

A Philosophy of Religion: Some Theses

1. The adherents of a religion represent the possibility of self-understanding/ understanding existence decisively re-presented through their religion's explicit primal source as originally, if only implicitly, authorized by ultimate reality itself, and as therefore *the* answer to the existential question about the meaning of reality for us. In this way, they explicitly address the question we all ask, implicitly, if not explicitly, of how we are to understand our own existence with others in the whole if we are to do so truly and authentically. Claiming to be authorized explicitly as well as implicitly by ultimate reality itself, they explicitly authorize all of us thus to understand ourselves and to lead our lives accordingly, by bearing the same witness they have borne to us through the whole of our life-praxis.

2. The life-praxis necessarily implied by the self-understanding/ understanding of existence, explicitly authorized by a religion is basically twofold in form. There is the primary form of bearing witness, and there is the secondary form of critically reflecting on bearing witness, which is to say, doing theology.

3. "Bearing witness" is the whole life-praxis, secular as well as religious, expressive of the self-understanding/ understanding of existence, explicitly authorized by a religion. It belongs to bearing witness to make or imply certain claims to validity—specifically, the claim to be adequate to its content because it is both appropriate to the explicit primal source authorizing it and credible to human existence; and the claim to be fitting to its situation. But whether these claims are valid is never settled simply by making or implying them. On the contrary, if and when they become sufficiently problematic, nothing is to be done, provided communication is to continue and its commitments are to be kept, but to shift from the primary level of making or implying the claims to the secondary level of critically validating them—and, in this sense, to do theology.

4. “Doing theology,” then, is critically reflecting on the self-understanding and life-praxis explicitly authorized by a religion—the life-praxis alone being actually given for reflection. “Critically reflecting” here includes, first, critically *interpreting* the meaning of bearing witness, and then, second, critically *validating* the claims to validity that bearing witness makes or implies.

5. Bearing witness and doing theology are as distinct as they are inseparable and therefore no more to be identified or confused than opposed or played off against one another. This is because the two forms of activity or praxis belong respectively on the two different but related levels of existing understandingly—bearing witness belonging on the primary level where we somehow understand ourselves and lead our lives accordingly; doing theology, on the secondary level where we critically interpret the meaning of our life-praxis and critically validate its claims to validity.

6. Doing theology so understood naturally differentiates itself into doing mainly three things, all of which must be done if theology is to be done: “doing historical theology,” “doing systematic theology,” and “doing practical theology.” To do the first is simply to do the critical interpretation of the meaning of bearing witness that is the *conditio sine qua non* of doing the critical validation of its claims to validity. To do the second and third is to do the critical validation necessary to validating respectively the claims of bearing witness to be adequate to its content and fitting to its situation.

7. If to do systematic theology is to critically validate the claim of witness to be adequate to its content, doing it requires validating, in turn, the two further claims thereby implied: that bearing witness is appropriate to the explicit primal source authorizing it; and that it is credible to any human being simply as such.

8. Critically validating the credibility of bearing witness is as integral to doing systematic theology as critically validating its appropriateness—and for exactly the same reason: because of the claims to validity made or implied by bearing witness itself.

9. Doing systematic theology, however, so as to critically validate bearing witness's claim to credibility is not possible without also doing the philosophical reflection necessary to determining our true and authentic self-understanding/ understanding of existence. Doing such philosophical reflection—or, more simply, “doing philosophy”—requires doing two different but closely related kinds of reflection. The reason for this is that there are two parts to determining what is to count as the true and authentic self-understanding/ understanding of existence—an “in principle” part and an “in fact” part.” Doing the first, “in principle” part requires doing the critical reflection proper to the philosophy of religion, understood as logical analysis of the “deep structure,” or logical *kind* of meaning, expressed not only by religious language but also by the implicit bearing witness that religious language explicitly authorizes. By means of such analysis, two things can be determined: (1) that it is only by its substantial agreement with the true and authentic self-understanding/ understanding of existence, that bearing witness can be validated as credible; and (2) that a self-understanding/ understanding of existence, can be true and authentic if, and only if, it is appropriate to, and hence authorized by, ultimate reality itself, whose meaning for us, for how we are to understand ourselves and lead our lives, is determined by its structure in itself.

10. But then to do the second, “in fact” part of determining the self-understanding/ understanding of existence that satisfies this principle requires doing the different kind of philosophical reflection that is properly meant by “doing metaphysics.” By this is meant logical analysis, not of the several different kinds of meaning or “deep structures,” whether separately or together, but of the necessary presuppositions of *any* kind of meaning, and so, as it were, the deepest structure of all. Doing metaphysics, in other words, is logically analyzing the ultimate reality of our own existence in its structure in itself.

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1. The language of a religion is to be analyzed as “existential language” in three senses of the term. It is existential language, first of all, in the proper sense that it is about

existence, understood simply as the property of being real in one of the two main ways in which something can be so, i.e., concretely real, as distinct from being real only abstractly. But, then, being language that explicitly addresses the existential question about the meaning of ultimate reality for us, religious language is existential in two further senses. It is existential, secondly, in the emphatic sense that the concrete reality it is about is the ultimate reality of our own existence, which is to say, ourselves, others, and the whole. And it is existential, thirdly, also in the emphatic sense that it is about this ultimate concrete reality, not abstractly, in its structure in itself, but concretely, in its meaning for us.

2. The difference between this analysis of religious language and that offered by the usual cognitivist analyses should be clear. On these analyses, religious utterances are taken to be existential in the first sense only, in that they simply assert or imply something about concrete reality. This they do as factual utterances that are meaningful, if they are, only because or insofar as they can be factually, if not empirically falsified. But what such analyses deny or overlook is that the concrete reality religious utterances are about is not the immediate, merely factual reality of the world and ourselves as disclosed empirically through our sense experience, but rather the ultimate reality of our own existence as disclosed existentially through our nonsensuous experience of ourselves, others, and the whole. This means that among the utterances foundational to a religion are some that, being about the strictly ultimate reality of the whole, logically cannot imply merely factual utterances that, as such, are factually falsifiable. Moreover, how religious utterances are about ultimate reality is also existential, in that they assert something about its meaning for us, for our own self-understanding and life-praxis, as distinct from its structure in itself.

3. On the usual noncognitivist analyses, on the other hand, the point that paradigmatic religious utterances are existential is missed altogether, because they are taken as not asserting or implying anything at all about concrete reality, even though certain things can definitely be asserted or implied about them themselves as instances of such reality. They are analyzed, instead, as expressions of a certain basic human attitude

or valuation in no way determined or authorized by reality, factual or otherwise, but variously characterized as a “*blik*,” or a “historical perspective,” or “an intention to behave in a certain way.”

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