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Matthew Frayer
Macalester College

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The Rationality of Religious Belief

Matthew Frayer

When I was about ten or eleven years old I told my Sunday school teacher that I did not believe in God so that I would not have to do my homework. My mother, upon hearing of my heretical ways, sat me down and told me that it did not matter whether or not I believed in God because going to Sunday school and church, or following any religion for that matter, serves a purpose and would make me a better person regardless of God's existence. At that time, I had no response to my mother's defense of religion, but I always questioned her conclusions. Where does truth fit in? Most people who truly have faith believe that truth and religion go hand in hand. They think that their religion actually tells them something about how the world works, and that is its function. In order for something to actually tell you something about the way the world really works, it has to be based in ontological truth. Therefore, the implications of faith as a practice lead to the assertion that all religious beliefs must be based in ontological truth or else they lack a function and are reduced to non-sense and uselessness. Yet, is this really the nature of religion? Does God's existence or non-existence even matter? The functionalists and the Wittgenstienian relativists would agree with my mother and say that the truth of religious doctrine and the existence of God do not matter, at least from the point of view of social science. I, however, will argue this premise. Religious claims must be ontologically true in order for religious belief to be rational.

Before further discussion, the role of rationality in religion must

be expounded upon. There are three dimensions of religion. The first is ontological, which pertains to the reality of God (or any spiritual being). The second is semantic, which deals with religious language, and of this there are two kinds: cognitivism and non-cognitivism. Cognitivism claims that religious statements are propositions of truth, while non-cognitivism claims that religious statements are symbols that reflect attitudes. The third is epistemic, which pertains to what we can know about religion.²⁹ Since most religious statements are unverifiable, it is hard to test what we can know about religion. We can know the way religion functions in society and we can know the truth of a very few statements, but the majority of believers downplay certainty in favor of faith. Because of problems determining certainty with regards to religion, this paper will mainly deal with the ontological and semantic elements.

Religion seems to be an attempt to describe reality. It cannot be separated from its ontological claims. George Ladd characterizes religion as an attempt to, “explain human experience by relating it to invisible existences that belong... to the real world.”³⁰ In other words, theism is ontological doctrine. Religion affects people’s lives because it is the worshipper’s theory of reality. People worship because they believe that it has real consequences. A prayer for a dead person is believed to help that person in the afterlife, good actions are thought to bring good karma, rain dances are thought to actually make it rain, and

²⁹Robert Audi, “Faith, Belief, and Rationality,” in Philosophical Perspectives, Vo. 5, Issue Philosophy of Religion (1991), 214.

³⁰George Trumbull Ladd, “The Religious Consciousness as Ontological,” in The Journal of Philosophy, Psychology and Scientific Methods, Vo. 1, Issue 1 (Jan. 7, 1904), 9.

human sacrifices are actually believed to appease real gods. Whether these practices are grounded in the real world or not is another question. Religions are, therefore, either true or false ontologically.

God is either really out there or he is not. The truth or falsity of ontological religious claims, however, is unverifiable so we must consider both as possibilities. If the ontological assertions of a particular religion are true, then belief in that religion is clearly rational, but this causes a problem in regards to religious doctrine. Many religious texts and teachings contradict other texts or teachings within the same religion and/or scientific discoveries. If religion is ontological truth then these internal and external contradictions must be reconciled. For example, the Christian trinity is an explicit contradiction. How can God be one person yet three? How can God be “other” and also “in us”? How can Christ die yet live?³¹ Christianity is not the only religion that embraces contradiction; Buddhism, Hinduism, Judaism, and Islam all have contradicting teachings. If religion is ontological truth, can there be meaning behind the literal sense of religious propositions? Clearly many religious propositions cannot be taken at face value because of the contradictions. Logic dictates that something cannot be both P and -P. Logically and ontologically, it is impossible for something to be both a tree and not a tree. Therefore, logical constraints are ontological constraints; even an all powerful god cannot make a square circle. In other words, even God cannot escape logic and the invalidity of contradiction.

³¹Thomas McPherson, “Positivism and Religion,” in Philosophy and Phenomenological Research, Vo. 14, Issue 3 (Mar., 1954), 319.

Philosophers have attempted to resolve this problem in a couple of different ways, all of which change the problem from an ontological one to a semantic one. One way out is to say that language is not able to deal with religious issues. The truths that are contained in a religion are too difficult to be expressed in simple language, but theologians must use it because it is the only tool they have.³² Religious language is an expedient means; it helps us come close to understanding something that we are unable to fully understand. Therefore the contradictions are not real because they are there to help us understand something that can not be linguistically captured or conceptualized. If this is true, however, it means that religious claims are not intended to be statements of ontological truth, which is essential to solving the original problem. If religious language is not to be taken literally, then why do religious people put so much stock in it. How do false statements help us get closer to a true reality? If the truth of a religion cannot be conceptualized, then there is nothing that we can rationally believe in or take to be a truth about reality. Another proposed solution is that logic has no place in religion. People are meant to “catch the spirit” of religious doctrines and parables but not take them as scientific statements.³³ This division between religion and science will come up later and, therefore, does not need to be discussed here except for as a proposed solution to the problem of doctrinal contradiction.

There are clearly inherent problems involved in assuming the ontological truth of religious doctrine, but what are the consequences of

³²Ibid., 320.

³³Ibid., 320.

believing in a religion if the tenants of that religion are false? Some might say that it does not matter if the reality proposed by a religion is a false one; it does not hurt anyone, but this is not true. There is a very high cost, on an immediate personal level and on a broader social level, in believing falsehoods.³⁴ People act according to their beliefs and this has consequences. For example, believing that disease is a divine punishment is harmful in the long run because it ignores medical science, which might be able to cure the problem. This example clearly shows that believing falsehoods can be irrational. So where does this leave religions as ontological doctrine? The semantic problems inherent in religious contradictions makes it hard for religion to be realistically based in ontological truth, and a belief in a falsehood hardly benefits anyone. Is there a rational justification for religious belief that avoids the inherent problems in religious propositions as true or false ontological statements? Many philosophers think so.

There are a myriad of theories that support the claim that theism is not ontological doctrine. These theories assert that religious beliefs are not irrational because they are literally false.³⁵ Defenders of faith assert that religion is not just a question of truth, but also one of personal identity, coping with the world, what is good, and how to live. Religion is said to bring morality and personal therapy and is therefore, rational. Taner Edis describes rationality as, “when people consider their options

³⁴Taner Edis, “The Rationality of an Illusion,” in The Humanist, Vo. 60, Issue 4 (July 2000), 4.

³⁵Ibid., 3.

and choose effective means to their ends.”³⁶ Edis’s idea is that religion is rational because it gives direct and justified answers to people’s problems and thereby is an effective means to an end, namely solving moral problems. He argues that it is rational to choose a concrete, possibly intellectually unsatisfying, answer (religion) over an ambiguous one.³⁷ For example, the Bible, in Christianity, and the Bhagavad Gita, in Hinduism, give definite answers to specific moral dilemmas; science, on the other hand, gives ambiguous ethical answers, if any at all.

The problem with this view is it tries to avoid the relevance of ontology, but the moral codes supplied by religion are unjustified if the religion is not based on ontology. Why should we follow the ethics that God set out if God does not exist? Also, the religion itself is not essential to one following the morals of that religion. For example, if someone believes in Hindu morals, they do not need the Hindu religion to justify them. It is an unnecessary step. Having a moral system that is not based on ontological truth is just as valid and a lot more simple than having a moral system that is based on a religion which is not based on ontological truth. Defenders of religion claim, however, that morals are not the only things that religion contributes to a society.

Functionalism is the view that religious claims are attempts to explain our experience of the world, and that religion itself helps fulfill social needs of stability, maintenance, order, reduction of anxiety, survival, and coherence to human life.³⁸ Functionalism basically states

³⁶Ibid., 3.

³⁷Ibid., 3.

³⁸Nancy K. Frankenberry and Hans H. Penner ed., Language, Truth, and

that religion is what it does. It is an attempt to discover why religious beliefs, practices, and rituals exist in society, but it falls just short of doing so. Hans H. Penner developed a logical rejection of functionalism based on Melford Spiro's definition of the theory. Spiro wants to claim that religion serves a purpose in society and that religious beliefs have no functional equivalents. Therefore, Spiro wants to say that religious beliefs are a necessary condition for satisfying the functional requirements of a society.³⁹ In his rejection of Spiro's claims, Penner first summarizes the functionalists argument as this: 1. At time *t* a society *x* functions adequately in a setting of kind *c*. 2. *x* functions adequately in a setting of kind *c* only if a necessary functional requirement *z* is satisfied (*z*= social maintenance). 3. If unit *y* (*y*= religious ritual, practice, belief) were present in *x*, then, as an effect, condition *z* would be satisfied. 4. Hence, at time *t*, unit *y* is present in *x*.⁴⁰

This argument tries to show that the function of religion is to satisfy some needed social maintenance. In other words, society only functions properly with the presence of religion. Penner points out, however, that this argument falls under the fallacy of affirming the consequent. Functionalism reduces to if *y* then *z*; *z* therefore *y*.⁴¹ The argument supporting functionalism only proves that religion exists in many adequately functioning societies, but it set out to explain why. Functionalism was proposed to explain why religion exists in society, but it actually only tells us that religion might fill the needs of a society. It

Religious Belief (Atlanta, GA: Scholars Press, 1999) 135.

³⁹Ibid., 260.

⁴⁰Ibid., 255.

wants to show that religious belief is rational because religion is a necessary characteristic of a functioning society; therefore, if it can be shown that religion is not necessary, then it loses its importance and supposed inherent rationality. Functionalism supports the claim that a community that replaced religion with science would not function properly. Functionalists not only claim that science is not a functional equivalent, but that nothing is a functional equivalent. This means that the functionalists claim that not only is religion sufficient for a proper functioning society, but it is necessary because it has no functional equivalent. However, a society that had no religion, but relied on science for all their answers, would function just fine.

The invalidity of functionalism does not mean the loss of hope for those who characterize religious belief as rational. Other theories try to ground the rationality for religion in a separation of religion and science. For example, C.S. Lewis tries to justify religious beliefs by differentiating between the logic of speculative thought and the logic of personal relations. Lewis describes speculative thought as the apportioning of belief to evidence as in scientific research. Belief, in speculative thought, means a weak degree of opinion. For example if someone were to say, "I believe it is raining outside," it would mean that they thought it was raining but they were not sure. In cases of personal relations, however, belief is independent of evidence. Belief, in personal relations, is the "assent to a proposition so overwhelmingly probable that there is a psychological exclusion of doubt, though not a logical

⁴¹Ibid., 256.

exclusion of dispute.”⁴² Lewis uses the example of a personal friend who is accused of committing a horrible crime. A friend of the accused man would likely stand by that person regardless of the evidence stacked up against them. He argues that belief in God is not like a scientist testing a hypothesis in a lab, but rather more like a person’s loyalty towards a friend.⁴³

The problem with this theory, however, is that Lewis’s distinction between the logic of speculative thought and the logic of personal relations is unfounded. Loyalty to a friend is very much based on evidence. No one is ever loyal to someone they do not know. People are constantly gathering evidence in friendships and when the time comes for the loyalty of a friend to be tested, the friend weighs the evidence for and against loyalty. For example, if your friend were on trial for murder and he had the tendency to kill people in the past, you probably would not believe him if he claimed innocence. On the other hand, if your friend had always been a good person and never hurt anyone in the time that you knew them, you would probably have good reason to believe their claim of innocence, even in the face of the police evidence against them. In this case, the evidence that you have accumulated over your friendship outweighs the police evidence, which pertains to one instance. The fact of the matter is that loyalty to a friend is quite similar to a scientist in a laboratory in that evidence is weighed and a conclusion is drawn based upon that evidence.

⁴²David Stewart, Exploring the Philosophy of Religion, (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1998) .114

⁴³Ibid., 115.

Another theory that separates religion and science is the philosophy of Wittgenstein. Wittgenstein argues that the world is divided up into different language games. Science and religion have their own language games that do not completely overlap. Science, according to Wittgenstein, cannot explain religion and religion, in turn, cannot explain science. Because of this separation it is silly to talk about religion in terms of evidence because evidence belongs to science, not religion. The separation also makes it impossible to reconcile quarrels between scientists and theologians. Wittgenstein uses the example of a statue that appears to be crying blood to illustrate this point.⁴⁴ A scientific person would see the statue and try to explain it through naturalistic theories while a religious person would see the same statue and try to explain it through supernatural theories. As a consequence of the language game theory, these two people would not be able to agree upon a true explanation. Even if it was discovered that a monk had painted the tears of blood on the statue, no resolution would come of it. The religious person could say that God made the monk paint the tears.

Despite the inability of the two different people to persuade each other to change sides, the separation between science and religion is unnecessary. Both the religious person and the scientific person are talking about the same thing, but in different ways. The scientific explanation is a bottom up explanation while the religious one is a top down explanation. Science starts with basic, observable principles and

⁴⁴Ludwig Wittgenstein, Lectures and Conversations on Aesthetics, Psychology, and Religious Belief, (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press), 60-61.

works up to complex theories. Religion, on the other hand, starts with unobservable assertions of the ultimate and works down to individual phenomena. At some point, religion and science should meet up in the middle, or if religion has no truth to it at all, science will work its way all the way up and leave no room for religion. In Wittgenstein's example, the religious person and the scientific person are talking about the same reality (namely a red liquid dripping from the eyes of a statue), independent of the truth or falsity of their individual beliefs. There cannot be two different realities existing at the same place and at the same time; either the theologian or the scientist, or both, is wrong. If the religious person is right, science is still capable of proving that he is right even if it is unable to do so yet.

Antony Flew's view of religion helps explain this point. Flew points out that religious beliefs are believed to be true, therefore, there is some way in which they are verifiable.⁴⁵ He uses the following example to clarify his idea. Suppose two people are walking through the woods and they come upon a clearing. One person automatically assumes that there is a gardener that maintains the clearing and the other believes that there is no gardener. In order to test their theories, the two people set up traps and electrified barb wire fences around the clearing. They wait for several days and nights but are unable to detect the comings and goings of the gardener. The disbelieving person claims that it is proof that there is no gardener; however, the believer begins to qualify the gardener to explain for the lack of detection. He asserts that the gardener is invisible, undetectable, and leaves no trace of his nighttime visits. Flew calls this

the “death of a thousand qualifications.”⁴⁶ If there is in fact a gardener, then his presence would be possible to prove provided the appropriate technological advances. Eventually, science would catch up to the invisible gardener. If the gardener is, in fact, invisible, undetectable, and leaves no trace, then it is indistinguishable from an imaginary gardener or no gardener at all, and a reasonable person would eventually realize this and abandon their belief.⁴⁷ Flew’s argument shows that there is a separation in thinking between religion and science, but ultimately they are trying to get at the same thing, true reality; therefore, theism is ontological doctrine.

The invalidity of functionalism and the lack of support for a separation between religion and science forces religion into declaring ontological truths. The core of religion is non-rational; the above discussion of functionalism shows that religion cannot be conceptualized through social construction, and the contradictions that are so prevalent in religious doctrine show that religion cannot be conceptualized through ordinary language either. In this light, how can it be said that religious beliefs are rational? How can we say that it is rational to believe in something that, if true, cannot be understood, and if false, is useless? The answer is that it cannot. Religious belief is, therefore, by its very nature, irrational.

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⁴⁵Stewart, 100.

⁴⁶Ibid., 100.

⁴⁷Ibid., 102.

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