Contemporary philosophy of religion: Issues and approaches

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The following essays are presented in celebration of the publication of the fiftieth volume of the International Journal for the Philosophy of Religion. Since the publication of the first volume in 1970, there has emerged a new era in western philosophy of religion characterized by pluralism in content and method. Some philosophers identify themselves as traditional theists, often returning to their roots in medieval philosophy. Others seek either to reconstruct the God of classical theism or in some cases leave it behind altogether. Persons often associate the first with Anglo-American or analytic approaches to the philosophy of religion and the latter with Continental or phenomenological approaches to philosophy of religion. There is some justification for this. It is not unusual to see the work of a contemporary analytic philosopher of religion begin with the declaration that by God he or she means the God of classical theism. By contrast the work of a philosopher of religion in the phenomenological tradition may begin with the declaration that theism in its traditional form has lost its credibility.

The picture given above, however, over-simplifies the situation. First, significant diversity exists in both Anglo-American and Continental approaches to the philosophy of religion. Second, these approaches to the philosophy of religion tell only part of the contemporary story. There are other approaches to the philosophy of religion which cannot be classified easily under these headings. Third, in spite of striking differences among contemporary philosophers of religion, they often share a good bit of common ground. For example, many contemporary philosophers of religion reject the neo-positivist and classical foundationalist approaches to knowledge, and discussions of religious knowledge often center on religious experience or the religious dimensions of experience. There are important differences regarding theories of experience, but few philosophers of religion today limit experience to self-authenticating revelation or the empirically verifiable. There is also a growing awareness of the diversity of human experience and of the historical and interpretive dimensions of experience. These developments

* I have discussed these developments in more detail in Part Four of Twentieth-Century Western Philosophy of Religion 1900–2000 (Kluwer Academic Publishers, 2000).

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challenge claims to universal truth in religion, send philosophers in search of new conceptions of rationality and in some cases lead to new conceptions of the nature and tasks of the philosophy of religion.

One of the important developments in the philosophy of religion during the last quarter of the twentieth century traces its roots to Martin Heidegger and the phenomenological tradition. One can hardly think of Heidegger and religion without thinking of Rudolf Bultmann and Paul Tillich. Yet Heidegger's emphasis upon interpretation and his understanding of language as the house of being helped prepare the way for what has been called a hermeneutical or linguistic turn in phenomenology. In its more radical form this is called deconstruction or postmodernism and is illustrated in the work of such philosophers as Emmanuel Levinas and Jacques Derrida. Postmodernism is an expression used widely in literature, philosophy and theology during the last decades of the twentieth century to signal a rejection in various degrees of the concept of rationality associated with modern philosophy or the Enlightenment.

The first essay by John Macquarrie, 'Postmodernism in Philosophy of Religion and Theology', provides an analysis of postmodernism and its influence in contemporary philosophy and theology. Macquarrie, whose own approach to philosophical theology is influenced by Heidegger and Bultmann, identifies several characteristics of postmodernism, including the limits of the intellect, the questioning of authority, the rejection of any unified world view, and the emphasis upon difference, the particular, pluralism and desire. From his own point of view he then illustrates and critically evaluates these characteristics in the work of three postmodern philosophers, Levinas, Jean-François Lyotard and Derrida and three postmodern theologians, Mark Taylor, Graham Ward and Jean-Luc Marion.

Adriaan Peperzak, the author of the second essay, 'Philosophy-Religion-Theology', is also indebted to recent continental philosophy. Defining the religious dimension of human existence in a broad way to mean the deepest dimension of human life in which all other dimensions are rooted, Peperzak argues that the religious dimension is a necessary and basic topic of philosophy, that philosophy itself is a kind of faith, and that if philosophy proclaims itself autarchic, it is a religion that must look down upon other religions as deficient forms of its own truth. From this perspective he challenges the modern self-conception of philosophy and argues that other religions can in turn criticize the impossibility of philosophy's faith in its autarchy and the arrogance that follows from it. Peperzak analyzes some relations between faith and thought in philosophy, philosophy of religion and theology and argues for a form of universality different from that professed by modern philosophy.
During much of the twentieth century, religion was relegated by many to the margins of the so-called modern political and intellectual worlds. Religion, however, has emerged on the geopolitical stage of the late twentieth-century as a significant force leading many to challenge an overly simplistic separation of the worlds of the religious and non-religious. In his article, ‘Of Miracles and Special Effects’, Hent de Vries argues that the narrative of Western ‘secularist’ modernity has obscured the fact that in most of its historical forms the concept of the political has to some extent always been dependent upon the religious. He is particularly concerned with what he identifies as an intrinsic and structural relationship between religion and the new media, and the transformative changes we are witnessing today. His study of miracle in relation to special effects provides a concrete example to illustrate this. Starting out from a discussion of Jacques Derrida’s recent essay, ‘Faith and Knowledge’, de Vries investigates the structural resemblances and differences between the miracle and the special effect and sketches out the place and function of religion in relation to the new technological media.

Analytic philosophers of religion trace their twentieth century roots to the new realism that characterized much British and American philosophy in the early part of the century. Since the 1960s, however, many analytic philosophers have called into question classical foundationalism and the evidentialist challenge to religious belief in the work of such philosophers as W.K. Clifford, Bertrand Russell, and Antony Flew. Some of these philosophers are classified as moderate foundationalists while others, who are more closely indebted to the later Wittgenstein, are often called anti-foundationists. Among the leading so-called moderate foundationalists is William Alston. Alston argues that a person may be justified in holding certain beliefs about God based on his or her direct experience or perception of God. Given what appears to be the incompatibility of perceptual religious beliefs formed in different religions, however, questions arise concerning the reliability or rationality of different religious practices and the closely connected issues of religious exclusivism and religious tolerance. In his essay, ‘Religious Diversity and Religious Toleration’, Philip Quinn discusses the work of Alston and related thinkers and challenges their tendencies towards religious exclusivism. Abstracting arguments from Pierre Bayle and Immanuel Kant, Quinn makes a connection between discussions of religious diversity in religious epistemology and discussions of religious diversity in moral and political philosophy. He argues that religious diversity reduces the epistemic status of religious exclusivism and intolerance, and makes it possible for a person to be justified in aspiring to be religious while living fully within a religiously pluralistic cultural environment.
Many contemporary analytic philosophers of religion are committed to traditional Jewish or Christian theism and this has helped stimulate interest in a diversity of topics associated with theistic faith and belief. The problem of evil has proven to be particularly acute for traditional theists and it has been the focus of much discussion in recent analytic philosophy of religion. In addressing this problem analytic philosophers have often explored medieval and other classical texts. William Wainwright’s article, ‘Theological Determinism and the Problem of Evil: Are Arminians Any Better Off?’, plumbs the work of Jonathan Edwards in an effort to better understand contemporary debates concerning freedom, determinism and the problem of evil. Wainwright maintains that Edwards’ theological determinism aggravates the problem of evil in three ways. It appears to make God the author of sin, exposes God to charges of insincerity and raises questions about God’s justice. Wainwright argues that Edwards is correct in thinking that Arminianism is exposed to many of the same difficulties, but that his idea of God’s justice inflicting infinite punishment upon persons whose actions have been determined by God is indefensible and may not be a difficulty for Arminianism.

The apparent incompatibility between divine foreknowledge and human freedom is another problem that has haunted the theistic tradition for many centuries and has received almost unprecedented attention in recent analytic philosophy of religion. In his article, ‘The Foreknowledge Conundrum’, William Hasker provides a survey and analysis of several classical and contemporary efforts to solve the problem of the incompatibility between comprehensive, infallible divine foreknowledge and libertarian free will, focusing in particular upon those solutions most actively considered by philosophers during the last three decades of the twentieth century. Concluding that none of the proposed solutions to the problem is fully satisfying, Hasker raises the question, whether theological incompatibilism might be less inimical to traditional theism than some have supposed. In this context he calls attention to ‘open theism’, a recent movement within evangelical Protestantism which, based upon its revised conception of God and of God’s relationship with the world, affirms the incompatibility of divine foreknowledge and free will. While admitting that it is too soon to draw conclusions about the effects of this movement, Hasker suggests that at a minimum it demonstrates that one cannot simply assume that theological incompatibilism is inimical to Biblical faith and traditional Christian theology.

Thomism is the expression applied since the fourteenth century to philosophers whose thinking has its foundation in the thought of St. Thomas Aquinas. The expression Neo-Thomism is sometimes used to refer to the revival of Thomism which began in the middle of the nineteenth century
and was later officially endorsed by the Roman Catholic Church. The aim of this revival was not merely a restatement of Thomas’ philosophy and theology, but an accurate understanding of the permanent truth of the principles of his thought that could be applied to contemporary thought. This has led to a re-vitalization of the Thomistic tradition as some have brought Thomas’ thought into conversation with other contemporary philosophical movements and others have challenged traditional conceptions of how to read his thought. In his essay, ‘Theology in Philosophy: Revisiting the Five Ways’, Fergus Kerr calls into question what he calls the standard reading of Aquinas’ arguments for the existence of God. On the standard view, Aquinas is understood to be a good example of those who think that the existence of God can be inferred from natural features of the world. Kerr challenges this reading of Aquinas and the general conception of philosophy of religion that arises from it. Reading the text in context, argues Kerr, suggests how theologically determined the philosophical arguments are. Thomas’ approach in the Summa Theologiae, he suggests, may be read not as turning away from the Bible, choosing Aristotle and conducting foundationalist apologetics, but as continuing more than a thousand years of reading the Vulgate in the light of a certain neo-Platonism.

Process philosophy is widely understood today to refer to the kind of realistic metaphysics associated with Alfred North Whitehead and Charles Hartshorne and those influenced by them. Although not limited to American thinkers, its greatest impact in recent years has been in the United States and in particular among those who declare themselves to be neo-classical or process theists. In general process theists are committed to the view that whatever exists in reality should be characterized in terms of processes rather than substances or things, and that we should look for God in the world process itself. They argue for a close relationship between philosophy and the natural sciences and understand God less in terms of timeless perfection and more in terms of temporal becoming. It is not their intention to deny the perfection of God, but to insist that perfect knowledge and love require involvement in the world.

In his article, ‘Process Philosophy of Religion’, David Ray Griffin summarizes ways in which he has sought to employ process metaphysics to address several topics, including the problem of evil and the relation between science and religion. Process philosophy’s panentheistic view of God seeks to combine features of both pantheism and theism. This results in a rejection of creatio ex nihilo in the strict sense and a rejection of the traditional idea of God’s omnipotence which leads to the traditional problem of evil. Creative power is understood to be inherent in the world as well as God, and God’s power is understood to be persuasive rather than coercive. With
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