

INTRODUCTION: PHILOSOPHY OF RELIGION IN THE NEW STYLE

Is it time that we lost our faith in philosophy of religion? That discipline, which is sometimes referred to as 'natural theology', is still often associated, if not identified, with the traditional philosophical arguments concerning the existence and nature of God. As the existentialist theologian John Macquarrie succinctly expresses this narrow interpretation of its purpose, it is 'to supply rational proof of the reality of those matters with which theology deals.'¹ Many philosophers have attempted to answer the old question 'What has Athens to do with Jerusalem?'² (theologians having mostly tended to treat it as a less urgent matter), and their answers have often taken the form of elaborate systems of philosophy of religion, thus narrowly interpreted.³ As a work of philosophy of religion, this book implicitly engages with Tertullian's question in a rather different way, in a way that demands a broader interpretation of the terms 'philosophy of religion' and 'natural theology'. The implied answer to my opening question, therefore, is a qualified negative.

I shall spare the reader from yet another detailed criticism of the traditional arguments; as Macquarrie remarks on such overfamiliar analysis, 'it has been done again and again.'⁴ Here, I simply record my agreement with his two main reasons for being dissatisfied by that general programme. The first reason is that the traditional attempts to prove or justify God's existence by appeal to evidence and rational argument are doomed to philosophical failure. Just as there are continued attempts to restate the old arguments in newer philosophical terms, so the counterarguments made famous by Hume and Kant continue to be revised in the light of those restatements.⁵ The two Enlightenment thinkers seem to have dealt blows to the traditional arguments from which they have never fully recovered, at least not yet. As a result, it has become difficult to believe that anything short of a genuinely new kind of argument (as opposed to an old one, revised and adapted) could succeed in proving the existence of God or in demonstrating that it is more rational to accept that God is real than it is to deny God's reality. It will suffice here to quote Macquarrie's succinct disposal of the main arguments which justifies his suggestion, and my own, that we should transcend this confined vision of what philosophy of religion is.⁶

As far as the ontological proof is concerned, the point that existence is not a predicate seems to me to count decisively against it; as regards the *a posteriori* arguments, it has to be admitted both that the evidence itself is ambiguous and that the attempt to move from empirical evidences to transempirical conclusions involves a logical jump that has never been satisfactorily explained.⁷

The second reason for being dissatisfied with philosophy of religion, narrowly construed, is associated with the sense that the religious or theological claim to faith in God is not really, solely or primarily, as advocates of the narrow interpretation have been assuming, a belief that a hypothesis is true. This reason is expressed in Macquarrie's claim that '[t]he God who is the conclusion of an argument ... is not the God who is worshipped in religion.'⁸ This point echoes, *inter alia*, Hume's famous and probably ironic statement at the end of his treatment 'Of Miracles', in Section 10 of the *Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, that '[o]ur most holy religion is founded on *faith*, not on reason', a statement that has itself also been echoed in John Cottingham's recent attempt to downplay what he calls 'doxastic freight' as characteristic of the main, substantial difference between theism and atheism.⁹ Even if we imagine, for the sake of argument, a scenario in which the traditional arguments for God's existence were found to be persuasive, the imagined consequences are difficult to identify as having anything to do with religious faith on any conventional understanding. The main consequence would presumably be that all rational beings would accept the existence of God either as proven or as the most reasonable explanation of the existence and nature of the observable world. It would in that case be irrational to reject the proposition that God exists or less rational to deny than to affirm it. But what would have been established, in this imagined scenario, is nothing like the solid rational foundation for religious commitment for which philosophy of religion has traditionally aimed. All that would have been established is the truth of a scientific or logical hypothesis: that an omniscient, omnipotent, benevolent being is very likely to exist or, logically, must exist. Any *religious* commitment beyond this (for example, the kind of commitment reflected by engaging in religious practices) would remain an act of faith. And if the truth of Classical Theism were established in this way, it is doubtful that the members of any religious group would or could worship this Classical god as their own. Surely, when it comes to the question of what God is, most members of such groups are already committed to rather more than the bland theism, which, on the narrow interpretation in question, a successful philosophy of religion could, at best, establish.

For both these reasons, Macquarrie (whose major systematic work, *Principles of Christian Theology*, was published back in the 1960s) pessimistically describes as 'ruinous' the condition of what he prefers to call 'natural theology in the old style'.¹⁰ He believes that natural theology, so construed, should be abandoned –

and, on this, I share his opinion. But, as he recognizes, sole reliance on 'revealed' theology, natural theology's supposed alternative, would be equally undesirable, if not more so; rational supports are necessary if theology is to be protected, and indeed distinguished, from illusion and superstition.¹¹ As is well known, Freud found the rational arguments in favour of religions, their holy books and teachings wanting but he also deftly demonstrated the circularity of the appeal to revelation for which one might be tempted to reach as an apparently self-sufficient alternative. If we cannot convincingly argue for the existence of God as the supposed author of religious texts and source of religious teachings, we might be inclined to appeal to revelation instead. But, as Freud pointed out, 'that assertion itself forms part of the teachings that are to be examined as to their credibility – and no proposition, as we know, can prove itself'.¹² Taken together, the lack of convincing rational arguments and the circularity of the appeal to revelation imply, for Freud, the inescapably superstitious and illusory character of religion. Whatever we make of his conclusion, we can be sure that the non-rational (if not irrational) nature of the appeal to revelation, together with its circularity, guarantees that it will be no replacement for natural theology in the old style.

Fortunately, then, Macquarrie advocates and develops a 'natural theology in the new style' that provides rational support for religion, bridging the gap between ordinary experience and faith. It takes over, to that extent, old-style natural theology's basic function but without the attendant weaknesses: it owes to the phenomenological method, is descriptive rather than purely deductive and attends not just to the rational arguments but also to the conviction that underlies and motivates them. It takes seriously the measure of participation involved in religious faith, a feature that might enable it to be a far more effective apologetic tool than abstract argument alone. Finally, it is existential rather than purely rational, taking the concrete, lived condition of human existence, which undoubtedly includes a rational dimension, as its starting point.¹³ Taken together, these features of natural theology in the new style actually entail, for Macquarrie, the blurring, if not the abandonment of the old, traditional distinction between 'natural' and 'revealed' kinds of theology.¹⁴ If God is the source of everything, this must include knowledge or experience of God's self. Not only, therefore, could there be no 'unaided' experience of God, so that all theology must claim to be 'revealed' in that sense, but even all 'revealed' theology must come to us via our human faculties of apprehension and is, to that extent, 'natural'. The resultant conception of natural theology is not of a second route to religious experience alongside God's self-revelation, nor does it reflect the desire to undermine the role of rational reflection in critically testing religious experience. Rather, it is of an appeal to the general possibility of revelation, or religious experience, which is accessible to any being with our human faculties, including, but not limited to, our rational ones.¹⁵ Towards the beginning of his Gifford

Lectures, Macquarrie describes this definition of natural theology as broader than the one pejoratively held by Hume and Kant but as no less consonant with the terms of Lord Gifford's foundation:

When he says that the subject is to be treated as a 'natural science', he cannot mean that God is to be treated as a phenomenon of nature, but that the enquiry is to be carried out by the natural human faculties that are common to all, without appeal to some special source of knowledge. This is how the word 'natural' was traditionally understood in the expression 'natural theology'.¹⁶

Tertullian's question, it seems, will not go away – nor, in my view, should it – but the answers that continue to be provided by practitioners of revised and updated forms of traditional philosophy of religion remain as philosophically and religiously unsatisfying as Macquarrie found them nearly half a century ago – and for the very same reasons. Few philosophers have taken up the gauntlet and considered the possibility of a broader, and perhaps more satisfying, kind of philosophy of religion in response both to Tertullian's question and to criticisms like the ones Macquarrie skilfully summarizes. This is perhaps forgivable on the grounds that, if familiarity does indeed breed contempt, it presumably does so as much in philosophy as in other spheres of human life; the philosophical arguments in defence of old-style natural theology are well-worn, after all. And we may find it reasonable to forgive philosophers who continue valiantly in the attempt to rebuff the criticisms of old-style natural theology when there is a clear need for something that fulfils its basic function yet, for all the criticisms, no obvious positive proposal for a more satisfactory kind of programme with which it might be replaced. Although Macquarrie, who was one of the first scholars to make Heidegger's philosophy available in English, helped to pioneer the application to religion of the existential phenomenological style of philosophizing, his own positive proposal concerning philosophy of religion has been neglected and has remained undeveloped.

This book is intended to serve as one, belated (or overdue) instance of a new kind of philosophy of religion, what Macquarrie calls a 'natural theology in the new style'. It attempts to show, in the process, what a revised, broadened form of philosophy of religion, appropriately informed by significant developments in twentieth-century and contemporary philosophy, might look like. It is written from a philosophical perspective, in agreement with Freud that 'there is no authority higher than reason' (at least until reason demonstrates its own limitations).¹⁷ But, at the same time, it tries to heed Macquarrie's desiderata and to deploy that authority as part of a coherent philosophical method that is phenomenological and existential as well as rational: the (presently rather unfashionable) method of existential phenomenology. As an instance of the broader form of philosophy of religion advocated by Macquarrie, it attempts to establish, by means of this philosophical methodology, the extent to which

religious experience or revelation is generally possible. In this way, it challenges the old distinction between 'natural' and 'revealed' kinds of theology by establishing the possibility of religious experience, insofar as it can be established, on a philosophical basis. It thereby acknowledges the continuity of the 'natural' form of theology with its supposedly 'revealed' counterpart. The book's specific focus is on the unjustly neglected concept of ineffability (of that which is, in principle, resistant to conceptual formulation and therefore literal linguistic articulation), a concept which, in its theological application, appears to be in greatest philosophical tension with the thought that religious experience is possible: if the divine is entirely mysterious, how can it possibly be experienced?

Part of the proposed answer lies in the thought, articulated by William James, that the experiential dimension to religion is deeply interconnected with the pragmatic dimension, perhaps more so than with the doxastic dimension. In this respect, the book is part of the recent turn in philosophy of religion away from a restricted focus on belief and on purely linguistic forms of expression towards experience and practice. (The names of John Cottingham and Mark Wynn, among others, are associated with what might be called the 'humane turn' in philosophy of religion.)¹⁸ This book therefore attempts to overcome a major philosophical obstacle to acceptance of the general possibility of religious experience and thereby to serve as an instance of a broader, more humane kind of philosophy of religion: a philosophy of religion in the new style.

This book is divided into three parts. The first part outlines and engages philosophically with the problem of ineffability in religion, the second part critically engages with philosophical and theological attempts to solve the problem, while the third part develops my own constructive proposal for a solution in the light of the foregoing analysis.

The book opens with the observation that the notion of ineffability has been largely ignored by philosophers, even though it is clearly a central one in the Christian mystical tradition and in more recent apophatic theological developments. Mid-twentieth-century philosophical discussions of mysticism invoked the idea and a number of phenomenologists share a sense that the meaningful human world is answerable to some 'background' that is inarticulable and mysterious. But, despite this, the logical implications of the notion of ineffability for religious experience, language and practice have not been explicitly and systematically thought through. This book, restricted to a dual focus on twentieth-century and contemporary philosophy and on the Christian religion, attempts to address this neglect.

After reviewing the philosophical, and some theological, literature on the notion of ineffability in religion, this book's first two chapters identify and respond to the problem of ineffability: a philosophical tension between the notions of 'ineffability' and 'answerability', between the idea that the ineffable

is beyond conceptualization and the thought that some kind of experience, language or practice connected with it is required if the notion is to be meaningfully invoked, let alone (as in a religious context) serve as the measure for the meaning of the human world and of human life. In this connection, the meaning of the word 'God' is interpreted as a reference to the concept of ineffability. A recent philosophical defence of the concept is endorsed which, rooted in existential phenomenology and (as is shown in detail) Heidegger's later philosophy, resolves this tension.

In the third and fourth chapters, the detail of theological attempts, by Paul Tillich and John Macquarrie, to accommodate this line of thought as directly inherited from the phenomenologists (especially Heidegger) is examined and criticized, as, eventually, is a more promising possibility represented by the unjustly neglected philosophy of Karl Jaspers.

In the fifth chapter, the rational status of existential phenomenology (its relation to discourse conditioned by the subject-object dichotomy) is revisited and examined more closely in the light of the engagement with Jaspers's thought. It is concluded that phenomenology's specifically philosophical way of evoking the ineffable is necessarily that of a rationally based dialectic.

The final chapter points to spheres outside philosophy, aesthetic and ritual, which may be understood to cultivate the experience of the ineffable without such dialectic. Concluding with a focus on religion's pragmatic dimension, it offers an 'aesthetic account of ritual meaning' and concludes by showing how the Christian Eucharistic rite can be understood, in philosophical terms, as a vehicle for religious experience and expression – the evocation and invocation of the ineffable.