

The Four Options in Philosophy of Religion

Philosophy and Religious Belief - by Roy Clouser

The subject of religious belief has long been a fascinating matter of philosophical debate. For centuries some of the most brilliant minds the world has ever known have argued over the existence and nature of God, human destiny, and a host of other issues related to religion.

Enormous ingenuity has been expended on these arguments so that both their construction and criticism exhibit some of the keenest distinctions and deepest insights produced in the history of human thought.

It is not surprising, then, that most books and courses in the philosophy of religion follow the tack of examining these famous arguments and/or constructing new ones. For certainly no one can claim to have adequately investigated the field who has not carefully considered these arguments.

But important as these arguments are to our understanding of what is at stake in philosophy vis a vis religious belief (and vice versa), it is even more important to notice that they all rest on a common assumption which has rarely, if ever, been examined and defended. It may well be that the uncritical nature of this assumption is due, in part, to the fact that it has rarely been challenged or denied. But whatever the reason, the fact remains that no matter what sort of arguments have been constructed and no matter what conclusions they have reached, all alike have assumed that human theoretical reasoning is, by nature, neutral with respect to religious belief. It might be objected immediately that there is little wonder that this assumption has not been examined or defended since questioning it at all is tantamount to questioning the very possibility of philosophy of religion.

For the whole enterprise of philosophy of religion would collapse if it turned out that the activities of constructing and evaluating theories, gathering and interpreting evidence, etc., must themselves presuppose some religious faith. In that case arguments could exhibit a faith and draw out the consequences of it, but they could never attempt to justify or discredit a faith without begging the question. Nevertheless, this possibility remains unrefuted so long as the

neutrality assumption goes unexamined and undefended. And the fact that it affects philosophy of religion — and the rest of philosophy as well — at its fundamentals is the best reason for not leaving this assumption unexamined.

To see more clearly what is at stake here, consider the basic alternatives in general ways theoretical, thinking may be understood to relate to the religious belief. The first possible way of conceiving of the relation I will term Religious Rationalism. The essential features of this conception are that theoretical thinking is: 1) neutral with respect to religious faith, 2) the final court of appeal for the truth or falsity of religion, and 3) is able, at least in principle, to decide on the truth or falsity of any religion. This notion of Rationalism is, consequently, wider than the traditional use of that term. It includes arguments which may otherwise be typed as empiricist, positivist, pragmatic, or whatever, so long as they are presumed to

stand in those three relations to religion. This view is at least as old as Plato², and has also been held by Aristotle, Spinoza, Leibnitz, Berkeley, Hume, James and Russell, to name a few. The second possible way of conceiving the relation in question I term Religious Irrationalism. This view also sees theory construction and justification as religiously neutral, and so agrees with Rationalism on that point. But while it also agrees with Rationalism in regarding theoretical reason as the final court of appeal for all matters within reason's jurisdiction, it disagrees with Rationalism by doubting or denying that religion falls within that jurisdiction. This position is committed, then, to a partitioning of human experience into two areas which co-exist without any important point of contact; there is the rational sector of life and there is the irrational, and generally speaking they have nothing to do with each other. This position had its ancient proponents such as Protagoras, but did not gain Philosophical prominence until the work of Kant at the end of the eighteenth century. And although some defenders of Religious Irrationalism have regarded the irrational status of religion as good reason to ignore or disparage it, many others have welcomed it as a defense which puts religion beyond the pale of rational attack. Not only Kant himself took this latter attitude, but a number of theologians such as Tertullian, Kierkegaard, and Schleiermacher — in addition to the entire tradition of mysticism — have done so.

The third basic interpretation of the relation of religious belief to theoretical thinking differs in its fundamentals from both Rationalists and Irrationalists by denying what they hold in common. Often called Fideism, this third position regards the whole of

life as religiously conditioned in such a way that no element of it, not even theoretical reasoning, fails to be profoundly influenced by religious belief. On this view the activities of constructing, justifying, testing, modifying and rejecting hypotheses are never presuppositionless, and among the presuppositions of any theory are some which constitute a religious faith. It is very important to see how the preceding description of Fideism distinguishes it from Irrationalism. Often the two are confused because part of the commonly accepted meaning of "faith" includes that what is taken on faith is believed without proof. Both Fideism and Irrationalism accept this element of the meaning of "faith" but they disagree on the sense in which faith is unprovable. The Irrationalist regards having faith as a virtually groundless leap into the dark; something done not only without reason, but in defiance of reason. The Fideist, on the other hand, regards faith as unprovable in a sense analogous to that in which axioms are unprovable. Religious faiths, like axioms, are beyond proof because they constitute a basis for being rational. They are, according to Fideism, the presuppositions on the basis of which all explanatory theories are constructed, and are therefore also basic to any theoretical interpretation of what it is to be rational! Needless to say, this third basic possibility for interpreting the relation of theoretical thinking to religious belief has not received much support in philosophy. This is perhaps understandable since as we have already noted, this position entails that philosophy of religion as traditionally conceived, is not possible. Augustine appears to have flirted with this view without ever wholly accepting it, while Luther, Calvin, and Pascal seem to have held it without attempting to defend it. The position has had at least one systematic, philosophical defense, however. Between 1953 and 1955, Professor Herman Dooyeweerd of the Free University of Amsterdam published just such a defense in his major work, *A New Critique of Theoretical Thought*.⁵

Although the three ways of conceiving the relation of faith to theoretical reason just reviewed are the basic possibilities, it is well known that many thinkers have subscribed to a combination of the first and third. This combination was the result of an attempt begun soon after the rise and spread of Christianity to bring about a harmony between the claims of biblical religion on the one hand and the teachings of Greek science and philosophy on the other. Since it became the prevailing assumption on which philosophy and science were carried out in the middle ages, I will term this view Religious Scholasticism.

It should be understood, however, that this term does not refer to a particular style of philosophizing, nor to any set of doctrines.

Rather it is used to characterize any view which compartmentalizes reality into a realm in which the rationalist view is correct and a realm in which the Fideist view is correct. Philo of Alexandria, Alfarabi, Anselm, Maimonides, Aquinas, and Duns Scotus are among the most famous advocates of this view.

In the middle ages, the two sides of this Scholastic partition were called the realm of Nature and the realm of Grace. Within the first realm, reason was supposed to be religiously neutral and omniscient for deciding the acceptability of any belief. Thus the neutrality of reason was maintained but its scope limited. At the same time it was maintained that faith is the supreme source of knowledge in the super-natural realm of Grace. In the latter, reason is no more than a handmaid to understanding whatever faith shows to be the truth.

The fact that reason can operate in the realm of Grace at all, however, is indicative of the important difference between the Scholastic and the Irrationalist positions. Both divide reality into two realms so that religious faith is in some way separated from the theoretical activities involved in justifying beliefs. But for the Irrationalist the wall of separation is complete, while for the Scholastic there are important points of contact between the two realms. Thus the Scholastic holds that truth about the realm of Grace, especially the existence of God, may be proven rationally. Moreover, reason has the further task of showing that those truths of faith which are beyond rational proof are at least rationally plausible. Thus it becomes one of the chief tasks of Scholastic philosophy and theology to show that there is a harmony between what is provable by reason in the realm of nature and what is revealed to faith; at the very least there must be no contradiction between the two.

Besides the contrasts already drawn in the above characterization we may also notice a further important difference between these four positions. By the nature of its position, Fideism is committed to holding that everyone has assumptions, whether conscious or unconscious, which amount to religious belief. The Fideist therefore regards having faith as a natural component of human personality; it is something everyone does. On this view a person may have a misplaced or unconscious faith, but it is religious faith nonetheless. The Scholastic on the other hand maintains that faith is a special gift from God ("donum superadditum") which is not given to everyone. For the Scholastic, this explains why not everyone believes the things reason proves to be true about the realm of Grace. Reason can show a person, eg., that God exists,

but can't make him believe it. The Irrationalist approach also tends to see religious belief as something some people have while others do not, and so sides with Scholasticism on this point (though Irrationalists have differed widely among themselves as to the causes of faith).

It is significant, however, that Scholasticism felt obliged to take the Fideist part of its view as seriously as it did. The reasons for this can be nothing other than the claims of the Bible to the effect that religion extends to the whole of life. As the sacred scriptures of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, the biblical writings often reiterate the claim that all knowledge is founded on religious faith.⁶

In fact, there can be little doubt that if one were to take these biblical texts quite seriously, they seem to affirm the Fideist position alone.

Of course there may be dozens of specific ties between religious beliefs and theory making, but that does not preclude that there are only a few ways to interpret how they stand to one another in general.

Laws, Bk X.

Eg, Kierkegaard whose *Concluding Unscientific Postscript* is in large measure devoted to the "absurdity" of faith.

"Faith is the starting point of knowledge" (*De Trinitate* VIII 5,8) and his famous remark: "nisi credideritis non intelligitis" (*De Libero Arbitrio*, Book I, par. 4.)

Craig Press, Nutley, N. J. (3 vols, of text with a 4th vol. index).

Eg. Psalms 111:10; Proverbs 1:7, 9:10; Luke 11:52; I Corinthians 1:19-24; II Corinthians 5:17; Colossians 2:3.

The above is part of the introductory section of Roy Clouser's "The Religious A Priori of Theoretical Thought", a 111-page mimeographed Philosophy syllabus written in 1977. Dr. Clouser is Professor of Philosophy at Trenton State College in Trenton, New Jersey, 08625.