

Issues in Contemporary Philosophy of Religion

Edited by

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Philosophy – religion – theology

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This essay is a (meta)philosophical attempt to clarify the theoretical practice called 'philosophy of religion'. It proceeds in stages. (1) Beginning with a very broad definition of 'religion', it claims (a) that the religious dimension is not only a necessary and basic topic of philosophy, but also its source, and (b) that *all* philosophers, in the practice of their life, rely on a basic 'faith'. If this is true, the question arises as to whether they can abstract from their faith in practicing philosophy. (2) The existing 'positive' religions concretize the religious dimension, but it is universally realized and expressed, even in atheistic and agnostic attitudes and convictions. *All* humans rely on a basic faith. (3) The modern self-conception of philosophy rests on the assumption that because it is autonomous it can separate itself from the lived existence from which it springs. This conception is a dream that has not been and cannot be realized. It must therefore be replaced with a metaphilosophy that respects the faith-based essence of philosophy. (4) Religion (the religious dimension and its concretization in faith) is united with philosophy in at least two ways: (a) as its object, and (b) as the basic condition of the philosophical (re)search. (5) Philosophy is a *relatively* autonomous element of the self-aware and critical life of philosophers. Its language is simultaneously particular and universal. As an attempt to think in the name of and for all humans, it continues its traditional task. Insofar as it is done at the service of a religious community, it is a particular faith searching for understanding, both of the universe and of itself. In its latter function philosophy can be called theology; in its universal function, it brackets its theological character, though it neither can nor should repress it. (6) The union of religion, including its faith and theology, and philosophy is guaranteed by all the connections mentioned in (1)–(5). Lacking an Archimedean standpoint, philosophers of religion should concentrate not only on the religions that are their subject, but also on the religious dimension to which they owe their inspiration. Philosophy of religion is one possible mode of being religious, that is, in an enlightened way. It cannot master what it illuminates, but it can express its own mixture of dependence and independence in conceptual language.

Religion

From an existential perspective we can use the word 'religion' to indicate the deepest dimension of human life in which all other dimensions are rooted. This very broad definition of religion points to the basic fact that human individuals and communities feel more or less at home in the world and its history. Instead of 'feeling at home in the universe', we could also say that the religious dimension is the dimension (or the level) where the question of decisive or ultimate meaning is asked and – at least tentatively and in an embryonic form – answered. All living persons accept their existence as somehow and to some degree meaningful, despite the many doubts, frustrations, rejections, and rebellions that may assail them. Insofar as the meaning that is found or presumed in the universe is fundamental, supporting human existence as a whole, it permeates and colors all other dimensions. As such it decides about the meaning of human lives.

The definition of religion proposed here implies that all concrete (or 'positive') religions can be interpreted as symbolic, ritual, and practical enactments of specific modes of being at home in the universe, aware that existence is not absurd, but possibly meaningful. It also implies that modes of inhabiting the world without religion, such as agnosticism or atheism, are likewise 'religious', insofar as their acceptance of the universe expresses (or even confesses) that existence in it must have a meaning. Materialists, biologists, and historicists, for example, may locate meaning elsewhere than in a realm of God or the gods, but they, too, believe in a basic meaning of existence.

The self-awareness that belongs to the deepest dimension of human lives is a pre-predicative and pre-propositional experience with a primarily affective character: the awareness of a fundamental attunement, a basic mood. We feel more or less at home in a specific mood. The universe can inspire awe, admiration, gratitude, anxiety; we can feel threatened, safe, secure, content, frustrated, nostalgic, and so on. Being affected by the phenomena, we react by affectively responding to them. How we respond depends on our degree of openness, receptivity, sensitivity, character and life story, and many other conditions; but so long as we continue to live, there is always some sort of basic consent and trust, even if these are hidden or overwhelmed by anguish and temptations of despair. Somehow we remain attached to our existence and confident that it is better to be than not to be. Even suicide cannot be preferred without, for the time being, approving and using the tools and actions needed to assure one's own disappearance.

Trust, confidence, or 'faith', taken in a sense as broad as the basic concept of 'religion', implies the affirmation that existence (including the entire universe insofar as one has to deal with it) has an overall meaning. Even if it is not *full* of meaning, it must be more meaningful than nothingness. This

affirmation is lived, rather than pronounced or thought. It is the element of consent in our moods, the basic mood that grants us the possibility of having a position and an attitude with regard to the universe and our existence in it. It grants us a 'stance'.

To have a stance is not statically fixed. An originary desire keeps humans on the move. As propelled by desire, a stance does not only trust the present (despite all threats), it also tends forward in search of meaning. Although, on this level, a clear answer to the question of life's meaning is not available, desire darkly anticipates that it must be possible to discover it and that it is already operative in the search. 'Faith' is thus linked with hope. If it includes attachment and the will to continue, it is also animated by a basic form of love, which, at this stage, still may be confined to love for oneself.

A reader of the preceding lines may have become suspicious: is this an attempt to read the three 'divine virtues' of Christian theology into the originary dimension of human existence, encompassing even such areligious or antireligious ways of life as atheism or agnosticism? Or is it perhaps an attempt to reduce the Christian religion and its theology to existential categories that fit all human beings so well that religion in any normal sense of the word and the differences between religions no longer matter? Not exactly; but undeniably it attempts to identify a universal dimension, level, or structure that can be found at the core of all forms or ways of life. At the same time it remains well-aware of the impossibility of doing so from a completely neutral, Archimedean perspective. The universality of the religious dimension is always approached from the perspective of a particular attachment (faith, hope, and love). However, such a perspective no more prevents a discussion with different perspectives or approaches than the difference between French and English or Chinese and Russian prevents a dialogue; but it clearly departs from the modern dogmas about universality and autonomy.

Autonomy

By proclaiming its own independence, philosophy has positioned itself as a rival of all moral, religious, literary, and political authorities. No longer a tributary to the authority of dogmas, ancients, or traditions, philosophers had to reinvent the universe on the basis of self-evident facts and principles. Their task was no longer ruled by powers other than thought itself; instead of serving states or churches, a philosopher would from now on speak in the name of humanity and for its benefit.

The modern emancipation necessitated a separation of thought itself from all the particular features of communal, historical, and individual life. None

of the contingent, idiosyncratic, or epochal elements involved in human existence should play a role in the constitution of universally valid truth. The great variety of factual religions should either be interpreted as a series of variations on one general 'religiosity' (not a 'positive', but a 'natural' religion) or seen as approximations of one universally valid philosophy, or even as failed attempts to capture the truth, which is in any case the monopoly of philosophy.

Descartes has thematized the necessity of a clear separation between his life in the world and the philosophical abstractions on which he wanted to thoughtfully rebuild the world and his own humanity,¹ but his successors have dedicated little attention to the (im)possibility of the radical split between theory and practice he proposed. They resumed his program of an abstract reconstruction without showing the possibility of a thought that would be wholly free from existential particularities.

The history of modern philosophy has demonstrated with utmost clarity that none of its systems is self-sufficient and that all philosophers have remained heavily dependent on the questions, discussions, conceptual frameworks, methods, and terminologies of predecessors and traditions, even when they succeeded in their revolutions and transformations. The best philosophers appropriated their past in an original way, thus transforming their inheritance into new beginnings, but none of their systems can be understood as a creation founded upon an indubitable evidence and crystalline logic. All of them are rooted in some hidden faith, though these authors were perhaps not always clearly aware of it.

In order to separate their philosophy from their lives as they live them, philosophers must find a free-standing perspective outside their own worldly and historical existence. Only then can they form an objective and universally valid judgment about the universe, including their own functioning within it. This standpoint was sought in thought itself. Thinking thus became the activity of an extra-existential, supra-historical and supra-terrestrial thinker, either in the form of a transcendental consciousness or as a trans- or super-human subject whose thoughts must be revealed by a human interpreter. As a hermetic or prophetic service to humanity, philosophy had to reduce the entire variety of cultures and stories to general forms and structures that could be verified everywhere. A formal universe was (re)created that had to be filled in by the real diversity of individual lives and communal histories.

Philosophy and religion

How does religion fare in the context of a philosophy that claims to be autonomous?

If religion, like art and morality, is an essential phenomenon, it cannot be excluded from philosophy. For within philosophy all exclusions are arbitrary, or rather, they are impossible because the horizon of philosophy is unlimited or universal. If religion is not a genuine phenomenon, philosophy must show which more genuine dimension hides behind its mask; if it is genuine and irreducible to anything else, philosophy will have to confront the rivalry that emerges from this fact. An autonomous philosophy necessarily submits religion to its own perspective and principles. Either it takes itself to be the highest tribunal for questions of meaning, or it leaves open the possibility that the ultimate judgement can be expected from another, deeper or higher realm. If there is such a realm, philosophy accepts the subordinate, relative, and provisional character of its 'autonomy', whereas in the first case, it is philosophy that knows the meaning of religion *and more*: its truth or falsehood, the reason why religion is meaningful or not, the extent to which different religions represent different degrees of truth and meaning, and so on. Hegel's reduction of the religious phenomenon to an imperfect presentation of philosophical truth is a consummate example of this reduction, while the subordination of philosophy to religion is asserted or assumed by all those philosophers who see themselves as primarily religious.

Is the expression 'primarily religious' a pleonasm? Can one be religious, i.e., attached to and engaged in a religion without being aware that religion *founds and encompasses* the entirety of human existence? Is it inevitable that the thought of religious persons either fits into their faith, or puts this faith to the test, which then might result in turning away from it, modifying it, or reinforcing it with philosophical considerations?

The crucial question is where a thinker stands when observing and thematizing others' or her own religious involvement. Thinking from the stance of religion (which I have called the basis of lived existence) ipso facto relativizes philosophy as a branch that cannot separate itself from the tree it serves. How could the branch claim the final judgment about the meaning of the tree? Thinking from an Archimedean position is either an abstraction – and to that extent only a provisional or hypothetical enterprise until it find its place in the whole of a life – or it is indeed autarchic, but then it expresses another faith: the faith (or the 'religion') that identifies autonomous thinking with the truest and deepest dimension of life. The main task to which existence calls humans is then nothing other than thought, and all other tasks, such as art, morals, sport, and love, are subordinate to it. Philosophy itself is then the true religion. It is not difficult to show that the God of this religion must coincide either with a grounding and all-encompassing thinker whose existence is imaginary as an unrealized ideal, or with a transcendental or transcendent consciousness whose truth is revealed in the finite messages of the philosophers.

If the autarchy of philosophy is in fact rooted in its own philosophical faith, the principle of philosophical autonomy implies a rivalry with concrete religions. An autarchic philosophy necessarily competes with religions for the right to present the basic and decisive answer to the question of ultimate meaning. In the name of its autonomy, philosophers must claim that they presuppose nothing that is not obvious to all people, while looking down on religions as a variety of particular beliefs that are neither empirically nor rationally fully warranted. These beliefs might be interesting (i.e., they might respond to existential interests or even be of interest for an epistemology of the connections between belief and truth), but their meaning is subordinate to the overall interest and the ultimate meaning of the philosophical enterprise. The stance and the faith of philosophy puts the faiths of religions in their place and relativizes their interests.

The claim of autonomy obscures the faith-driven passion of modern philosophy. The pretention that it is led by universal reason alone falsifies its dealings with religion by interpreting its relationship to the latter as a relationship between universality (reason) and particularity (faith). If, on the contrary, philosophy recognized its rootedness in its own faith, it would recognize the particularity of its own bias. This bias does not necessarily preclude the task of speaking in a universally recognizable way, but it entails the awareness that it cannot do this in a non-particular language. Neither natural, nor conceptual languages are universal. All of them are particular perspectives on the universe. Moreover, the individuals who express their thoughts in them give them a personal twist.

Philosophy as religion

Dedicated philosophers are aware of a double impetus: though fascinated by the task of formulating universal truths (e.g., the truth about the religions, their own included), they are primarily interested in their own destiny (and its truth) and that of others. If their existential and their theoretical interests coincide, philosophy is nothing other than the theoretical part of their existential endeavor. Thought and life are then one, though a distinction is still possible to the extent that existence encompasses more than thought. If faith or 'religion', in the broad sense, is fundamental for existence, the religion of a thinker permeates his thinking, but when he speaks to those who do not share his faith, he will look for common ground and shared assumptions in order to make a discussion possible despite any fundamental differences. If we reserve the name 'philosophy' for the level of universally shared assumptions, we abstract from all the real and possible differences in faith. Such a universally valid philosophy does not represent the concrete (and therefore existential) thought of its author, because it is only an abstract element of it.

Modern philosophers have believed that this element could be emancipated and proclaimed as something independent, while denying that such independence presupposes another kind of existential rooting and another kind of trust than the faith from which self-thinking was liberated. This conviction explains why modern philosophy saw itself as the universal and highest perspective; but its faith in itself as the supreme way of finding meaning in the universe puts it beside, not above, other religions. Philosophy, in its modern self-interpretation, is the religion of Enlightenment; it is a 'form of life' rather than an abstract element that, thanks to its abstractness, fits into a more deeply rooted engagement with existence. The real relation between philosophy and religion varies with philosophy's conception of its own practice. If philosophy tries to be autarchic, it is a rival of other religions, claiming for itself the same kind of ultimacy, universality, and authority. However, if it confines itself to being the thinking element within a religion – as the conceptual understanding and clarification of the universally relevant meaning of that religion – it gives up its autarky by adopting a more authentic, if limited, relative, and subordinate autonomy.

The religious character of autarchic philosophy is shown by its appeals to particular traditions and authorities, by the rituals it develops, by the standards and the fora through which it protects its orthodoxy, by the scholasticism of its questions and answers, and by its excommunication of dissidents. Originality and revolutions soon develop into chapels of heterodoxy, if they are not domesticated by integration into the mainstream. The stories that philosophy tells about its past – e.g., in their Kantian, Hegelian, Nietzschean, or Heideggerian versions – are as simplistic as other all-encompassing myths and the practice it recommends is ruled by the law of celebration and repetition. Congresses are dominated by endless monologues and controlled by judges who screen the thoughts of the newly initiated. For those who profess the autonomy of philosophy, there is a Church in which they can feel at home. What is more tempting than the promise of a free, all-judging thought, especially when it is authorized by the fame of stars!

The freedom of the enlightened faith on which modern philosophy thrives necessarily rivals with the inspired freedoms that are enacted in Jewish, Buddhist, Hindu, Christian, or Muslim faith. But rivalry is a kind of enmity, as long as each faith is convinced that it must triumph over the others. Such a triumph can consist in an *Aufhebung* or integration, by which other faiths are judged and subordinated. Hegel's philosophical integration of the religions or Origen's integration of Platonic and Stoic elements are examples of such conquests.

Are hostility or submission the only alternatives or is a friendly co-existence, perhaps even a sort of fraternity, between philosophy and religion possible? If philosophy is an autonomous and secular 'religion', its coexist-

ence with Christian faith (and its theology) is comparable, for example, to the co-existence of Christianity with Judaism, Islam, Buddhism, etc. Peaceful co-existence between religions cannot be established by giving up one's own faith, but only by mutual respect. But how can one maintain a wholehearted adherence to one faith without relativism or syncretism? Respect, on this level of ultimacy, presupposes the recognition of a fundamental and ultimate truth and meaning. How can such a recognition of other faiths avoid relativizing one's own faith insofar as this contradicts the others? Recognition – and the mutual respect that ensues from it – is not possible unless the different faiths, despite the contradictions that seem to make them utterly hostile, are experienced as somehow pointing to and converging on a truth that, though darkly and differently revealed in respectable religions, does not let itself be captured completely by any of them. Such truth must then be deeper and 'more ultimate' than faith and religion themselves.

Even this hypothesis does not undermine the possibility of a firm adherence to one's own religion, because such an adherence does not exclude that other religions, in their aporetic or contradictory way, point toward the same hidden God.

One formulation of the non-relativistic relativity intended here is the Christian conviction, which is part of its faith, that in heaven there are no sacraments or ecclesiastical structures and dogmas. Even religion itself should not be made into an idol; it should always be lived as referring to the first and last itself.

Must the modern project of an autarchic philosophy be saluted by other religions as an alternative way of salvation? Is its *gnosis* one of the religions through which human beings open up to the ultimate truth of their existence? If receptivity, listening, acceptance, thanksgiving, and celebration are characteristic of religion, modern philosophy does not strike us as characteristically religious. Its obsession by the 'I' that thinks and masters, uses, acts, concludes, and enjoys seems too humanistic to allow for much mystery. But perhaps its infatigable questioning and self-critical questioning betray a genuine desire of something greater than itself, which could grant it another freedom than the narrow one of self-identity. Perhaps even this philosophy points to an unconquerable dimension of absolute transcendence. From where does its passion for the truth come and what justifies its hope? Would it really be satisfied by conceptual transparency or would that put an end to all hopes? Even Descartes desired wisdom more than knowledge; and who would prefer clarity over a good life? If philosophy, even in its modern version, has always been a passionate search for the union of ultimate truth and goodness in the form of a partly given, partly conquered wisdom, it, too, is a religious

enterprise. But then it can and must also be understood, evaluated, respected, and dealt with from the perspective of other religions.

The recognition of modern philosophy as one among many religions would reconstitute its existential seriousness, but at the same time it would rob it of its metaphilosophical monopoly. Philosophy could no longer claim to be the highest court for questions of meaning and truth, because it is only one (respectable, but particular) way of engaging in the essential quest. Even intellectuals could not proclaim its supremacy unless they could demonstrate that its conceptual language is more trustworthy and encompassing than the symbolisms of other religions. If the reverse is true, or if both have their own strengths and weaknesses, a more brotherly or sisterly relationship might be possible, unless one or more religions could correctly claim that it encompasses all true philosophy. But why should the latter be the case? Can't we become what we have to be without conceptual mastery? To see such mastery as the summit of wisdom would make us Hegelian or Spinozist; but it is exactly such kinds of faith that we are questioning.

Philosophy of religion between philosophy and religion

What are the consequences of the (hypo)thesis defended in the preceding pages for the philosophy of religion? If philosophy is autonomous and autarchical, it must summon all (other) religions and judge their identity, structure, truth, and meaning in the name of its own standards, which it regards as the highest and ultimate standards of truth and meaning. The identity and essence of the religions are then *a priori* adjusted to the patterns and restrictions of the judge's logic. All the elements that do not fit with its observational or conceptual network must be considered irrelevant, meaningless, and extrarational. A certain form of contempt then, inherent to all judgmental looking-down, characterizes the philosopher's attitude.

If an autonomous philosophy itself is a kind of religion, the situation is different. Instead of being the highest tribunal before which the other religions must legitimize themselves, it must rather allow other religions to identify and evaluate this philosophy (and its thought about religions both in general and in particular) from their own religious perspective. In the trial that ensues, philosophy must justify its faith in reason and its exclusion of certain elements considered essential by other religions but rejected as irrational, superstitious, irrelevant, or false by any autonomous philosophy. In presiding at the tribunal, a religious judge will question the claimed neutrality and universality of such a philosophy and ask what credentials it has for promising a way to existentially relevant truth, freedom, wisdom, salvation, and goodness.

To be understood, so that philosophy can defend its own endeavors, including its judgment about the religions, the judging religion must speak a language that philosophy can understand. It will therefore borrow thoughts and terms from the philosophers that are available in the culture of the time. Many examples of this procedure can be found in Jewish, Christian, and Muslim thought from the First to the Fifteenth century: while adopting Platonic and Stoic elements of the Greek and Hellenistic cultures, Philo, Origen, Augustine, and many others used them to distinguish their own way of existence from the philosophical forms of life of their epoch. Their appropriation certainly transformed the thoughts that had emerged in another context, but even so they tried to remain comprehensible to differently inspired philosophers. The result of their attempt was a multitude of theologies for which they often used the title *philosophia* to show its affinity with the Greek program. Aware of the impossibility of being and thinking autonomously in a rigorous sense of this word, they tried to translate their faith as much as possible into a renewed kind of philosophical language, while remaining convinced that such an enterprise could never reduce the mysterious character of their faith. At the same time, however, they did not doubt that human reason was enlightened enough to engage in a rational dialogue with the (other) philosophers, many of whom recognized their own religious allegiance.²

The relationship between Christian or Jewish or Muslim 'philosophy' on the one hand, and philosophies that claim to be autonomous, on the other, can be transformed from a trial into a dialogue when both the judging and the judged parties agree to deal with one another as respectable partners in a discussion about wisdom and the ultimate meaning of human existence in the universe. Valid observation and logical clarity are necessary conditions for such a discussion, but they are not sufficient, because the radical dimension in which they are rooted and the faith that guides their existential engagement cannot be reduced to conceptual or empiricist claims and arguments.

It is difficult for dedicated philosophers to give up the standpoint from which all things in heaven and on the earth are subjected to a universally valid and final judgment, but it is more authentically religious and truthful to recognize that such a standpoint is either too abstract to be true or too proud to be good. However, a similar judgment is true about theologians who, longing to be modern and respected by secular thinkers, accept the autonomy of philosophy as a principle of their own work. Instead of revering philosophy as a separate realm of universal truth, they should integrate and transform the proper meaning of that realm, which can thus show its theological virtuality. As a limited clarification of faith, theology is a self-conscious philosophy of religion. It tries to understand how its own thinking can throw some light

on religions (including modern philosophy as well as the faith from which it emerges or onto which it has been grafted). As a faith in search of understanding, philosophy (even in its explicitly theological version) does not entail a dictatorship, because its arguments should not be mistaken for faith itself, while faith can only be authentic if it is and remains free. The free consent of trust guides both philosophy and theology because neither of them is radical enough to be original. Thus, both are at the service of an orientation that originates and carries them, and this orientation constitutes the essence of human existence.

Universality?

To conclude, just a remark to prevent misunderstanding. What happens to the universality that modern philosophy has loudly proclaimed to be the distinguishing mark of its validity? If philosophy itself is a *faith* in search of understanding, must we then abandon all hope that universally valid truth can ever be found and communicated?

It would be preposterous to claim that such a question can be answered by a supplementary remark. What can be said is that these pages plead for another conception of universality than that of conceptually clear propositions, theses, or theorems. The universality defended here is more similar to the universality that conditions and underlies the sharing of thoughts that are expressed in different languages. All translation presupposes a silent, prelingual commonality. Would this not be a necessary presupposition for human universality? Perhaps the assumption that unity and universality can be grasped and possessed in the form of judgments and an explicit understanding of our own position is itself an idol that we should discard, if we want to be true to religion and the origins of philosophy.

Notes

1. Cf. the third part of Descartes' *Discours de la méthode*, and Adriaan T. Peperzak, 'Life, Science, and Wisdom According to Descartes,' *History of Philosophy Quarterly* 12 (1995): 133–154.
2. That 'philosophy' in Antiquity was a way of life and not an attempt to realize Descartes' program has been proved by the specialists of Greek and Hellenistic philosophy. A summary of their results can be found in Pierre Hadot's *Qu'est-ce que la philosophie antique* (Paris: Gallimard, 1995).

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