

Editorial

Two Types of Philosophy of Religion: Neutral Cognition versus Lived Experience

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As a discipline taught and debated in universities and seminaries, philosophy of religion has traditionally been understood as a form of apologetics: that is, it pursues with concentrated effort what proof for the existence of God the human mind can mobilize with recourse strictly to reason and logic. While the term itself (“philosophy of religion”) may originate with Hegel’s *Vorlesungen über die Philosophie der Religion* delivered as a set of lectures in the 1820s and early 1830s (Hegel 1984), other antecedent vocabularies such as “theology illumined by the natural light of reason”, which serve as a preamble to faith (Aquinas) (Aquinas 1948, Part I, Q.2, a.2), or “rational theology”, which is at once speculative and moral (Kant 1996, p. 346), have designated the same intellectual task of adducing proofs exploited in service of the mind’s cognitive journey to God.

But does philosophy of religion need to occupy only cognitive terrain? Can it develop resources to discuss and celebrate not the contradiction to, but the foundation of, the intellect? Perhaps the way of the heart, the way of lived experience, can serve the purpose of the reorientation of the discipline, without implying we must discard the faculty of reason. David Hume discussed divine revelation and its limits in his own *Dialogues on Natural Religion* indicating titularly perhaps yet another expression that reflects a family resemblance among a series of terms involved in the discipline we know as philosophy of religion (i.e., “natural religion”). Hume also wisely divides philosophy into one of two trajectories that can, I am inclined to suggest, with equal justice be mapped onto philosophy of religion. He writes that philosophy reduces to two “species”, in which one emphasizes a “feel” that evokes in us a disposition ready for action or the other a cognition that “makes us understand” and hence strengthens our intellectual grasp of the question before us (Hume 2007, p. 5). Some thinkers in the tradition of philosophy of religion emphasize, as a matter of degree, either feeling/action or cognitive structures of an intellectual tradition.

I wish to signal here, as is evident in this Special Issue, that philosophy of religion operates within the parameters of the embodied heart lived in a particular context; hence, it can prioritize the former over the latter, the species of the heart over the head, the species of lived experience over argument, and, finally, the species of contemplative practice over divisive debate about an abstract first cause. By the same token, Paul Tillich’s famed essay “Two Types of Philosophy Religion” resonates strongly here with my own preference for the logic of experiential ultimacy rooted in the heart. In that well-known essay, Tillich proposes that in the Christian tradition, we may well parse two distinct paths to God: the (i) cognitive model meets nothing more than a “stranger” or abstract first principle set in contradistinction to the (ii) existential model that opens up intimate self-discovery of myself in relationship with a personal God. The first type greets a stranger, whereas the second species (let us call it species after Hume) overcomes estrangement in order to “discover himself when he discovers God.”¹ The generation of authors writing after Tillich ignored his call to adopt the existential proposal, opting instead for a strictly cognitive approach whereby objective proofs for the existence of a divine being are accumulated in scholastic-like fashion, quite apart from interpersonal or lived dynamics that make such a divine being meaningful at all.



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The species of philosophy of religion that arises from the heart and lived experience, embodied in many of the essays here, thus goes against the grain of the discipline, as it has taken root in the course of the last several decades (1960s to the present). Gleaned from the publications of Richard Swinburne, Alvin Plantinga, William Lane Craig, and, more recently, Graham Oppy,² the question concerning the purpose of the discipline lies within the power of the author to conduct a neutral investigation or objective analysis of the truth (or falsity) of God's existence: the priority of rational demonstration over lived experience (i.e., head over heart). Even more recent calls for attentive analyses of "lived religion" (with the aid of qualitative interviews of ordinary religious practitioners) persist in the conviction that religion as it is actually lived concentrates on a "reason-giving" cognitive system. That is, if we simply interview ordinary individuals who practice their religion, we shall see they can adduce several reasons for why they believe whatever creed they adhere to.³ We shall see they can "argue" for their religious disposition, for their set of credal beliefs. I disagree firmly. The model of lived experience, as it is truly lived, for which I advocate, would make appeal to the heart, which summons the noncognitive experience that phenomenology has studied so carefully from Husserl up to the present French cadre of thinkers involved in the "theological turn" of phenomenology. I am persuaded interviews would correspond to this style of lived religion (but that is work to be conducted on another day).

To make clearer the model of the heart, I shall invoke an exemplar definition with which I disagree. John Hick, a pioneer of religious studies as a discipline as it broke away from theology in 1960s, writes in a textbook introduction, that

Philosophy of religion is, accordingly, not a branch of theology (meaning by 'theology' the systematic formulation of religious beliefs), but a branch of philosophy. It studies the concepts and belief systems of the religions as well as the prior phenomena of religious experience and the activities of worship and meditation on which these belief systems rest and out of which they have arisen. It is not itself a part of the religious realm but is related to it as, for example, the philosophy of law is related to the realm of legal phenomena and to juridical concepts and modes of reasoning, or the philosophy of art to artistic phenomena and to the categories and methods of aesthetic discussion.⁴

I could not disagree more with Hick's assessment of the form and function of philosophy of religion. Why must its disciplinary boundaries demand of necessity that an investigation be so disengaged from disinterested in or spectatorial of a religious tradition that it be "not itself part of the religious realm" or be "prior to religious experience and the activities of worship and meditation?" Obviously, we can investigate religion without practicing that religion (and without entering into activities of worship), but such a retreat from the "religious realm" does not guarantee objectivity or neutrality, as Hick presumes. Perhaps participation could enrich the skillful approach to theoretical analysis. Divorcing theory and practice, or keeping them separate, as Hick carelessly advances, seems neither helpful nor possible.

In the above, Hick presumes parallels with other disciplines. Yet, even those disciplines are not clear-cut in the distinction between theory and practice. For example, while one need not be an artist to write about art, there is nevertheless an assumption that art urges feelings of delight, contemplation, and awe in those who behold it (why write about art at all if it did not?) and, further, that such an exchange between the artwork and those who enjoy it is worthy of discussion and debate. The lines drawn between art critic, artist, and those members of the public of enjoy the aesthetic of art become blurred or, at least, can become so. I could make a case that a practicing lawyer would be all the more incisive a scholar of legal philosophy. I am persuaded in philosophy of religion that the same prospect of blurring distinctions between the professional philosopher and practitioner of a specific religion can and does occur (while not necessitating that it become so) and that such blurring is honest, just as an atheist seeking to debunk proofs for God is honest about authorial intent. Hick informs the reader that the impartial or disinterested spectator role operates in the domain of pure theory, if and only if theory remains separate from the

domain of practice. This recalls the impoverished approaches described by Hume's purely cognitive species of philosophy or Tillich's "stranger" model.

A confession I wish to make: a purely cognitive approach is never purely cognitive or disinterested. Hence, standard bearers of the cognitive model, like openly self-professed Christian philosophers William Lane Craig and Richard Swinburne, naturally invite an equal and opposite reaction, that of atheistic philosophy of religion, carried out in an identical mold. If the tools of neutral reason and objective analysis (which I do not believe exist, just so I am clear) can be used in favor of God's existence, why not the reverse? Before Richard Dawkins and Daniel Dennett and Graham Oppy, the 1970s and 1980s witnessed the emergence of powerful critiques of theism, in the writings of J.L. Mackie and George Smith, who both take meticulous care to utilize objective tools of reason to disprove the existence of God.⁵

The question invoked over and over again, for Western and usually Christian philosophy of religion, is whether God's existence can be "proven" or "disproven" according to the canons of reason, dispassionate analysis, and the suspension of belief in the supernatural (again, impartial spectating is assumed to be the preferable stance, and it is presumed to be an attitude an author can adopt). Yet, another way, another path, has opened up before us with the advent of phenomenology and existentialism, what Tillich, and his contemporary Karl Rahner, would call the "interested" or "metaphysical" (or ontological) approach to philosophy of religion. I prefer this path given it is simply honest about the human condition: we are always already interested, always already creatures who take a stance. How might reframing the discussion in this honest manner reframe the structure of the human being? At issue is thus: the very structure of the human condition, not as neutral, but as impassioned.

Rahner, born in the 1950–1960s existentialist atmosphere of European philosophy, in his early work wrote that human beings operate in every aspect of life within the plane of hermeneutics and facticity, or what Rahner depicts as the self-spiritual openness to the unlimited interpretive stance we occupy toward the horizon of all things, the "excess of things" all around us. The a priori transcendental structure of this "metaphysical anthropology", for Rahner, must constitute a finite openness to an infinite divine if human subjectivity is to enjoy the "a capacity of dynamic self-movement of the spirit, given a priori with human nature, directed toward all possible objects." (Rahner 1969, p. 59). Structurally speaking, the human condition is a spirit that display an instinctive desire to transcend itself toward all possible objects. This structural openness, in turn, dwells within a larger horizon of the unlimited (e.g., of all possible thing), which always remains a possibility as the infinite depth dimension that frames any single particular object. That is, if the human subject is truly open to all possible objects without limit or exception, then one possible horizon of experience must be the unlimited as such, the absolute who remains unrestricted (or unconditioned) by any law or precept that could be outlined in advance. Because we are therefore open to all possible objects, we have become subjects who are vulnerable and disposed to all possible forms of revelation (even divine revelation).

While Rahner never once claims we necessarily experience the unlimited absolute who is given the name God or absolute mystery, we must permanently occupy an existential space (given a priori) that supports this as a possibility. This transcendental structure nurtures the open-ended space where the unconditioned/infinite may make an appearance within us. So, crucial to our identity as spiritual beings is this structural feature that the radical openness to the infinite is an essential ingredient of the human condition: "The only thing which makes him a man is that he is forever on the road to God whether he is clearly aware of the fact or not, whether he wants to be or not, for he is always the infinite openness to the finite for God" (Rahner 1969, p. 66). We all have an "ear that is open to any word whatsoever that may proceed from the mouth of the Eternal" (Rahner 1969, p. 68). This constitutes a working from below, from the human condition to revelation, or from the finite to the infinite—here, philosophy of religion prepares the ground for a lived experience of a divine revelation (as a possibility). Therein lies the existential model that

Rahner proposes: the metaphysical anthropology that imparts into each of us a structural feature that illuminates God as a possibility within the horizon of experience.

For this reason, philosophy of religion as I conceive it need not situate itself primarily in the cognitive space in which the formal exchange between question and answer occurs, a space opened up by the analytic tradition of Plantinga, Swinburne, and others (though I am not against aspects of Aquinas's scholastic method, which I use in the classroom as teaching tool regularly); nor does philosophy of religion need to concern itself with the task of formal syllogistic logic, abstract instruction, or narrow scrutiny of absolute foundations some philosophers implore on behalf of what Hume calls "understanding". In contrast, the type of philosophy of religion I wish to promote is one that occupies instead the subjective and lived terrain of testimony, or witness, or contemplative action, a type that the continental tradition of phenomenology and existentialism tends to value. While being an impartial spectator may be the goal of mathematics or symbolic logic or metaphysical realism, the theologically inclined philosopher guarantees nothing more than the dominion of lived experience to be enlarged within the world of a possible revelation of divine grace and love.

The invitation to study the spiritual heart as it is "lived" need not illustrate a neutral argument or timeless moral foundation. Such appeals to objective reason and neutral rationality fail to grasp the kind of heartfelt self I wish to encourage and the style of philosophy of religion I see in general on display in this Special Issue. The urgings and longings of the heart, formulated in the grammar of time and culture, in the medium of the body, and in the tonality of affection, open up the enduring subjective pursuit of self-discovery, that is, our journey to know and feel happiness, wholeness, and healing made manifest in the mood of love and, finally, expressed as the openness to a possible divine revelation.

The type of intellectual appetite conceived in the pages below is one that satiates the heart's desire for purposeful, ordered, and even coherent articulations of the lived narrative of divine grace and spiritual love (open to all religious traditions). We know so that we may act from the heart. We conduct theological explorations so that we may become who we want to be, namely, an embodied creature deeply informed by and acquainted with the habit of love who is at once moved by grace and elevated into a healing relationship with others. In this performance of body and spirit, we aspire "to be" in time more fully and consistently a self who imbibes love, attains happiness, and empathically connects with others. In short, we make the world, and it is a world that harmonizes difference in and through the power of love—as a love open to a possible revelation of a God who is love.

Finally, what of proof? I affirm a tradition of thinking that discards the need to prove that we see in theologically inspired phenomenologists like Robert Sokolowski when remarking that phenomenology "is not meant to establish Christian belief but to be involved in its understanding." (Sokolowski 1994, p. 11). Equally, we see it in phenomenologically inspired theologians like Etienne Gilson when contending that philosophy of religion (from an Augustinian perspective here but no doubt also from a Thomistic perspective) is an active searching for the living God and that "our task is not so much to prove Him as to find Him" (Gilson 1961, p. 104). And, I also affirm the multireligious reality that other paths, from Buddhist to Muslim, from Jain to Hindu, may provide richly visible signs of spiritual life and love and that philosophy of religion can branch out beyond the confines of Christian lived experience.⁶

Let me pause simply to review for the reader the contributions to this Special Issue (which come from overwhelmingly from a Christian perspective; however, again, other traditions would be needed to round out the model of lived experience). Moving in order from the top to the bottom, the first essay introduces the Special Issue, which is entitled "What is Philosophy of Religion? Definitions, Motifs, New Directions". Here, Andreas Nordlander, perhaps the most schooled in continental philosophy of all the contributors, investigates the widely read secular manifesto *All Things Shining* (coauthored by Hubert Dreyfuss and Sean D. Kelly) from a phenomenological point of view (with a nod to Husserl

and Merleau-Ponty in particular). Invoking the enactive structure of phenomenology where meaning as such arises in the interaction between kinetic subject and environment, Nordlander sketches the subjective disposition needed to find enchantment in an age of disenchantment, in a fuller existential mode than what is on offer in *All Things Shining*.

Ekin Kaynak Iltar et al. reprimand and rehabilitate two patristic women thinkers in the context of a Christian philosophy of religion. Embodied and attentive to gender, history, and language, this essay shows that careful historical scholarship can unearth the philosophical riches of neglected resources like Saint Monica (Augustine’s mother) and Saint Macrina, the sister of Gregory of Nyssa and Basil of Caesarea. Samuel Loncar discusses the myth of secular philosophy, or what I above call the myth of neutral, detached spectating. Outlining the professionalization of the discipline of philosophy of religion, Loncar observes incisively that it remains an embattled field of debate that operates in a space between seminaries, philosophy departments, and self-consciously secular departments in the study of religion. Acknowledging the Christian roots of the field, Loncar is rightly critical of the narrow borders of the analytic tradition, which suffers from amnesia about its theological roots.

Another article on the Eastern Orthodox tradition stimulates further debate about this neglected Christian tradition and its relationship to philosophy. Here, Olga Chistyakova and Denis Chistyakov argue that an underlying philosophy is visible in an array of the greatest of Byzantine thinkers, from Maximus the Confessor to John Climacus to Symeon the New Theologian. Moving to the medieval apex of philosophy of religion, Michael Torres discovers for the reader what a Thomistic account of philosophy of religion would look like. Interesting forays into the definition and meaning of religion are evident here, as well as a compelling distinction between natural theology and philosophy of religion.

The last two entries introduce the readership to more specialist conversations within the philosophy of religion. The penultimate article, penned by Canadian philosopher Max Schaefer, tackles the complementary interrelationship between Michel Henry and Giorgio Agamben (which assumes some background knowledge of both). More constructive in tone, and therefore less interested in reflection on the “field” of philosophy of religion, the essay is an excellent example of continental philosophy of religion in action. The final essay addresses, from Benedict XVI’s point of view, the uniquely Roman Catholic framework of public culture; again, with minimal reflection on philosophy of religion as such, Mary Frances McKenna takes us on a journey through a dialogical structure of the former Pope’s philosophically informed theology.

Conflicts of Interest: The author declares no conflict of interest.

Notes

- ¹ (Tillich 1970, p. 10). He labels the cognitive, abstract version the “cosmological way” and the interpersonal way the “ontological way”.
- ² I am thinking here of the recent Oppy (2014).
- ³ Timothy Knepper’s focus on lived religion is refreshing, but the ultimately seeks out reasons-giving practices in lived religion, which I take it were presumed as religion being primarily cognitive. See (Knepper 2021, pp. 61–72).
- ⁴ (Hick 1990, pp. 1–2). To be completely fair to Hick, their later essay inspires much of what I suggest here (religion as rooted in feeling and embodied action) as a counter to their cognitive, spectating model. See their later brilliant essay (Hick 1997, pp. 132–35). Joseph S. O’Leary also connects religion as a hermeneutic enterprise linked with the Buddhist concept of skillful means; see (O’Leary 2019, pp. 140–60).
- ⁵ See the classic Mackie (1982); also Smith (1979). Smith writes, for example, on p. 99, “Explicit atheism is the consequence of a commitment to rationality—the conviction that man’s mind is fully competent to know the facts of reality, and that no aspect of the universe is closed to rational scrutiny. Atheism is merely a corollary, a specific application, of one’s commitment to reason”. The canon of “reason” is never quite defined but rather assumed.
- ⁶ This is the case made by Schilbrack (2014).

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