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.

*E. Th. Long (ed.), Issues in Contemporary Philosophy of Religion* 
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, Archimedian 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, 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 transcendent consciousness or as a trans- or superhuman 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.
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