PROBLEMS IN THE PHILOSOPHY OF RELIGION

Critical Studies of the Work of John Hick

Edited by
Harold Hewitt, Jr

Series Standing Order
If you would like to receive future titles in this series as they are published, you can make use of our standing order facility. To place a standing order please contact your bookseller or, in case of difficulty, write to us at the address below with your name and address and the name of the series. Please state with which title you wish to begin your standing order. (If you live outside the United Kingdom we may not have the rights for your area, in which case we will forward your order to the publisher concerned.)

Customer Services Department, Macmillan Distribution Ltd
Critical Response

From Philosophy of Religion to History of Religion

CARL W. ERNST

The evolution of John Hick's thinking on religion testifies to a remarkable opening-up of the philosophy of religion toward the phenomena offered by the comparative study of religion, or history of religion. From its inception in the European Enlightenment, the modern philosophy of religion occasionally made bows in the directions of non-Christian religions, but philosophers from Hume and Kant onward tended to use such data only as part of a larger project, which was a rational critique of Christianity, mainly the Protestant variety. The philosophy of religion, relying exclusively on the concept of autonomous reason as a standard, treated thinkers from the Catholic tradition primarily in terms of logical consistency, and rarely let them off easily. More exotic doctrines were for the most part consigned to a kind of limbo or to places even more unkind.

The struggle to formulate a philosophy of religious pluralism, as we see it in the work of John Hick, or in that of theologians such as Hans Küng, is the sign of a major intellectual shift in the post-colonial era. I think Professor Gillis is right to warn us not to underestimate the difficulty of this transition, both in theological and in political terms. On the intellectual side, there are many substantive and methodological questions to be faced. One of these is the question of how philosophy of religion is to absorb the materials offered by the history of religion, and how it will itself be changed in the process. The following remarks are some suggestions from the viewpoint of a historian of religion, occasioned by Gillis's lucid critical review of Hick's An Interpretation of Religion.

At its worst, philosophy of religion's approach to the history of religion can be characterized as plunder. The theorist swoops down, snatches a likely-looking bauble, and carries it home gleefully to add to the collection. Various recondite terms from Chinese, Algonquin or Arabic then eventually find their way to the open market, where eventually even freshmen will bandy them about. What is objected to here is not so much popularization, but the reductionist and tendentious use of religious symbolism and doctrine out of context. Such was the case in the chinoiserie fad in the eighteenth century, when Leibniz and Voltaire imagined Confucius as an enlightened deist. Twentieth-century philosophers have been considerably more subtle, but not much more successful. It is doubtful, for instance, that Karl Jaspers' friendly but superficial reflection on the Buddhist philosopher Nagarjuna will be long remembered. The main problem with these philosophical raids outside European territory is that they do not lead to any fundamental rethinking of the categories and methods of European rationalism. If the philosophy of religion aspires to go beyond a Eurocentric parochialism, it will be necessary to enlarge not only the scope of the religious data that are to be considered, but also the very concept of reason itself.

It is very encouraging to find that John Hick has recognized the new task facing the philosophy of religion, which he describes thus: "A philosopher of religion must today take account not only of the thought and experience of the tradition within which he or she happens to work, but in principle of the religious experience and thought of the whole human race." The potential burden imposed by this opening-up of the field to the entirety of human history is indeed vast, oppressively so. It is to Hick's great credit that for years he has actively and systematically engaged in the study of the panoply of world religions and in dialogue with representatives of different faiths. While no one can attempt to know all areas of religious history thoroughly, unless one makes a sustained effort as Hick has done, there is little hope of going beyond provincialism. Again, I do not underestimate the political difficulty of this task; as Chester Gillis observes, "much is invested in the current paradigm, and many will not surrender that investment easily or be coerced to surrender it on rational grounds". Yet we are now offered a historically unparalleled opportunity to familiarize ourselves with the human religious universe, and I hope that Hick's example will stimulate others to continue in this effort.

The enlargement of the scope of philosophy of religion thus calls for an engagement with the various scriptural traditions (in the broadest sense, including oral as well as written traditions). The
theorist needs to confront the manifold formulations in which the saints, prophets and buddhas of the world have expressed their experiences, and then imaginatively re-experience them. It will not do if we simply accept the abstract textbook summaries of the world religions, which typically reduce religious teachings to simplified dogma or formula for action; we must think with the traditions, and see how the scriptural mandates are carried through historically, how the spirit of the law is conveyed and understood in society. For instance, in the question raised by Gillis of justice as a problem in cross-cultural ethics, if we push for a deeper understanding of political culture in the different religious traditions, the results will be more satisfactory than if we glance at them with the preconceptions of modern Western rationalism. Thus, in looking at the Qur’anic punishment of amputating a thief’s hand, it is important to recognize that Qur’anic demands for mercy make poverty an acceptable excuse for the crime. The Hindu concept of *karma*, which to the Western mind may suggest a cynical justification of the *status quo*, is tempered with the ethical demands of *dharma* as a hierarchically ramified religious law. The Buddhist tradition, far from lacking a concept of justice, conceives of the just ruler as implementing the ideal of the Buddha before his renunciation. The apparently irrational excesses of the Iranian revolution need to be seen as the violent secularization of Shi’i authoritarianism through anti-colonial nationalism. And so on. It is not simply a question of “What sort of justice?”, in my view, it is a question of how our concept of justice may be extended by the history of religion.

As far as the concept of reason is concerned, I find myself in general agreement with Gillis’s criticisms of Hick for conceding ground to positivism, for a reductive attitude toward myth, and for insufficiently dealing with issues of hermeneutics and the ambiguities within the various traditions. Yet I would go further in questioning the rationalist presuppositions that continue to direct phases of the inquiry. A doctrinal understanding of religion has dominated Christian theology ever since the term “religion” was adopted; Augustine’s definition of religion as the acknowledgement, with piety, of God as the creator helped set in motion the perennial Western concept of a doctrinal and credal structuring of the relation between the human and the divine.

The centrality of this rationalistic emphasis in Christian theology and, later, the European Enlightenment, is nearly unpara-

leled in other religious traditions. Thus Hick treats faith as primarily a cognitive issue, and describes religion’s confrontation with naturalistic ideologies as a factual one subject to experiential verification. His argument then leads to the statement that, for those who participate in religious experience, “it is rational to believe in the reality of God”. I would suggest that this is to put the cart before the horse. Religious experience is fundamental; symbols, formulations, and doctrines are elaborated on the basis of experience. The very origin of the concept of experience in Western thought attests to a struggle against dogmatism, whether religious, philosophical or scientific. In religion, it was primarily the Protestant reformers who invoked religious experience against the authority and doctrine of the Catholic Church, and this non-doctrinal usage continued down to William James’s use of the term in his classic study. In the scientific field, along with Baconianism, alchemy was another source of our concept of experience in its struggle against Aristotelian orthodoxy; alchemy, of course, had religious implications as well. Here I would like to invoke an image from a seventeenth-century alchemical text, which allegorically depicts Experience as the Queen of Heaven before whom Philosophy bows down and worships. So, with apologies to Philo, I would like to suggest that we think of philosophy as the handmaid of experience in the new context that we face today.

Faith needs rational justification only for those to whom reason is supreme. Philosophy can articulate through reason the fundamental experiences that have given the spiritual bases of the religious traditions. And reason itself, as articulated in ancient and medieval Western philosophy, was far more existential than its current reduction to propositional logic would allow. Rethinking the relationship of the Enlightenment to the rest of world history, and working through the scriptures and their philosophical interpreters from a global perspective, will give us a better foundation for describing the relationship between the intellect and the Real.

The philosophy of religion has run a course from the beginnings of the Enlightenment to the post-modern age. It now has to break out of the self-imposed boundaries of the Eurocentric colonial period. The history of religion has much to offer to philosophers of religion as they rethink their task in the light of the world’s religious traditions. The precise shape of a future philosophy of
religion that is based on a global awareness of religious experience is something that we can not yet discern. Yet we can be sure that the pioneering work of John Hick will stand as an important step in this enterprise.

NOTES

1. An Interpretation of Religion, p. xii.
2. Chester Gillis, above, p. 42.
4. As Hick points out, the democratic concept of political equality has nothing to do with any of the world religions, but is an outcome of “the development of western science-based civilization” (Interpretation of Religion, p. 328).
9. Interpretation of Religion, p. 211.
12. “There with arose Phylosophy as one filled with grace, / Whose looks did shew that she had byne in some Heavenly place; / For oft she wipt her Eyes, / And oft she bowd her knees. / And oft she kist the Steps with dread, / Whereon Experience did tread; / And oft she cast her Head on high / And oft full low she cast her Eye / Experience for to espy, ” — “Experience and Philosophy”, in Elias Ashmole, Theatrum Chemicum Britannicum (1652; repr., Hildesheim: Georg Olms, 1968) p. 341.