metaphysical questions and to ask about ethics in religious contexts. As a result of these new lines of inquiry, especially in Britain and Germany, the philosophy of religion had become an independent discipline within philosophy probably by the end of the eighteenth century onwards.

Herein lies the added importance of philosophy of religion, which has now become distinct from both theology and metaphysics, traditionally considered as the bases of religion and society. Philosophy of religion, like theology and metaphysics, deals with issues of fundamental significance to ourselves. It is in fact a development of metaphysics (and theology).

Check Your Progress III

Note: Use the space provided for your answers.

1. Who are the “masters of suspicion”? Why are they called so?

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2. Give the significance of the book edited by Graham Oppy and Nick Trakakis?

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2.9 LET US SUM UP

The philosophy of religion, like most philosophy and theology, is not a linear discipline. That is, its concepts cannot be learned sequentially, but must be gradually fitted together like the pieces of a jigsaw puzzle. In whatever order they are presented, some concepts presented earlier will remain obscure until other concepts are presented later. This is unavoidable, because life is too

complicated an affair to be regulated linearly (Luft 2004). So in this unit we have tried to show what philosophy of religion is and its importance as a theoretical discipline with practical applications.

2.10 KEYWORDS

- Panentheism** : The belief or doctrine that God is greater than the universe and includes and interpenetrates it
- Numinous** : It is a term referring to a feeling of the mysterious, all-inspiring, holy or sacred, which is present without reason
- Savoir** : connaître and wissen / kennen: The difference between “kennen” and “wissen” is that “kennen” means “to know an object or person” and “wissen” is “to know a fact.” In French savoir means 1) to know a fact 2) to know by heart or 3) to know how to do something. Connaître has two meanings: 1) to know a person or 2) to be familiar with a person or thing.
- Zeitgeist** : The defining spirit or mood of a particular period of history as shown by the ideas and beliefs of the time.

2.11 FURTHER READINGS AND REFERENCES

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