Part III

RELIGIOUS DIVERSITY
Does truth matter?

For Geivett and Sweetman, ‘whether or not it is rational to believe in the existence of God’ is ‘one of the most important of all human concerns’ (Geivett and Sweetman 1992: 3). This assumes that the truth of religion is central: it matters more than anything else. And the use of human rationality to determine its rationality is therefore of vital importance. As Grace Jantzen observes, Geivett and Sweetman might have overstated the case: ‘Taken at face value, this statement is a shocking illustration of the blinkered privilege of western philosophers of religion: there are many millions of people for whom just getting enough to eat is of much more pressing concern’ (Jantzen 1998: 79). Jantzen wants philosophy reconnected to life. And most normal people do not sit around determining the rationality of their beliefs.

This question posed by Jantzen is a modern version of the famous debate between William Clifford and William James. Clifford’s famous essay ‘The ethics of belief’ insists that all beliefs need to be justified by the evidence. He starts his essay with a shipowner who decides not to investigate or confirm whether the ship is seaworthy. Instead, the owner has a sincere trust and belief that the ship is fine. Because of this untested (and as events subsequently showed, unfounded) belief, the ship sinks. Clifford is harsh: the shipowner ‘had no right to believe on such evidence as was before him’ (Clifford in Rowe and Wainwright 1998: 458). He then establishes this as a fundamental principle and axiom. Nothing can be taken on trust or authority; everything should be subject to argument and the evaluation of evidence. He sums up: ‘it is wrong always, everywhere, and for any one, to believe anything upon insufficient evidence’ (ibid.: 460).

It was William James who wrote the reply (‘The will to believe’). For James, there are countless moments when the decision is made in the action. To live life denying oneself the possibility of seeing the world in certain ways because of insufficient evidence is unfair. Belief, for James, should be seen in terms of choices. Certain options present themselves as ‘live’ options (i.e., something that you could imagine yourself believing), ‘forced’ (i.e., where you have no option but to decide), and ‘momentous’ (it is not trivial). James then argues that psychologically indecision (because of insufficient evidence) runs the risk of ‘losing the truth’ (James in Rowe and Wainwright...
1998: 466). For James, Clifford overstates the problem of error. He sums up Clifford thus:

Believe nothing, he tells us, keep your mind in suspense forever, rather than by closing it on insufficient evidence incur the awful risk of believing lies. You, on the other hand, may think that the risk of being in error is a very small matter when compared with the blessings of real knowledge, and be ready to be duped many times in your investigation rather than postpone indefinitely the chance of guessing true. (ibid.)

For James, taking the risk and believing that religion is true opens up all the advantages of such belief. For those for whom a religious belief is a live option (i.e., temperamentally predisposed to the possibility that religion is true), one has a momentous option (being religious is life-transforming) and a forced option (if you opt for agnosticism, then one does not practice the religion, thereby missing out on the benefits).

One interesting feature of this exchange is the following assumption: Clifford presumes that there is insufficient evidence to provide a certain foundation for belief in God; James accepts this assumption, but then argues that evidence is not the only consideration. At the very least this shows that both men, ostensibly on opposite sides of a debate about the nature of belief, agree that the truth about the existence of God is difficult to determine.

Clifford and James, writing in the latter part of the nineteenth century, demonstrate an emerging cultural attitude to truth in religion (one also found in Jantzen), which shaped much of the modernist project. This short chapter will outline briefly the history behind different accounts of truth. However, before doing so, it is helpful to identify some of the major accounts of truth you find in the literature.

**Different accounts of truth**

Most introductions to philosophy offer four main options (see Hospers 1990: 182–8; also Brümmer 1981: 169–78). The first is the correspondence theory of truth. This is probably closest to what most people mean by truth in ordinary speech. Truth is the property of corresponding to reality. So ‘it is raining’ is true, if, when looking out of the window, I see rain falling. However, the problem with this account is the precise relation between my perception of rain and the reality of rain. How do we bridge the gap between my belief that it is raining and the fact in reality that it is raining? Several standard arguments for skepticism can be introduced at this point: at the most extreme, it is possible we might be dreaming. More interestingly, we all know that a stick placed in water appears bent; so we know that our senses can be misled. This gap between reality and the mental interpretations of reality is, for many philosophers, too difficult for the correspondence theory to bridge.

The second and third options both eliminate the need for a correspondence with reality. Thus, the second theory stresses instead the importance of coherence. Truth is linked to statements. Statements are part of a system. The statements within the
system must cohere with each other. The language of untruth is used when one offers a statement that does not fit in with others within the system. Internal consistency within a system is the only possible requirement for truth that one can set. This means that a tribal culture which explains illness in terms of spirits, and a scientific culture which offers molecular explanations are both coherent options and therefore both true (e.g., Bradley 1914).

The third theory seeks to supplement coherence with ‘utility.’ What is required is not only an internally consistent worldview, but one that ‘works’ in a pragmatic sense.

The fourth view has a variety of names: the disquotational notion, the redundancy view, or (the one preferred by the most capable recent defender, Paul Horwich) the minimalist theory. This account simplifies matters considerably: truth is a synonym for that which is true. It is a way of saying: consider x, x is true means x (see Horwich 1990).

It is odd how these options are often set out without any historical setting. All too frequently the philosopher’s preoccupation with ideas disregards the historical context. This entire approach to philosophy has been challenged by the work of Alasdair MacIntyre. The achievement of his A Short History of Ethics was that he located and attempted to explicate why some of the apparently ‘timeless’ theories he was describing emerged at certain points in history (see MacIntyre 1966). So the emotivist theories of ethics advocated by the logical positivists reflected a certain historical and cultural shift: namely, the modern turn to the subject and the inability to understand how to defend the objectivity of moral assertions. Since A Short History of Ethics, MacIntyre has developed further narratives to explain changing attitudes to both ethics and rationality.

This chapter began by reflecting on the debate between Clifford and James. We noted the shared assumption that the rational justification of the truth of God’s existence is very difficult. So inspired by MacIntyre, we shall now attempt a brief narrative that explains the debate surrounding truth.

**History of different accounts of truth**

In the western tradition, it was Aristotle, perhaps developing Plato’s reflections in the Sophist, who offered the basic form of the correspondence theory of truth. With significant variations, the basic insight was affirmed throughout the medieval period. Both Augustine and Thomas Aquinas formulate fairly sophisticated versions of the theory.

It was the Enlightenment that created the problems. Kant, building on Hume and Descartes, is responsible for the perceived difficulties with correspondence. Where Augustine had felt that the problems of perception do not undermine the possibility of correspondence with reality, Kant saw the unbridgeable gap (see Augustine 1955: 93f). Kant is best understood in the light of Descartes and Hume. Descartes had created the impossible standard, that knowledge requires complete certainty. Descartes wrote, ‘Reason now leads me to think that I should hold back my assent from opinions...
which are not completely certain and indubitable just as carefully as I do from those which are patently false’ (Descartes 1985: 12). Hume had shown that any attempt to meet that condition is doomed to failure (Hume 1978: bk. 1). Kant’s solution was to distinguish between the noumenal and the phenomenal. The noumenal is the way things are in themselves; the phenomenal is the way things appear to the mind. Despite the fact that much of Kant reads as if he is suggesting two separate worlds, most contemporary Kantian scholars believe that in fact he sees the noumenal and the phenomenal as part of the same world (see Alison 1983). Kant is, to use Devitt’s terminology, holding a minimal doctrine of ‘weak, or Fig-Leaf, Realism’ (Devitt 1984: 22, 59–61). So it is not that the noumenal causes the phenomenal (two worlds), but that the phenomenal is the only way we can know the noumenal (one world). For Kant, the act of knowing involves both the actual object and the mental imposition of a priori categories along with the spatio-temporal setting. The problem when it comes to truth is that the mental in a very significant way is actually creating the world in which we live. Once this was seen, then consistency with the rational interpretative scheme became much more important. And if consistency matters, then coherence becomes central.

The pragmatist adjustment reflects a concern to explain change. Why adjust from one coherent scheme into another? The pragmatism of William James stresses the expedience of truth (see James 1978). On this view, science and, for James, religion, are true because they work. They reap benefits in terms of quality of life. This is at the heart of his response to Clifford.

This historical sensitivity creates the awareness that philosophical decisions about truth are not simply judgments about the plausibility of each account (in itself a very difficult exercise), but raise the question whether the cultural presuppositions of each account are justified. So the attractiveness of a coherence or pragmatist account of truth depends on the legitimacy of Kant, which in turn depends on the standard set by Descartes. This was MacIntyre’s discovery in Whose Justice? Which Rationality?, where he shows brilliantly that the modern tendency towards relativism is a result of unreasonable requirements for knowledge.

A central divide, then, in the contemporary debate about truth in religion is over the legitimacy of modernist assumptions about the problem of discovering that truth. Some, inspired by Continental philosophy, believe that Truth (with a capital T, as Richard Rorty puts it) is completely inaccessible. Others seek to challenge these modernist and, in a slightly different variant, postmodern assumptions; they want to continue to affirm the value and centrality of natural theology in their philosophical method.

**Truth in religion is inaccessible**

It is perhaps the rather enigmatic philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein who relocates the debates around religious language from truth to meaning. The problem with Wittgenstein is that he can be read in a variety of different ways. However, it is D. Z. Phillips who has offered a very distinctive and influential reading of Wittgenstein.
A key text for Phillips is Wittgenstein’s observation in his ‘Lectures on religious belief.’ Wittgenstein makes the following observation:

Suppose someone were a believer and said: ‘I believe in a Last Judgement’, and I said, ‘Well, I’m not so sure. Possibly.’ You would say that there is an enormous gulf between us. If he said ‘There is a German aeroplane overhead’, and I said ‘Possibly. I’m not so sure’, you’d say we were fairly near. (Wittgenstein in Rowe and Wainwright: 1998: 293)

Now Phillips reads this in the following way. Wittgenstein argued that human discourse is a multifaceted entity, and no single rationality can embrace its diversity. Instead of searching for one meta-rationality that provides rules of meaningfulness for all human discourse, one should concede that there are many different rationalities with different rules. Wittgenstein (followed by Phillips) offers the analogy of language games. Consider soccer, cricket, patience, and chess: each game has a different set of rules. It would be absurd to ask a goalkeeper to checkmate the forward or to instruct a chess player to use the bishop to bowl an over. The mistake in both cases is that each game has its own set of rules and its own ‘language.’ You can only judge an activity within a game by the rules of that particular game. So by analogy, science and religion are separate language games. Within science one constructs a hypothesis and provides evidence for and against; in religion one does not do this. To ask the question ‘Does God exist?’ within the rules of the scientific language game is as inappropriate as asking whether a knight is off-side in chess.

For Phillips, to understand God-talk, one needs to learn the language of religious communities. According to Phillips, as one does this, one discovers that religious people are not making straightforward claims about reality; instead, religious language is a way of coping with the difficulties in life. So a prayer for a sick relative, for example, is not supposed to bring healing to the patient. If one does pray with that expectation, then one is guilty of superstition, and this would not be authentic religion. It would be a case of misapplying quasi-scientific procedures as if religious dealings were comparable to asking the appropriate human benefactor to intervene in one’s situation of need. For Phillips, when one understands the language of prayer from within the language game of religion, then one sees that it is really a way of coping with the contingencies of being human.

It is for this reason that Phillips is frequently described as an ‘anti-realist’ in religion. Does God objectively exist? Phillips’s answer is exasperating; he seems to say ‘yes’ if you are asking the question within the language game of religion, and ‘no’ if you are asking it within the language game of science.

For Don Cupitt, the issue is clearer. In Taking Leave of God, the proofs for God’s existence no longer work and faith needs a symbol, not a reality. He insists that with an objective God, worship is grotesque (no objective supreme being should require humans to grovel and offer praise); but once God is turned into a symbol ‘that represents to us everything that spirituality requires of us and promises to us’ (Cupitt 1980: 14), then worship makes sense. In Creation out of Nothing, the inaccessibility of any form of ‘Final Truth’ is made central. He writes,
For realism to be true there must be a way things really are that is at last articulate in language. But Final Truth is never reached, because the nature of language is such that there is no sentence whose meaning and interpretation are so clear as to be beyond any possibility of further dispute. The consequence is that reality never gets fully closed or fixed, but goes on being contested endlessly. The world is an argument that never gets settled. So there is no objectively-determinate real world that could ever be finally fixed in language. (Cupitt 1990: 60)

Hidden in this passage is the Cartesian standard for knowledge. If one cannot provide an uncontestable description of the world, then the claim that there are better and worse ways of describing the world cannot be justified. Knowledge of the external world requires uncontestable descriptions. The description of the world must be one that others cannot challenge. It must be a description about which one is completely certain and no doubts are entertained. It is these assumptions that others want to challenge.

Truth in religion is possible

Perhaps the clearest opponent of the Phillips and Cupitt approach is Richard Swinburne. Swinburne's initial trilogy set out his basic position. In The Coherence of Theism he delivers his account of religious language and defends the coherence of the idea of God. In The Existence of God he argues that there are good inductive arguments for the existence of this God. In Faith and Reason he argues that belief in the creed of Christianity, which he sees as having probability on its side, is sufficient for the practice of religion.

On religious language, Swinburne is impatient with the complicated accounts formulated by other theologians. He follows the thirteenth-century philosopher and theologian John Duns Scotus. Religious assertions take certain human concepts from mundane situations and stretch them out to apply to God. So the assertion ‘God is love’ takes the same basic human quality of ‘concern for others’ and stretches it out to apply to God. There is no need for St Thomas’s tortured ‘analogy’ or Ian Ramsey’s ‘models and qualifiers.’ God has certain qualities to a much greater degree than is possible in humans beings. Just occasionally one finds oneself forced to the use of words in an analogical rather than direct way, but he stresses that this must be the last resort. Swinburne writes,

[C]learly we ought to assume that theists are using words in their ordinary mundane senses. ... When the theist says that God is ‘good’, ‘good’ is, I suggest, being used in a perfectly ordinary sense. The only extraordinary thing being suggested is that it exists to a degree in which it does not exist in mundane objects. But when theists say that God is a ‘person’ who is ‘necessarily’ able to ‘bring about’ any state of affairs and ‘knows’ all things, I shall
suggest that if what they say is to be coherent some of these words must be being used in somewhat analogical senses. (Swinburne 1977: 71)

Swinburne’s intention is to stress the intelligibility of God-talk. Once we start creating unique rules for our language about God, which in principle humans are too finite to understand, then it becomes very difficult to distinguish gobbledygook from coherent talk; and religious talk becomes simply a creation of the imagination. And anyway, argues Swinburne, since it is possible to construct a metaphysic without too much analogy, then let us avoid needless complexity.

With this view of religious language, he then begins to formulate his definition of God. God is, explains Swinburne, ‘like a person without a body (i.e. a spirit) who is eternal, free, able to do anything, knows everything, is perfectly good, is the proper object of human worship and obedience, the creator and sustainer of the universe’ (1977: 1). Swinburne clearly feels that he is defending the traditional picture of God. Certainly he wants to affirm all the traditional attributes, which also include God’s omnipotence and omniscience. Although he modifies the traditional relation of God and time, he feels that this is a fairly minimalist adjustment for the sake of coherence.

Having sorted out religious language and offered an account of God, which is coherent, Swinburne is ready to demonstrate the existence of God. He is selective about the arguments that he is willing to endorse. Among the traditional arguments, he dismisses the ontological argument completely, while only providing a very weak version of the cosmological argument. Instead, he concentrates on the design argument and the argument from religious experience. On design, Swinburne is struck by the amazing consistency of the natural order: the fact that the laws of nature continue to operate from moment to moment to moment. Clearly this fundamental consistency cannot be explained by science because science is only possible because natural laws are stable; therefore we need an alternative level of explanation. And this alternative explanation is a personal explanation (see Swinburne 1979: ch. 8). On religious experience, he simply draws attention to the many millions of sane, well-balanced individuals who are totally convinced that they have experienced God. If these people were telling us of some everyday experience (such as seeing a mutual friend in the high street), we would be inclined to accept their report. They are not drunk; they don’t take drugs; they are not given to spectacular story-telling; and they lack any motive to mislead. Yet when it comes to a metaphysical experience, we suddenly become so much more skeptical. This is unreasonable. We ought to concede that the widespread phenomenon of religious experience is good evidence for the reality of God (see 1979: ch. 13). In both cases – the arguments from design and religious experience – Swinburne wants us to accept them as good inductive arguments for the existence of God.

For Richard Swinburne, philosophy can now step outside the shadow of Kantian epistemology. Unlike Continental philosophy, analytic philosophy provides the tools to rescue religious discourse. He writes:
Other philosophies of the western world, many of which are often lumped together as ‘continental philosophy’, have in common an allegiance to Kant’s claim that investigation of the nature of the world can discover only patterns in phenomena, not their unobservable causes, and hence ‘ultimate questions’ are beyond theoretical resolution. Kant lived before the establishment of the atomic theory of chemistry, the first scientific theory to purport to show in precise detail some of the unobservable causes of phenomena – the atoms whose combinations give rise to observable chemical phenomena. No one in the twenty-first century can seriously doubt that, what chemistry purported to show, it really did show, and that we now know a very great deal about the unobservable causes of things and the framework of the universe far beyond observation by the naked eye. The Kantian doctrine about the limits of human knowledge was a big mistake; and analytic philosophy, unlike Continental philosophy, has liberated itself from that doctrine. (Swinburne in Harris and Insole 2005: 39)

For Swinburne, truth in religion is possible. There are good arguments for theism (and, as he later argued, for other Christian doctrines), which ought to persuade the skeptic.

**Truth issues in religion**

Thus far this discussion has concentrated on the underlying character of religious discourse, namely, the extent to which the discourse is grounded in a quest for truth (beyond human projection or linguistic constructions). This chapter will conclude by looking at some of the other issues surrounding truth in religion.

The first is the extent to which truth is either grounded in religion or alternatively distinctively shaped by religion. The argument that truth is grounded in religion was made by Brian Hebblethwaite in *The Ocean of Truth*. This connection has an ancient pedigree, perhaps originally made by Augustine of Hippo in *On the Freedom of the Will*. For Hebblethwaite, there is an ‘argument from objectivity and truth to God’ (Hebblethwaite 1988: 109). I have developed his argument in *Truth and the Reality of God* (Markham 1998). The idea that truth is distinctively shaped by religion was formulated by Bruce Marshall. Marshall, who is building on George Lindbeck’s *The Nature of Doctrine*, wants to argue that ‘a genuinely theological account of truth and epistemic justification needs to be robustly Trinitarian. It ought to subject whatever ideas it may find useful to the formative discipline of the Christian community’s convictions about the triune God’ (Marshall 1999: xi–xii). Marshall goes on to argue that the ritual practice of the church is the key to understanding the core commitments of the Christian community and that this practice is firmly Trinitarian. Andrew Moore takes a similar approach and argues for a ‘Christian realism’ where ‘ontology and epistemology [are] shaped in the context of the covenant consummated in Christ’ (Moore 2003: 183).

The second issue is the area of religious diversity. When John Hick offered his pluralist hypothesis, his debt to Kant was explicit. Hick explains that the pluralistic
hypothesis is that ‘the great world faiths embody different perceptions and conceptions of, and correspondingly different responses to, the Real from within the major variant ways of being human; and that within each of them the transformation of human existence from self-centredness to Reality-centredness is taking place’ (Hick 1989: 240). He then goes on to say:

In developing this thesis our chief philosophical resource will be one of Kant’s most basic epistemological insights, namely that the mind actively interprets sensory information in terms of concepts, so that the environment as we consciously perceive and inhabit it is our familiar three-dimensional world of objects interacting in space. (1989: 240)

For Hick, each culture is experiencing the ‘Real’ (his preferred inclusive term for ‘God’ or the ‘Transcendent’) through a particular lens. When Christians name the religious experience ‘the triune God,’ this is simply their cultural linguistic imposition on the experience. Meanwhile Buddhists are talking about ‘nirvana,’ which is a Buddhist imposition. The great advantage is that no religion is any better or worse than any of the alternatives.

Opponents of John Hick’s pluralist hypothesis have concentrated on his account of truth. Harold Netland’s argument for a version of exclusivism is grounded in a defense of ‘propositional truth,’ which means that ‘truth is a property of propositions such that a proposition is true if and only if the state of affairs to which it refers is as the proposition asserts it to be; otherwise it is false’ (Netland 1991: 114–15). For Netland, God is either triune or not; it makes no sense to talk about God as being neither, nor beyond any resolution. For Netland, Hick’s pluralism is tantamount to agnosticism.

Related to this debate over the Christian theology of other religions, we have the challenge to relativism. Both Catholic and evangelical theologians have been challenging the relativist culture of modernity. Pope John Paul II wrote an encyclical in 1993 called Veritatis Splendor (‘The Splendor of Truth’). For Pope John Paul II, true freedom depends on a concept of ‘universal truth’ (John Paul II 1993: 53). We do not want a freedom where the Nazi’s ethic is the epistemological equivalent of the ethic advocated by the great civil rights leader, Martin Luther King.

For the evangelicals, Brad Stetson and Joseph Conti argue that true toleration needs to be grounded in truth. They argue that the Judeo-Christian tradition ‘uniquely has the resources to uphold true tolerance and prevent its collapse into an antitraditional, secular intolerance based on an arbitrary selection of untested and ultimately incoherent assertions about human rights and purposes’ (Stetson and Conti 2005: 173).

So then the concept of truth in religion is a key battleground for the shape of one’s theology. Much is dependent on how one understands truth. Modernity has created options about the understanding of truth. However, for those who want to continue to affirm natural theology and an objective God, coupled with a robust account of freedom and tolerance, modernity has taken a wrong turn.
See also David Hume (Chapter 15), Immanuel Kant (Chapter 16), William James (Chapter 19), Religious traditions and rational assessments (Chapter 21), Religious pluralism (Chapter 22), Inclusivism and exclusivism (Chapter 23), Non-theistic conceptions of God (Chapter 25), Goodness (Chapter 33), The cosmological argument (Chapter 37), The teleological argument (Chapter 38), The moral argument (Chapter 39), The problem of religious language (Chapter 44), Problems with theistic arguments (Chapter 45), Science and the improbability of God (Chapter 46), Postmodern theology (Chapter 52), Theology and religious language (Chapter 53), Continental philosophy (Chapter 66), Religious naturalism (Chapter 68), Religion and science (Chapter 71).

References


Further reading

