

### **What is Philosophy of Religion and How Ought We Study Religion?**

One question strikes anyone commencing on this subject: namely, what is philosophy of religion? Why isn't this called theology? In order to answer this question, we should make a comparison with other subfields of philosophy. If this were a course in epistemology or the study of knowledge, we would identify a subject matter: what is knowledge, and then work through a manageable number of standard problems: what is knowledge, what is the relationship between thought and the objects of thought, etc. Next, we would examine a number of theories that claim to provide solutions to these problems, and examine them in terms of consistency and coherence to determine whether these theories are internally coherent and consistent and if they, indeed, provide solutions to the questions. Typically, most introductory level courses in philosophy of religion take this approach. However, since this is a study of religion, this complicates matters.

First, there is a long tradition of internally understanding religion for the purpose of maintaining the understanding of fundamental doctrines various organized religions have as the foundation of their beliefs. Second, there is a long external tradition, in the West, of philosophically and, later, scientifically, challenging the claims made by organized religions. Third, the subject matter of religion is vast. It is not clear that there is a specific subject matter identifiable as is the case in other subfields of philosophy. Here, the connection to the nature of philosophy itself is similar to the case of religion.

In a typical philosophy of religion course, we would attempt to identify the vast nature of religion, then attempt to identify certain central problems and identify concepts and theories that attempt to explain these problems. Then, by using the tools of logic, analyze them in terms of coherence and consistency in order to determine the validity of these theories. In fact, we would be ignoring many of the methodologies used by those in the field of religious studies. I think this is a grave error. Religious texts, or for that matter those religions that do not claim to have sacred texts, are not written for the purpose of explaining the doctrines of the faith. We may do a grave disservice to our understanding of the nature of religion if we approach these texts from the standpoint of pure philosophy. However, there is a definite overlap between the claims made by those attempting to clarify revealed texts, and the claims made about the nature of truth and knowledge and the values associated with action. In other words, properly equipped, the possibility of a philosophical investigation of religion is possible. What it will require of us is to make use of these other tools typically unused by philosophers, but used by those in the fields of linguistics, history, and religious studies.

Kessler introduces us to a crucial distinction: the insider's perspective and the outsider's perspective. Kessler defines the insider's perspective as the view that someone who participates in a particular religious tradition. This sort of study presupposes religious commitment and promotes an understanding that will lead to greater commitment. It promotes the interests and furthers the causes of a specific religious organization. The outsider's perspective is that of the academic study of religion. Students stand outside all religious traditions and study religions from the viewpoint of the methods and standards associated with the secular academy. The outsider's viewpoint does not presuppose any kind of religious commitment, although it does presuppose a commitment to the standards of the academy. Its goal is neither to increase nor to decrease an individual's religious faith, although it may have a profound effect on that faith.

This distinction is extremely helpful in understanding the goals and objectives of philosophy of religion as opposed to and as different from theology. What we are trying to understand is how religions function, provide meaning and coherency to individual's lives, and whether religious language or religious claims to knowledge relate to truth. These notions are loaded, because all religions claim to be the sole vehicle for truth. We will have more to say about this notion in future classes.

In order to pursue the academic study of religion, several concepts come into play: openness, honesty, critical intelligence, careful reading and listening, and tolerance.

Kessler defines openness as the ability to be always ready to be surprised. It is a constant willingness to regard tentatively the categories, classification systems, labels, and names with which we pigeonhole religious phenomena. We must realize that they are revisable and incomplete. This parallels the notion of revisability in scientific work.

Honesty involves responsibility to yourself and others and the subject matter. By responsibility, we understand it to mean the ability to respond in a nonprejudicial way to what you learn. To be prejudiced is different than being biased. Prejudice means prejudgment. Bias means a particular slant, outlook, or perspective. Even the honest person is biased because human beings see, of necessity, what they take to be real from a certain viewpoint.

To be critical involves a number of intellectual skills including both analysis and synthesis. In analysis we seek to take apart, to break up wholes into basic elements. Synthesis means putting things back together. What we are looking for here is what are the explanations to account for how a religious text, say, was constructed and what meaning there is for it being put together this way rather than some other way.

This leads us to reading and listening. What I like to imagine in doing religious studies is that I am an alien from some other planet and I have been sent to this one to uncover what religion is. This is a completely foreign idea to my culture, and what my task is, simply said, is the anthropologist's task. Understanding. This means that I must listen to what others are saying and take them seriously. I also have to adopt a different way of reading. I must read these works as if I have never seen them before.

Sympathetic tolerance is another concept that comes into play here. We must be open to the notion that even though other people understand the religious differently than we do, this does not immediately mean that they are wrong and we are right.