

INTRODUCTION TO PHILOSOPHY OF RELIGION

B.A. PHILOSOPHY PART-III

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Philosophy of Religion is philosophical study of the meaning and nature of religion. It includes the analysis of religious concepts, belief, terms, arguments, and practice of religious adherents. The scope of much work done in a philosophy of religion has been limited to the various theistic religions. According to John Hick, Philosophy of Religion is philosophical thinking about religion. More recent work often involves a broader, more global approach, taking into consideration both theistic and non theistic religious traditions. The range of those engaged in the field of philosophy of religion is broad and diverse and include philosopher from the analytic and continental traditions, eastern and western thinkers, religious believers and agnostics, skeptics and atheists. Philosophy of religion draw on all of the major area of philosophy as well as other relevant fields, including theology, history, sociology, psychology, and natural science.

Philosophy of religion, then, is not an organ of religious teaching. Indeed, it need not be undertaken from a religious standpoint at all. The atheist, the agnostic, and the person of faith all can and do philosophize about religion. Philosophy of religion is, accordingly, not a branch of theology (meaning by "theology" the systematic formulation of religious beliefs), but a branch of philosophy. It studies the concepts and belief systems of the religions as well as the prior phenomena of religious experience and the activities of worship and meditation on which these belief systems rest and out of which they have arisen.

Philosophy of religion is thus a second-order activity, standing apart from its subject matter. It is not itself a part of the religious realm but is related to it as, for example, the philosophy of law is related to the realm of legal phenomena and to juridical concepts and modes of reasoning, or the philosophy of art to artistic phenomena and to the categories and methods of aesthetic discussion. The philosophy of religion is thus related to the particular religions and theologies of the world as the philosophy of science relates to the special sciences. It seeks to analyze concepts such as God, dharma, Brahman, salvation, worship, creation, sacrifice, nirvana, eternal life, etc., and to determine the nature of religious utterances in comparison with those of everyday life, scientific discovery, morality, and the imaginative expressions of the arts.

What, however, is religion? Many different definitions have been proposed. Some of these are phenomenological, trying to state that which is common to all the acknowledged forms of religion; for example, religion is "human recognition of a superhuman controlling power and especially of a personal God or gods entitled to obedience and worship" (*Concise Oxford Dictionary*). Others are interpretative. Thus there are psychological definitions—for example, "the feelings, acts, and experiences of individual men in their solitude, so far as they apprehend themselves to stand in relation to whatever they may consider the divine" (William James). Others are sociological—for example, "a set of beliefs, practices, and institutions which men have evolved in various societies" (Talcott Parsons). Others, again, are naturalistic—for example, "a body of scruples which impede the free exercise of our faculties" (Salomon Reinach) or, more sympathetically, "ethics heightened, enkindled, lit up by feeling" (Matthew Arnold). Yet others are religious definitions of religion—for example, "Religion is the recognition that all things are manifestations of a Power which transcends our knowledge" (Herbert Spencer), or again, "humanity's response to the divine."

But such definitions are all stipulative: they decide how the term is to be used and impose this in the form of a definition. Perhaps a more realistic view is that the word "religion" does not have a single correct meaning but that the many different phenomena subsumed under it are related in the way that the philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein has characterized as family resemblance. His own example was the word "game." You cannot define a game as being played for pleasure (for some are played for profit), or as being competitive (for some are solo performances), or as requiring skill (for some depend on chance), or indeed it would seem by any single feature. Yet all these different kinds of game overlap in character with some other kinds, which in turn overlap in different ways with yet other kinds, so that the whole ramifying collection hangs together in a complex network of similarities and differences which Wittgenstein likened to the resemblances and differences appearing within a family. We may apply Wittgenstein's idea to the word "religion." Perhaps there is no one characteristic of everything that can be called a religion but rather a set of "family resemblances." In much religion there is the worship of a God or gods; but in Theravada Buddhism, for example, there is not. Again, religion often makes for social cohesion; yet in some strands it is aptly characterized as "what man does with his solitariness" (A. N. Whitehead). Again, religion often makes for the inner harmony of the individual; yet some of the greatest religious innovators seemed to their contemporaries to be unbalanced and even insane. The family resemblances model allows for such differences. It also allows us to acknowledge the similarities as well as the differences between more standard examples of religion and such secular faiths as Marxism.

Marxism has its eschatological ideal of the ultimate class less society, its doctrine of predestination through historical necessity, its scriptures, prophets, saints, and martyrs. Thus we can see it as sharing some of the features of the family of religions while lacking other and probably more central ones. But whether a movement is religious is not an all-or-nothing matter but a question of degree within a widely spreading network of resemblances and differences.

The core of philosophy of religion ,as of philosophy generally,is metaphysics and epistemology,systematic attempts to give defensible answers to the questions,what is there?and how can we know what is there is?At the core of any religious tradition is its own answer these questions construed as and embedded in an answer to the basic problem to which the tradition addresses itself as the rationale for its existence.Thus our own concentration on accounts of religious reality and religious knowledge.How is ultimate reality conceived and how are human person viewed in relation to ultimate reality?With what consequences for salvation or enlightenment,morality,and any against ,these views?What appeals to experience are made for one view and against another?What assessment should be offered of these arguments and appeals?

There are two very different position taken by philosophers of religion with respect to the concept of religious discourse:

Realism:Probably the vast majority of religious adherents are religious realists ,that is most religious adherents hold that their beliefs are about what reality exists independent of the human beings who are having those beliefs.

Non -realism:Although they are in the minority ,there are also religious non-realists.While there are different forms of religious non-realism,in general non -realists maintain that religious claims are not about realities which transcend human language,concepts and social forms,religious claims are not about something 'out there'.

Among Non-realists there are those who are,as it were, favourable towards religion and those who are not.Consider the words of Sigmund Freud:

"These (religious ideas),which are given out as teaching,are not precipitates of experience or end results of thinking,they are illusions,fulfillments of the oldest,strongest and most urgent wishes of mankind.The secret of their strength of those wishes.

For Freud,there are no referents for religious beliefs about transcendent entities such as God.Rather,religion is an illusion and religious beliefs are merely manifestations of this illusion.This belief in God,for example ,is simply the projection of a father image.

More recently, Oxford geneticist Richard Dawkins and Philosopher Daniel Dennett have advanced the notion that a Darwinian account of cultural evolution may explain religion and religious beliefs via the replication of something very much like genes.

For Dawkins, the widespread belief in God is not due to there actually being such an entity because there are good reasons for believing there are. Rather people believe because the 'god meme' has spread in ways akin to a virus throughout human population. Religion turns out to be an "accidental by product a misfiring of something useful," so too with all attending religious beliefs.

In other words, philosophy of religion, discipline concerned with the philosophical appraisal of human religious attitude and of the real or imaginary object of those attitudes, God or the gods. The philosophy of religion is an integral part of philosophy as such and embraces central issues regarding the nature and extent of human knowledge, the ultimate character of reality, and the fundamental of morality.

Regarding these fundamental issues, philosophy of religion, and indeed, philosophy itself have taken new directions in recent times. While philosophical reflection on religious ideas has been occurring for centuries, even millennia, it underwent a momentous setback in the early -to-mid twentieth century through the work of the logical positivists. Logical positivists held, among other things, that for a claim to be true and meaningful it must be empirically verifiable. As religious claims were for the most part taken to be empirically unverifiable, philosophical reflection on religious themes was widely considered to be a specious endeavour and religious ideas were often taken to be meaningless.