

ISSN 2053-5163

Issue 3

Autumn 2013

Challenging Religious Issues

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on God in
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on Describing God

Challenging Religious Issues

Supporting Religious Studies at A-level and beyond

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Searching for God in Pop Culture

David Wilkinson

While some argue that Western culture is becoming increasingly secular, within the area of popular culture – that is movies, television and music – questions of God are being explored in entertaining and serious ways. This article surveys this new and growing area of thinking within religious studies and gives a framework that goes beyond the extremes of those who dismiss it all as trivial entertainment and those who read their own faith beliefs into everything.

Specification link: WJEC RS3 CS: Studies in Religion in Contemporary Society (A2), 2. Religion in film.

Finding God in popular places

Back in 2007, two books often found themselves side by side on the best-seller lists. Richard Dawkins' *The God Delusion* achieved world-wide fame in its attack on religion and traditional arguments for the existence of God. It was welcomed and used by many outside the academic world. The TV illusionist Derren Brown said on the back cover, 'This is my favourite book of all time . . . It is a heroic and life-changing work' (Dawkins, 1996). Comedians such as Eddie Izzard, Ricky Gervais, Stephen Fry and Dara O'Brien often represent similar atheism in their comedy. Such examples seem to give support to the thesis that Western culture is being driven by science to become more secular, seeing religion as irrelevant, unreasonable and out of date.

However, *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows*, also on the best-seller lists of 2007, drew on Christian themes, images and quotations in bringing this extraordinary series to its climax where 'the last enemy to be destroyed is death'. J. K. Rowling said that it had always been difficult to talk about this because divulging some of the books' Christian motifs would give away too much of the end of the story (*Church of England Newspaper*, 10 August, 2007). Harry Potter is not alone. *The Simpsons* remain a churchgoing family and while Ned Flanders and Rev Lovejoy are constantly mocked, there are moments when some of the big questions of religion are explored – do we have souls, what is God like, the nature of temptation and forgiveness, and whether there is an afterlife (Pinsky, 2002). *Star Wars*

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explores the big themes of hope, good and evil, and whether there is a reality beyond what we can scientifically understand (Wilkinson, 2000). These hugely popular cultural icons sit alongside sagas such as *The Lord of the Rings* and *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*, both of which reflect their authors' strong Christian faith.

This means that pop culture is very complex in the way that it represents religion.

Taking pop culture seriously

This can be a challenge for faith communities. Robert Johnston comments on recent Hollywood movies:

Conversation about God is increasingly found outside the church as well as within it. One of the chief venues for such conversation is the movie theater with its adjacent cafes. (Johnston, 2006, p. 14)

Yet faith communities have often actively avoided television, movies and pop music.

There can be no doubt that the movies with their sensationalism, their false standards, their pornography, and their open exhibition of moral laxity and lawlessness are influencing our young people today far more than the church, and seriously counteracting the combined stabilizing influence of the school and home. (Maxwell S. Stewart, quoted in Romanowski, 1996, p. 36)

So wrote an author in *The Christian Century* in 1930, and one wonders what that author would have made of the world of *Family Guy*, *Grand Theft Auto* and *Ted!* These 'pop culture wars', as Romanowski has characterised them, have often seen pop culture as of the

devil, or as insignificant trivial entertainment.

Lawrence Levine points out, in *Highbrow/Lowbrow*, that in Western culture there has been a separation between high and low culture, in the field of education in particular (Levine, 1988). Thus, highbrow arts such as classical music have been worthy of analysis and respect, while lowbrow art such as rock and roll is dismissed as worthless. Romanowski and others have shown how the church has reflected this separation, often seeing the highbrow arts as holy and demonising the lowbrow arts (Romanowski, 2006).

Of course, a global consumer culture is intimately linked to pop culture, which has a global appeal and penetrates virtually all social groups. When Roger Enrico, the boss of Pepsi, signed a \$2 billion deal in 1996 to market products tied in to *The Phantom Menace* he said, 'This will allow us to connect with virtually every consumer in the world' (Rayment, 1999).

However, alongside such messages and images designed to change lifestyle through purchasing power, and alongside carefully crafted stories designed to entertain, come some big questions. Indeed, the stories of pop culture have a way of questioning the world rather than giving answers. Story is a very powerful way to ask questions. The 380,000 people in England and Wales who registered their religion as 'Jedi' in the 2001 Census, misunderstood this key insight (the figure was down to less than half this in the 2011 census). Pop culture can embody the concerns of those who want to seek the spiritual, ask how the world can be a better place, explore what it means to be human, and ask what God is like. It can also embody confused, emotional and angry voices

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that are disenfranchised. For these reasons it needs to be taken seriously.

Taking time to understand pop culture

Some religious people interact with pop culture by raiding a movie or a television programme simply for a quote or image to back up their own religious view. For example, some Christians argued that *The Matrix* trilogy was an allegory of the Christian faith, with Neo representing Jesus Christ. The trouble is that stories are more complicated than that. Such an approach is symptomatic of a deeper media illiteracy and a lack of real commitment to work hard at understanding the art form and digging below its surface. We can illustrate this with respect to *Star Wars*.

George Lucas, the creator of *Star Wars*, attributes its nature and popularity to its being like an ice-cream sundae. That is, it is a combination of lots of different and attractive features. First, it contains myth, using a common store of images, symbols and stories, so that Luke Skywalker follows the classic journey of the hero. Second, there is the Western, recreating for Hollywood the Western genre but this time in outer space as Han Solo becomes the gunslinger on the frontier. Third, *Star Wars* is full of the science fiction styling and stories of Lucas' fascination with the comic strips of Flash Gordon and Buck Rogers. Fourth, this is a story reflecting the Space Age and the period following Neil Armstrong's small step onto the Moon. Finally, Lucas borrows heavily from Samurai movies, especially Akira Kurosawa's *The Hidden Fortress* (1958). On top of all these elements, *Star Wars* liberally sprinkles little bits of religion, for

example *The Empire Strikes Back* encompasses a number of Buddhist themes.

The danger is to focus immediately on these religious quotes and images, and characterise *Star Wars* as Buddhist, New Age or even a Christian allegory. However, the ice cream sundae of *Star Wars* is held together by big questions concerning hope, good and evil, and transcendence. Rather like the glass that contains the different kinds of ice-cream and chocolate, these big questions give the story an attraction. In discussing the question of transcendence, Lucas comments:

I would hesitate to call the Force God. It's designed primarily to make young people think about mystery. Not to say, 'here's the answer'. It's to say 'Think about this for a second. Is there a God? What does God look like? What does God sound like? What does God feel like? How do we relate to God?' (Moyers & Lucas, 1999)

We need to understand and engage with these questions and with the story as a whole, rather than simply picking out bits that support our own position. Cooper and Skrade encourage us to be open to film in a way that allows it to charm, enlighten and disturb us (Cooper & Skrade, 1970). Theological engagement needs careful attention to its genre, its nature as art and the deeper questions it poses. Further, we need what Michael Dyson calls 'ethical patience' (Dyson, 2001) – to counter the tendency of faith groups to pronounce judgement on things being right or wrong before they have heard the whole of the story.

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Engaging with pop culture

What are the major themes that a student of religion might explore, in engaging with pop culture? Gordon Lynch suggests that it can explore the relationship of religion and everyday life, and also how elements of pop culture can be used by religions. Perhaps one of the most extreme examples of this is the way that some new religious movements have integrated elements of science fiction into their belief systems. (For example, the Heaven's Gate cult whose members committed suicide in a mansion in San Diego integrated many themes from *Star Trek*.) In addition, there are questions for those who are members of faith communities about how faith should be communicated in Western culture, and how pop culture can be a medium for reflecting on the big questions (Lynch, 2005).

I would suggest some other important themes. First, *the role of the imagination*. The astrophysicist Lawrence Krauss has written a fun book on the physics of *Star Trek* (Krauss, 1997), asking whether warp drive and such things are possible. Stephen Hawking, in a foreword to the book, suggests, 'Science fiction like *Star Trek* is not only good fun but it also serves a serious purpose, that of

expanding the human imagination.'

There is an interesting parallel here with the way that religion uses images, music, story and art to expand the human imagination.

Second, *the role of entertainment* is central to pop culture. But how does it operate within religion? Indeed, do faith communities see entertainment as a gift from God? When thinking about what it means to be human, what is the significance of laughter in response to a cartoon, the feeling engendered by a romcom, the fear of a horror story, or the triumph that inevitably happens at the end of an action thriller? Do these forms of entertainment sometimes give alternative narratives to those of religious communities?

Third, *the role of the divine outside faith communities*. Some have argued that the exploration of the questions of pop culture often demonstrates God at work in the world in surprising ways. Robert Johnston comments, 'Movies have, at times, a sacramental capacity to provide the viewer an experience of transcendence' (Johnston, 2006, p. 57); while the Roman Catholic Andrew Greeley suggests that the filmmaker can at times disclose God's presence 'sharply and decisively' (Greeley, 1998).

Link

<http://www.damaris.org/> (Damaris is an educational charity that creates official community resources to accompany the latest feature films, so

as to help people engage with the themes and ideas explored in the films)

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Discussion points

1. Romanowski (1996) argues that the relationship between pop culture and the Christian church in the USA has often been one of warfare. Why do some faith communities feel threatened by pop culture?
2. How important is the author's original intention, when we interpret a movie, book or song in religious terms?
3. What can story do to help us to understand the nature of human beings, God and the universe?

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Aristotle's Virtue Theory

Adam Willows

The article discusses the moral thought of Aristotle, with a particular focus on the nature of virtue and virtuous behaviour. It also looks at modern Aristotelians and how Aristotle's thought is received by some religious traditions.

Specification link: WJEC RS3 ETH: Studies in Religion and Ethics (A2), 1. Aristotle's virtue theory.

Virtue theory and virtue ethics

Virtue theory is the area of philosophical and theological enquiry to do with investigating and understanding the virtues. It is distinct from virtue ethics, a *normative* moral theory that sees the development and possession of the virtues as the primary goal of the moral life. Although virtue ethicists are also virtue theorists, many virtue theorists subscribe to other normative theories such as consequentialism or deontology (Hursthouse, 2013, section 1).

The origins of virtue theory and virtue ethics lie in classical Greek philosophy, and in particular with Aristotle. The virtues lost their prominence in moral theory after the Enlightenment, and until the mid-twentieth century they featured very little in modern discussions of ethics. Since then, however, there has been a rise in interest in the virtues and now most moral theories will have something to say about virtue, even if it is not their primary focus. The status of virtue ethics

as a separate normative theory has been secured by thinkers like Rosalind Hursthouse and Philippa Foot. In Christian ethics, Alasdair MacIntyre and Stanley Hauerwas have led the rediscovery of virtue and there is significant renewed interest in the moral theory of Thomas Aquinas, whose thought shares many similarities with Aristotle.

What is a virtue?

A virtue, Aristotle tells us, is 'a purposive disposition' (Aristotle, 2004, 1107a 1). This means that it is a particular kind of character trait: a fixed tendency to act and feel in a certain way. It is important that the disposition is stable and constant – a habitual skinflint who donated money on a whim would not thereby acquire the virtue of generosity. But what *kind* of stable disposition are we talking about? A disposition for stealing will clearly not qualify. Nor, while inoffensive, will a habitual liking for cups

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of tea. Aristotle says that a virtue is a human excellence. It is 'the disposition which makes one a good man and causes him to perform his function well' (Aristotle, 2004, 1106a 20-25).

In order to understand this, we need to know what a good, functioning person might look like. The idea that humans have a particular function is crucial for Aristotle's virtue theory. He thinks that everything has a function – something it is *for*, a purpose. By understanding what something is meant to do or be, we can understand what its *good* is. For example, the function of a knife is to cut things efficiently. Knowing this means that we can recognise a good knife when we see one – it is sharp, not too heavy, etc. Likewise, we recognise that a blunt knife is a bad knife because it will not perform its function. So if we can understand what the function of humans is, we shall be able to recognise a good person and understand what kind of dispositions the virtues are.

Aristotle says that the function of humanity is rational operation. This is the one thing which humans do, that other things or creatures do not. The virtues are those dispositions which lead us to perform our function well – to live rationally.

This means that for Aristotle to call someone a good person does not just mean that they are doing what they ought to do in the sense of moral obligation (although it does mean that). It also means that they are good at *being* a person – by being virtuous they are performing their function well – and it is having this function that marks them out as a person at all.

Performing your function is also good for you. Aristotle binds the idea of what it is good *to do* to the idea of what is good *for us*. A flourishing life does not just

mean a life of morally correct behaviour. It is also (circumstances permitting) a fulfilled life, a state of well-being – in short, happiness. The Greek word for this is *eudaimonia*. *Eudaimonia* is a very important term in Aristotle's ethics and does not have a direct English equivalent. It is often translated 'happiness', but should not be understood as simple hedonistic pleasure (Hursthouse, 1999, pp. 9-10). It is a kind of flourishing or completeness. A *eudaimon* life is the sort of life that humans ought to have, the best kind of life for a person. Unlike pleasure, it is not subjective because it is related to the purpose that all humans share. Virtue is not the only thing needed for *eudaimonia*, because 'it is difficult if not impossible to do fine deeds without any resources' (Aristotle, 2004, 1099a 30-35). It is not possible, however, to achieve *eudaimonia* without virtue.

So we know what kind of disposition a virtue is. It is a disposition that will lead to *eudaimonia*, one that means its possessor thinks and acts in a rational way. But this does not seem enough for a moral theory. What ethics really needs is a way of telling which attitudes these are. Which behaviours and attitudes are truly virtuous? Is self-sacrifice always a good thing? Can lying sometimes be the right approach? How ought we to treat our money? In the next couple of sections we shall look at how Aristotle deals with these kinds of questions.

Intellectual and moral virtues

The first step towards answering this question is the distinction between intellectual and moral virtues. It seems obvious that not every rational disposition has an inherently moral dimension (e.g. artistic skill), even though they do seem to fit the criteria for virtue. Aristotle has this to say about the

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different kinds of virtue: 'Now when we classified the virtues of the soul we said that some of them were virtues of the character and others of the intellect' (Aristotle, 2004, 1138b 30 - 1139a 5). The *virtues of character* are the moral virtues. They include things like justice, courage and generosity. *Virtues of intellect* have to do with the mind, and include things like scientific knowledge, artistic ability and wisdom. Ethical discussion will primarily concern the moral virtues. The one exception is what Aristotle calls *practical wisdom*, or prudence. A prudent person has the ability 'to deliberate rightly about what is good and advantageous for himself' (Aristotle, 2004, 1140a 25-30). Someone with a moral virtue will have the right kind of disposition; for example, they will want to be fair, honest and kind. It is prudence that shows us *how* to be fair, honest and kind in each situation. Although this is an intellectual virtue, it is essential to the proper working of the moral virtues. Being fully virtuous involves acting on our dispositions, so without prudence to guide us it will not be possible to be virtuous at all.

The doctrine of the mean

Another important part of the moral life is the ability to calculate the 'mean'. Aristotle thinks that each virtue lies at a mean between two vices (bad character traits). For every virtue, there is a vice of excess and a vice of deficiency. A *vice of excess* occurs when someone has too much of the feeling or desire relevant to a situation, and a *vice of deficiency* occurs when there is too little. So for the virtue of courage, the vice of excess might be recklessness and the vice of deficiency would be timidity or cowardice.

Courage involves a disposition towards feeling just the right amount of fear and confidence.

The virtuous mean is not necessarily exactly in-between the two vices; nor is it always in the same location between them. Where the mean is located depends on the situation. A soldier facing overwhelming odds might be right to feel afraid to the extent of fleeing; a soldier on the opposing side who felt the same amount of fear would be a coward. Aristotle sums it up in this way:

To have these feelings at the right times on the right grounds towards the right people for the right motive and in the right way is to feel them to an intermediate, that is to the best, degree; and this is the mark of virtue. (Aristotle, 2004, 1106b 20-25)

Making moral decisions

It is now possible to see how virtue ethics approaches practical moral questions. The need both to observe the mean and to act in a prudent way come together to produce a highly situation-sensitive ethic. This means that it is often impossible for a virtue ethicist to give a general answer to a moral question. They will need to know the context, who is involved, what their motives are, and so on. Only then is it possible to calculate the mean and understand the prudent course of action. This means that virtue ethics does not exactly provide a guide to action; rather, it encourages us to develop the skills and dispositions needed to want and decide on the right action in each circumstance. This is done by building the right habits; learning from and copying virtuous people; and eventually understanding how to find the right way ourselves.

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Virtue theory in other contexts

The majority of virtue ethicists today are *Neo-Aristotelian*. They share many of Aristotle's positions but differ in some key ways. Often, Neo-Aristotelians reject or adapt Aristotle's idea that there is a particular function for humans. Although this allows them to avoid making a controversial claim about human nature, they face the problem of explaining how they know that virtues are the best traits for everyone if there is no single function which they all serve. Some, like Philippa Foot, address the problem by arguing that scientific understanding of human nature gives us good reason to believe that there are particular behaviours (e.g. social interaction) that contribute to our flourishing (Foot, 2001, pp. 44-45).

As mentioned above, virtue theory is not confined to virtue ethicists like Aristotle. Virtue can and does play an essential part in other normative theories. There is a great deal of variety in these treatments of virtue; however, what typically distinguishes them from virtue ethics proper is that they subordinate virtue to a more fundamental moral principle. *Kantian approaches* usually see a virtue as a trait that enables us to act in accordance with the categorical imperative (Louden, 1986, pp. 473-489). Likewise, *consequentialist* virtue theories usually describe a virtue as a trait that will produce more/the most good consequences (Bradley, 2005, pp. 282-298).

A religious perspective on Aristotle's moral theory

Aristotle's ethics shares a great deal with some religious ethics. In particular, there is a strong Christian tradition of virtue

ethics centred around Aquinas, whose moral theory draws heavily on Aristotle. Some common ideas include the importance of character to ethics and the idea that there is a particular goal for human life. Nevertheless, there are a few parts of Aristotle's moral theory that may be at odds with a religious perspective. Aristotle thinks that *eudaimonia* – flourishing – is confined to this life, and that achieving complete *eudaimonia* is impossible in practice. This does not fit well with the idea of finding fulfilment in a life after death. Aquinas' equivalent understanding of the human good, called *beatitudo*, is broken into two parts – an imperfect one that can be had in this life, and a second perfect version that can only be given by God in the next life.

Another potential difference between Aristotle and religious virtue ethics concerns the function of human beings. The idea that humans have a particular function is less at odds with some religious perspectives than with Neo-Aristotelianism, but there may be differences over *what* the function is. Religious virtue theory is likely to see the function of humans as God-given and directed towards God. This does not necessarily exclude Aristotle's claim that our function is rational operation, but goes beyond it – rational operation itself is understood as the kind of act/character that will lead us to God.

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Glossary

Hedonistic: (here) physical, sensual gratification.

Normative theories are theories about how people ought to act, based on standards ('norms').

Links

<http://www.iep.utm.edu/aristotl/#H7>

(Biography of Aristotle and assessment of his thought, including his ethics)

<http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/1547>

[2a.htm](#) (A discussion of virtue from a Catholic perspective)

<http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/aristotle>

[-ethics/](#) (Very useful entry with a more in-depth treatment of Aristotle's ethics)

Discussion points

1. What kind of traits do you think would qualify as a virtue, and why?
2. Should a moral theory be able to give general answers to questions such as, 'Is it ever permissible to lie?'
3. Does the idea that humans have a particular function really make sense?
4. Aristotle thinks that if we are unlucky, we could miss out on

eudaimonia through no fault of our own – for example, by suffering a terrible tragedy that prevents us from ever being whole. Does someone like this have a good reason to develop the virtues? How might a religious perspective make a difference to your answer?

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Faith, Reason and Revelation

Gerard Loughlin

The article distinguishes two positions on the relationship between faith and reason, as illustrated by Karl Barth and Thomas Aquinas, and reflects on what reason within faith might mean.

Specification link: WJEC RS3 PHIL: Studies in Philosophy of Religion (A2), 1. Is religious faith rational?

Faith opposing reason

Many people suppose that faith and reason are opposed. Faith is belief in something without reason. It is belief in that which is not seen (Hebrews 11:1). If you have reasons for your belief it is not faith. Faith is a leap beyond reason, as the philosopher Søren Kierkegaard (1813-55) taught. A similar view can be found in the work of the twentieth-century theologian, Karl Barth (1886-1968). He declares that belief in God cannot depend on human reason but only on the word of God. Faith is a leap, but a leap that God incites.

For Barth, human reason is fallible and prone to human self-interest. Any God that reason discovers is a God made in the image of humankind. He is a projection of human want, of human needs and desires; and God has nearly always been projected as 'he' rather than 'she'. Reason cannot discover the true God, who alone reveals Godself to us. Faith is not the fruit of reason, but of

revelation. This is a very powerful idea, and it influenced many Christian thinkers in the twentieth century, especially in the Reformed (Calvinist) tradition. Barth himself came to this view in the wake of the First World War, after being dismayed that so many of those who had taught him theology had supported the German war effort. For Barth this was a clear example of how human reason leads to a false God. The same occurred again in the 1930s, when many German theologians supported Adolf Hitler and the Nazi party.

If we follow Kierkegaard and Barth we will think that faith is opposed to reason. But this Christian view is also remarkably similar to that of several atheists. In the nineteenth century, Ludwig Feuerbach (1804-72) famously argued that God is a projection of the human imagination, a symbol of human ideals. Reason does not lead us to God but to seeing that God is make-believe. It is we who make God rather than God who makes us. And

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this is also the view of someone like the biologist Richard Dawkins, who in the twenty-first century argues that faith and reason are opposed. Kierkegaard and Barth agree with these atheists that reason cannot establish what God is like or that God exists. But unlike the atheists, Kierkegaard and Barth think that God can confront and confound us, and in so doing show us that God exists. God does this most fully in the person of Jesus Christ.

Faith complementing reason

But now we must take a step back, for it is only some believers and non-believers who think that reason and faith are opposed. There is another, and older, tradition of Christian thought which sees faith and reason as intimately connected. For this tradition, faith is entirely reasonable, and indeed more reasonable than non-faith. This is the view of St Thomas Aquinas (1225-74), who is arguably the greatest theologian in the Catholic tradition, and who thought himself following St Augustine of Hippo and, before him, St Paul.

According to Aquinas, faith and reason are not opposed but complementary, because both derive from God. Faith is a gift from God, and so is reason, in the sense that God creates everything that exists. What marks us out from the other creatures that God creates is our ability to reason. In Genesis we are told that Adam and Eve were created in the 'image of God' (1:26-27). While many have discussed what this might mean, the dominant view, and certainly the view that Aquinas held, is that it refers to our ability to reason, which is that which makes us human, and not some other

kind of animal. Thus reason is given by God, and when we reason we somehow participate in God's own reasoning. Of course we are not God, and God's reasoning is different from ours: thus God knows everything at once, while we have to learn over time, and we get things wrong. But when we know things truly we know what God knows, but we know them in the way of creatures and not as they are known by their creator, who knows them more perfectly than they could know themselves.

Aquinas' reasoning may not be persuasive, but we have to acknowledge that for him and for those who follow him, faith and reason cannot be opposed. But there is still a difference between faith and reason. Aquinas teaches that some things can be known by reason – and so by reason and faith – and some by faith alone. There are some things that have to be revealed if they are to be known at all, such as God's triunity. Thus the difference between Aquinas and later thinkers like Kierkegaard and Barth comes down to an argument about what we can know about God by reason and by faith. Can we know that God exists on the basis of reason, or must we first have faith? Karl Barth would seem to say that we must have faith *in* God before we can know *that* God exists; while Aquinas would seem to say that we can know *that* God exists before we come to have faith *in* God and in the things that God reveals. Aquinas and Barth seem to differ on whether we can prove – or disprove – the existence of God. Barth thinks that we cannot, and so on this point agrees with the atheists. But Aquinas seems to think that we can, and so disagrees with the atheists and with fellow Christians like Barth.

Aquinas and God's existence

At the beginning of his last great work, the *Summa Theologiae*, Thomas Aquinas noted five ways by which it can be shown that God exists (1a, 2, 3, reply). But before discussing these, we might note that Aquinas is rather brusque with what has become known as the ontological argument for the existence of God. This is the argument presented by St Anselm of Canterbury (1033-1109) and which says that once it is understood that the word 'God' means 'that than which nothing greater can be thought' it follows that God exists. Aquinas dismisses this as nonsense, for even if this is the meaning of 'God' it does not show that God exists in fact, but only in thought (1a 2, 1, reply 2). So much for Anselm and all those who have continued to puzzle over his argument!

So how does Aquinas use reason to get us to God? In each of his five ways he points to some aspect of the world that we all experience and argues from this effect to its ultimate cause, to what we must suppose in order to make sense of our experience. We all experience change, and know that things change because changed by others, and those things by yet other things, and so on. But we have to imagine – so Aquinas says – a first thing that is not changed by anything else, and 'this is what everyone understands by God'. The second way is a version of the first, but instead of pointing to change, Aquinas simply notes that everything is caused by something else, and we have to think that there is a first cause, for otherwise there would be no chain of cause and effect at all, and this first cause is what everyone means by God.

The third way is a little trickier. Aquinas notes that some things need not be, they

appear and disappear and their appearing is, as we might say, contingent or accidental. But not everything is like this; that it might not have been. For if everything were like this, then nothing would have been. So we have to imagine – Aquinas says – something that had to be, a necessary something that caused all the unnecessary things to exist. We may think the fourth way equally tricky. Now Aquinas points out that some things are more perfect than others, and that when there are gradations of perfection there is that which is most perfect; for example, that which is most good – which is goodness itself – and that is what everyone calls God.

Finally – the fifth way – Aquinas notes that everything has an aim. The acorn aims at becoming an oak; the arrow at reaching its target. But the arrow does so only because there is an archer who aims the arrow at the target. So with the acorn we have to suppose that which aims it at growing into an oak, and this something – that has intent, like the archer – we call God.

Faithful reason?

Has Aquinas used reason to show that God exists? Has he done away with the need for faith? His arguments, as well as those of others, have been long discussed. But we might notice that though Aquinas points to our experience of the world, he is really pointing to some of the fundamental concepts that we use when thinking about the world – change, causation, contingency, perfection and purpose – and saying that each of these implies an underlying principle – a first cause or a necessary being – and that these principles are what people mean by God. So we might think that even if the arguments work they only establish a

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very abstract notion of God. Do they establish the God of faith, the God who – as Aquinas believed – spoke to Moses from the burning bush and became incarnate in Jesus Christ?

In the very next part of the *Summa Theologiae*, Aquinas argues that though we can know by reason *that* God exists, we cannot know *what* God is. Indeed, Aquinas says that we can only know what God is not. To know God in more than negative terms (God is not this, God is not that) we have to know God through faith. We have to know God through God's self-revelation in the story of Israel, in the person of Jesus, in the teachings of the Church, and in personal prayer and worship in the tradition that testifies to God's revelation. Thus we might begin to wonder whether Aquinas and Barth are so very far apart. Aquinas may be more positive than Barth about what reason can do, but what it does it does within faith. Reason allows believers to think more clearly about what they believe in, which is – so Aquinas thinks – the unseen cause of all things, the unseen mystery named God. Faith is not opposed to reason when reason is faithful.

This reminds us that what reason is depends on the context in which it is used, and it is always used within a context. The ability to reason – to think

through a problem, to make an argument – may be a universal ability, it may even be that which makes us human, though it is clear that other animals can think about problems and solve them. But when we reason we always do so within a particular setting, a particular social group or institution, a particular tradition or discipline of thought. We have learned – to greater or lesser degrees – what counts as good or bad reasoning in those contexts, and we have done so because others have approved or disapproved of what we have done and said. Reasoning is a social activity, and this is why original thinkers are so rare, for they are people who discover or invent new ways of reasoning about the world and about reasoning itself, beyond the socially reasonable. It is because reason is social and contextual that what makes sense to some fails to convince others. Faith and reason are opposed when the reason in question is not formed within faith, when it has different presuppositions. But this does not mean there is no reason within faith, or even that someone without faith cannot come to understand the reason within faith, and *vice versa*, for all reasoning is within the context of being human; which for faith is the context of being a creature of the creator who gives us reason to believe.

Link

<http://www.iep.utm.edu/faith-re/>
(‘Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy’: James Swindal’s historical overview of the interrelation of religious faith and reason)

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Discussion points

1. Consider some of the different ways in which people appeal to 'reason' and 'rationality' both within and outside religion.
2. Does faith need reason, and does reason need faith? Why?
3. Do arguments for the existence of God – such as Aquinas' five ways – serve a purpose, even if they do not prove God's existence?

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Describing God

Jeff Astley

The article discusses the two main types of descriptive religious language: analogical and metaphorical. Attention is also paid to its 'symbolic' status and to the arguments for treating some parts of theology as univocal.

Specification link: WJEC RS3 PHIL: Studies in Philosophy of Religion (A2), 2. Is religious language meaningful?

Uses of religious language

The language of religion has many functions, of which perhaps the most significant is its 'cognitive' (in this context, fact asserting or denying) function of making statements about the divine, talking *about* (or *of*) God's nature and activity. At its most basic, 'theology' is simply this 'God-talk'.

But even this descriptive language may perform other functions, for example in expressing a religious attitude, belief or emotion; committing the speaker to a religious way of living or a religious or moral obligation; and evoking a religious experience. (Philosophers call them 'non-cognitive' functions.) In the case of some religious language – especially in prayers, choruses and hymns – these other functions may be primary. However, most believers maintain that you cannot express your own trust in or thanksgiving to God 'without presupposing that this God exists in fact' (Brümmer, 1981, p. 268).

The problem of describing God

Many of the criticisms levelled at theology arise because, even if it has cognitive meaning, it is not always clear what it means. Believers respond that this is inevitable, because in talking about the infinite, mysterious creator God they are applying human language – which was developed to describe our finite, created world – to a realm that 'transcends' (exceeds, goes beyond) human nature, life and activity. Hence Ian Ramsey argued that religious assertions do not function as 'plain descriptions of fact', which describe God in a 'picturing' or 'photographic' manner in any 'plain and literal sense' (Ramsey, 1961, p. 1; 1963, pp. 63-65; 1971, section 22). Rather, they represent the nature of God through metaphors and models.

Types of descriptive religious language

Analogy

Many theologians follow Thomas Aquinas in distinguishing two main types of God-talk:

- a *literal* application of words to God, in which ordinary words or phrases are mainly used in a qualified sense, as analogies: e.g. 'good' and 'living';
- a *figurative* (non-literal) usage, in which the terms that are applied to God move well beyond their ordinary meanings, in a 'figure of speech': e.g. by using the metaphors 'rock' or 'dove'.

The debate about whether we may speak of God literally or only figuratively (or 'symbolically') tends to ignore Aquinas' claim that analogy is a form of literal language. Aquinas agreed that our earthly terms cannot be applied to God in exactly the same way as they are applied to, say, humans. Their meaning must be stretched or extended – and so qualified. An *analogy* is a partial similarity. When applied to God, such terms no longer have a meaning that is identical to the meaning they had when they described human beings, but they retain a *similar meaning*. They 'mean certain perfections without any indication of how these perfections are possessed – words, for example, like "being", "good", "living" and so on. These words can be used literally of God' (Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, 1a, 13, 3).

We use analogies when we speak of animals being 'clever' (or sly or embarrassed). Your dog is clever in a dog-like way, but not in all the human-like ways. There is an *analogy of proportionality* between the two uses of the word, and this applies in the case of God also. Thus God is 'alive' in God's

own way – in a way proper to God, 'in proportion' to God – as humans are alive in a human way, and plants in a plant-like way. But you can still say that plants are 'really' alive, and that your dog is 'really' clever. These are not metaphors, as if you had described your dog – or your teacher – as a 'pig', or his behaviour as 'volcanic'. The meaning of *those* words has been extended so far that they no longer literally apply.

Brian Davies comments:

Someone might say, 'God is a mighty fortress'. We then ask, 'Is that really true? Is God made of stone, for example?' The answer will probably be: 'Of course not. I am speaking metaphorically.' . . . But suppose someone now says 'God is alive' or 'God is good'. Again we ask, 'Is that really true? Is he really alive and good? Or are we now using a figure of speech?' (Davies, 1993, pp. 22–23)

[Aquinas] wants to say that when we speak of God analogically we are speaking in a literal way. If someone asked Aquinas 'Is God really wise' the answer would have been 'Yes'. . . In the case of God and creatures it is possible to apply the same terms to both in such a way that it does not have to mean entirely the same in both cases nor something so different that the result is just a metaphor. (Davies, 1985, p. 140)

Aquinas and others believe that, in speaking of God, analogy is greatly to be preferred over metaphor for two reasons.

- Words like 'rock' and 'lion' have material limitations built into their meaning: 'it is part of the meaning of "rock" that it has its being in a merely material way. Such words can be

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used of God only metaphorically' (*Summa Theologiae*, 1a, 13, 3).

- Analogies are more easily specified than metaphors. We do this by distinguishing their *positive content*, the features that are in common between their application to God and their application to the created world, and their *negative content*, the features that are *not* shared between God and, for example, humans (e.g. God's 'life' does not involve or imply many of the features of biological life such as growth and development, respiration, irritability and reproduction). Without some specification, we could never use language about God in a valid argument, because we would not know what was implied, and what was not implied, by calling God 'wise' or 'loving'. Surely, nothing at all follows from the claim that 'God is loving', unless we can say something about the ways in which God's love is (and is not) like human love?

Although Aquinas himself rejected the idea that words about humans could be applied to God *univocally* ('with a single voice', i.e. with exactly the same meaning), philosophers of religion have pointed out that:

- (1) there are some technical theological concepts that apply *only* to God (e.g. aseity or 'self-existence') and only God is truly 'infinite' (not finite); and
- (2) even words such as 'wise' may be univocal in their application to us and God, since 'wise' is still synonymous with 'knows many things' and contrary to 'foolish', although 'there are differences in what wisdom amounts to in God' (Swinburne, 1992, p. 152;

see also ch. 3). According to William Alston, it is possible to apply many human terms univocally to God, at least in a 'partial' way, because some human terms ('know', 'will', 'love', 'forgive', 'make', etc.) retain a common core of meaning in terms of function when they are applied to God. For example:

What it is for God to *make something* is radically different from what it is for a human being to make something; but that does not rule out an abstract feature in common, for example, *that by the exercise of agency something comes into existence*. (Alston, 1987, p. 24; see also Alston, 2005)

The contrast between analogies and metaphors is often treated as a difference of degree rather than a difference in kind, as they occupy the ends of a continuous spectrum of shifted meaning: see Astley, 2004, pp. 53-54; Stiver, 1996, p. 127. Further, if you look at Aquinas' examples of analogies, you might argue that our notion of being alive is also a highly 'material' – in the sense of physical – idea, and its application to God should therefore be regarded as metaphorical.

Symbols

A symbol is essentially something that represents or 'stands for' something else. On this definition, all language is symbolic even when used literally and univocally, as it represents some reality, process or abstract idea outside language. For this reason, it is best to think primarily of *empirical objects and situations* as symbols. Examples from Christianity include the physical cross

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and the historical event of Jesus' crucifixion.

In religion, symbolic *language* is best understood as referring to objects, people and events in this world (the real symbols) that religious believers think of as standing for – and thus revealing and expressing – a reality that lies beyond the things of this world. Such symbolic language operates 'by taking images derived from the world of sense experience and using them to speak of that which transcends them' (Fawcett, 1970, p. 30). Nevertheless, many writers use the terms 'symbol' and 'metaphor' interchangeably.

Paul Tillich wrote powerfully – though not always very clearly – about the way that symbols imaginatively reach beyond the limits of our concepts or ideas. An explicitly religious symbol works in opening up the hidden dimension of reality at its most fundamental level, the dimension of the Holy, by somehow *participating* 'in the power of the divine to which it points'. These symbols are always in danger of replacing the Holy; and 'faith, if it takes its symbols literally, becomes idolatrous!' Other than the claim that God, as ultimate reality, is 'Being Itself', everything else that may be said about God is symbolic (Tillich, 1968, vol. 1, p. 265; 1957, p. 52; cf. Astley, 2011).

Metaphor

Metaphorical language is not just for poets. We all use it all the time when we describe something in words that only literally apply to another – sometimes very different – thing. In doing this, we perform a leap of imagination that transfers language between them (*meta pherō*, 'I carry across') – speaking about 'one thing in terms which are seen to be suggestive of another' (Soskice, 1985,

p. 15). This depends on our spotting a similarity (an analogy) between the two things, as Christians do when speaking of the church as 'the body of Christ', and God as a 'shepherd', 'king', 'parent', 'potter' or 'rock'. Janet Soskice argues that

no metaphor is completely reducible to a literal equivalent without consequent loss of content . . . There are many areas where, if we do not speak figuratively, we can say very little. (Soskice, 1985, pp. 94-96)

As the figurative meaning would be lost in translation into literal language, many prefer to stick to metaphors in speaking of God.

Properly understood, metaphors may offer stronger protection than analogies against the temptation to describe God 'anthropomorphically' (in the exact form of a human being), and of thus reducing the creator to the level of a creature. 'God is our father' does not imply that God is male; 'I am the true vine' does not mean that Jesus grows literal fruit. In worship and scripture, metaphors are often piled together, mutually qualifying one another. If God is both 'rock' (Deuteronomy 32:15) and lion (Hosea 5:14), and both laundress (Isaiah 4:4) and king (Jeremiah 10:7), no one description can be taken as literal – or complete. This is also true of the *similes* used in Jesus' parables, where the kingdom of God is declared to be 'like' many different situations (cf. Matthew 20:1-16; Luke 18:9-14).

Later, orthodoxy 'aimed at having every possible model' (Ramsey, 1957, p. 170). When systematic theology develops the Bible's imaginative metaphors and stories into more conceptual models, and then into even more abstract concepts such as the

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Trinity and more developed explanations such as the theory of the death of Christ as a penal substitution, there is gain in clarity and consistency – but a danger of losing the *religious* dimension.

Images ‘feed’ concepts; concepts ‘discipline’ images. Images without concepts are blind; concepts without images are sterile . . . Concepts are never free of the need for funding by images, the affectional and existential

richness of images, and the qualification against conceptual pretensions supplied by the plurality of images. (McFague, 1983, p. 26; see Astley, 2010, pp. 58-62).

The existential nature of our God-talk . . . excludes mere intellectual speculation about how God is apart from the way we relate to him in our spirituality and in the life of faith. (Brümmer, 2005, pp. 12, 17)

Glossary

Analogical: the use of the same language with a similar meaning.

Analogy of attribution: e.g. God is ‘wise’ as the cause of human wisdom.

Analogy of being: the similarity between humans and God that results from their being created in God’s image.

Analogy of proportionality: e.g. God is ‘wise’ in a way appropriate to God’s nature (as we are wise in a way appropriate to our own).

Equivocal: the use of the same language with completely different meanings.

Existential: relating to human concerns and immediate lived experience.

Metaphor: a figure of speech in which one thing is spoken of in terms of another.

Univocal: the use of the same language with exactly the same meaning.

Links

<http://www.biblegateway.com/resources/dictionary-of-bible-themes/5409-metaphor>

(BibleGateway.com: Examples of biblical metaphors)

<http://www.religion-online.org/showbook.asp?title=452>

(Sallie McFague, *Speaking in*

Parables: A Study in Metaphor and Theology)

<http://www.iep.utm.edu/rel-lang/>

(‘Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy’: Jennifer Hart Weed on religious language)

Discussion points

1. Take an appropriate hymn, creed or Bible passage and analyse the meaning of the language it applies to God.
2. What are the advantages and disadvantages of (a) analogical and (b) metaphorical religious language?
3. In what ways is the analogical and metaphorical nature of religious language relevant to the criticism that some religious beliefs appear to be 'unfalsifiable'?

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