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0521803683 - Religion and the Hermeneutics of Contemplation

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CHAPTER I

*Hermeneutics and the philosophical future of
religious studies*I THE PRESENT CONTENDERS: THE HERMENEUTICS OF
RECOLLECTION AND THE HERMENEUTICS OF SUSPICION

Since Paul Ricoeur's book, *Freud and Philosophy: An Essay on Interpretation*,¹ it has been commonly understood that if we want to understand religious concepts we have to choose between two distinct modes of interpreting religion in religious studies: the hermeneutics of recollection or the hermeneutics of suspicion. The hermeneutics of recollection is sympathetic to religion, since it assumes that believers are in touch with something real. Its task is to recollect, in the sense of retrieve, this 'something' for our age, convinced that there is a message here which we need to heed. The new faith which emerges from this dialectical exercise will be one which has been purged by the fires of criticism. By contrast, the hermeneutics of suspicion denies that there is a divine reality in religion. The very conception of it is said to be the product of illusion. The imperative of the intellect is an imperative to be radically suspicious in this context. Since there is nothing real to recollect, or to retrieve, enlightenment consists in rescuing us from religious mystification.

Ricoeur believes that most phenomenologists of religion need to practise the hermeneutics of recollection. The faith which finally emerges will be a second naiveté, but one which can only be achieved when one has worked one's way through to it via the various criticisms of religion in our culture which cannot be ignored.

For many others, such as J. Samuel Preus, the hermeneutics of suspicion is the very hallmark of modern religious studies. For Preus,

¹ Paul Ricoeur, *Freud and Philosophy: An Essay on Interpretation*, trans. Denis Savage, New Haven: Yale University Press 1970.

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the hermeneutics of recollection is inimical to serious intellectual enquiry, and belongs, if anywhere, in religious institutions. He argues that there is an essential distinction between religious apologetics on the one hand, and naturalistic explanations of religion on the other. Religious apologetics involves the acceptance of religious authority, and in its acceptance of the God-given character of religion, it uses assumptions ‘different from the assumptions one might use to understand and explain other realms of culture’.² This is why the status of religious apologetics in the academy is problematic. On the other hand, Preus argues, naturalistic explanations of religion are justifiably reductionist, since they analyse religious beliefs in terms of their more fundamental constituent parts which are not religious. ‘Contrary to the claim of classical Western theology, this new tradition claimed and claims that it is not necessary to believe in order to understand – indeed, that suspension of belief is probably a condition for understanding.’³

Preus admits that religious and naturalistic explanations compete in secular universities. He calls these explanations ‘paradigms’ or ‘exemplars’ of understanding, and holds that they are incommensurable. As yet, Preus concludes, there is no agreement in the academy about which paradigm or exemplar of interpretation of religion should be adopted.

In fact, the situation within religious studies is more complex, since there are battles within the two kinds of hermeneutics. Within the hermeneutics of recollection there are battles between evidentialists, Reformed epistemologists, and phenomenologists of various persuasions. There is also a battle of paradigms and exemplars within the hermeneutics of suspicion. We need think only of Tylor’s intellectualist account of religion, Freud’s psychoanalytic account, and Durkheim’s sociological analysis, to realise how radical the battle of the paradigms can be.

When we consider this complex situation, it is not surprising that many thinkers, such as Daniel L. Pals, conclude that no single interpretation is going to succeed in giving a complete, all-inclusive account of religion:

When we look back on it from the present, this hope of forming a single theory of all religions astonishes us by its naive overconfidence. Thoughtful

² J. Samuel Preus, *Explaining Religion*, Atlanta: Scholars Press 1996, p. x.

³ Ibid.

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observers today are inclined to be far more modest. Impressive books have been written just to explain one belief of one religion or to compare a single feature – a specific custom or ritual – of one religion with something similar in another.⁴

Despite this complexity, Pals admits that all-embracing theories continue to prove attractive. Within the hermeneutics of recollection religionists are still ‘inspired by the scientific ideal of a general theory that could draw many different phenomena into one coherent, widely illuminating pattern’.⁵

What of the all-embracing naturalistic explanations of the hermeneutics of suspicion? Pals argues that these explanations ‘need not be valid to be of value’.

In religion as in other fields of inquiry, a suggestive original theory can, even in failure, stimulate new inquiry, or reformulate problems in such a way as to promote fruitful new understandings. Thus, even if most of what they have said were found to be in error, the theorists . . . would still deserve our time and attention, for their ideas and interpretations have often filtered beyond the sphere of religion alone to affect our literature, philosophy, history, politics, art, psychology, and, indeed, almost every realm of modern thought.⁶

Although these cultural consequences cannot be denied, ‘understanding religion’ cannot be found among the ‘fruitful new understandings’ if, in fact, most of what the theories say about religion is in error. In this context, to use Peter Berger’s phrase, ‘imaginary sticks can draw real blood’.⁷ What is vital is not to bleed to death, but to learn from the wounds of confusion. These wounds may go deep, but fruitful new understandings emerge through the process of healing them.

Pals’ final verdict is that, whether in the hermeneutics of recollection, or the hermeneutics of suspicion, attempts at general theories are too ambitious, and that the future in religious studies lies with the particularists.⁸ Why not settle for this suitably modest conclusion? The philosophical reason for not doing so is that it does not address the conceptual issues which separate the hermeneutics of recollection and the hermeneutics of suspicion. These conceptual issues re-emerge no matter how particularist research programmes

⁴ Daniel L. Pals, *Seven Theories of Religion*, Oxford: Oxford University Press 1996, p. 9.

⁵ Ibid. ⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Peter Berger, *Invitation to Sociology*, Harmondsworth: Penguin Books 1975, p. 185.

⁸ Pals, *Seven Theories of Religion*, ‘Conclusion’.

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in religious studies become. Pals admits that in this context many have still found naturalistic explanations of religion ‘to be extraordinarily useful simply by scaling back their claims from the whole to the part’.⁹ He has in mind those who are prepared to admit that such explanations are only partially correct. The strategy he recommends, however, has been used by Kai Nielsen, and others, to re-establish the comprehensive claims of the hermeneutics of suspicion.¹⁰ They admit that no *single* reductionist theory can account for every religious belief and practice, but still maintain that every aspect of religious belief and practice can be explained by *some* reductionist theory. What Tylor, Freud and Durkheim cannot achieve individually, they can achieve collectively. In this way, a general thesis is re-established: it is possible to give a naturalistic explanation of every aspect of religious belief and practice. Nor can Pals escape the ambitions of such a claim by saying, as he does at the end of his book, that ‘religion in the end seems to be a matter not of impersonal processes that can be known with certainty because they have been scripted by the laws of nature, but of personal beliefs and behaviours that can only be plausibly explained because they have arisen from complex, partly free and partly conditioned choices of human agents’.¹¹ This is because reductionist theories of a psychological or sociological persuasion will claim to provide an analysis of these choices which is more fundamental than the reasons offered by the agents themselves. Those who practise the hermeneutics of recollection will, of course, continue to deny this claim.

2 THE HERMENEUTICS OF CONTEMPLATION

In this book, I want to demonstrate the need to go beyond the hermeneutics of recollection and the hermeneutics of suspicion to the hermeneutics of contemplation. The last is simply an application to religion of the more general contemplative character of philosophy itself.¹² This philosophical contemplation waits on the role concepts play in human life. In doing so, it faces head-on the

⁹ Ibid., p. 281.

¹⁰ Kai Nielsen, ‘Is Religion “the Opium of the People?” Marxianism and Religion’ in D. Z. Phillips, ed., *Can Religion Be Explained Away?*, London and New York: Macmillan and St. Martin’s Press 1996.

¹¹ Pals, *Seven Theories of Religion*, pp. 282–3.

¹² See D. Z. Phillips, *Philosophy’s Cool Place*, Ithaca: Cornell University Press 1999.

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fundamental conceptual issues separating the hermeneutics of 'recollection' and 'suspicion'. Can religion be explained in non-religious terms? Is religion a surface phenomenon which can be analysed in terms more real and fundamental than its own? Does religion have anything to say which is irreducibly religious?

At this stage, I am stating conclusions dogmatically. Their justification will be found in the chapters which follow. I adopt this strategy so that methodological issues may be addressed at the outset. Pals is correct in saying that the outcome of our enquiries will not be an all-embracing theory. In certain cases, reductionist, naturalistic explanations will prove to have an application. Would it not be surprising if they had no point at all? But, as we have seen, these explanations make far more ambitious claims. They claim that all religious beliefs are illusory. Waiting on such beliefs, contemplating their sense, shows that this general claim cannot be sustained. It follows that the hermeneutics of contemplation is opposed to the general claims of the hermeneutics of suspicion, without denying that some of its suspicions are well-founded.

If the hermeneutics of contemplation goes beyond the hermeneutics of suspicion, does it go beyond the hermeneutics of recollection? Some will see in it no more than the hermeneutics of recollection in disguise. No philosophical progress can be made until I disabuse the reader of this accusation. Why should some harbour this thought? There are two reasons which need to be examined.

The first reason for thinking that the hermeneutics of contemplation is no more than the hermeneutics of recollection in disguise is the thought that the former is still a subtle form of apologetics. As we have seen, the hermeneutics of recollection has the retrieval of faith as its aim; a faith purged by criticism and, hence, one that can be advocated. The religious interpreter lives in the expectancy of a new Word which has a message for him. But this cannot be said of the hermeneutics of contemplation. To contemplate possibilities of sense is different from advocating those possibilities, or from finding a faith to live by in them. Philosophical, conceptual elucidation is different from, and wider than, personal appropriation. This has the consequence of opposing that theoretical atheism which claims that all religious beliefs are meaningless. Philosophical contemplation rescues atheism, as much as belief, from distortions of itself. We still need not deny that there are unbelievers who see no sense in religion, and religious believers who see no sense in atheism. An

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appreciation of the virtues of philosophical contemplation would lead to a different attitude towards such blindness. Just as there is a difference between saying, 'I do not appreciate chamber music', and saying, 'There is nothing in chamber music to appreciate', so there would be a difference between someone's saying that they cannot see any sense in either religion or atheism, and the claim that there is no sense in either to be appreciated.

There is a sense in which finding meaning in religious belief or atheism is to have the possibility of belief or unbelief in one. This is not to confess either belief or unbelief. Rather, it is the ability to appreciate how human life can be seen like that. That need not imply that one will see one's own life in that way, or say 'Amen' to it. Reactions to what is appreciated will vary a great deal, including the possibility of being appalled by it.

Those who do not think religion can survive intellectual enquiry will not be able to admit the distinction I am making. This is why Preus argues that the distinction between theology as 'prescriptive' and religious studies as 'descriptive', drawn to justify the latter in secular universities, does not go far enough. Preus claims that 'even when one only "describes" religious traditions, the self-understandings and self-justifications of these traditions are inevitably included in any adequate description. The result is that a subtle form of apologetic may result, since the message conveyed is that the (only) right and proper explanations of religions are of the sort given by believers.'¹³

If it can be shown, through examples, that religious concepts can have an irreducibly religious sense, why should that be any kind of advocacy? Preus says, 'The goal, after all, is not to legitimate religion but to explain it.'¹⁴ But why should explanation, in the form of conceptual elucidation, be thought to show, always, that religion is illegitimate? Surely, our primary intellectual obligation is to recognise sense where sense is present. If that sense is a religious sense, so be it. In anthropology this is achieved in 'interpretative' accounts of religious beliefs and practices, which endeavour to bring them alive to the reader in their own terms. Pals gives the work of Clifford Geertz as an example. The aim of Geertz's work is not apologetic. Pals says that Geertz opposes reductionist theories of religion, not

¹³ Preus, *Explaining Religion*, p. xx.

¹⁴ Ibid.

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because they ‘present any challenge to his personal beliefs, but simply because in his view they do not adequately explain the subject of religion’.¹⁵ Personally, Geertz is agnostic about religion. The interpretative understanding he achieves in anthropology has a parallel, in philosophy, in the hermeneutics of contemplation.

The second reason for thinking that the hermeneutics of contemplation is no more than the hermeneutics of recollection in disguise is the thought that it is simply a defensive strategy against the intellectual challenge of the hermeneutics of suspicion. Preus would, no doubt, describe it in the same way as he describes religious explanations: ‘The very last bastion of theology (or religious thought) was, and is, its claim to be able to explain *itself* on “its own terms”’.¹⁶ For Preus, it is an attempt to thwart the Enlightenment intellectual ambition to explain everything; an ambition whose exuberant spirit was expressed by Charles Dupuis when he exclaimed: ‘The genius of a man capable of explaining religion seems to me to be of a higher order than that of a founder of religion. And that is the glory to which I aspire.’¹⁷

One contributory factor to thinking of the hermeneutics of contemplation as a defensive strategy against the hermeneutics of suspicion is the confusion of thinking of religious beliefs as explanations of religion to be set against the reductive explanations of the latter. What do the religious explanations look like? Preus suggests that the explanation of religion offered is some ‘supernatural (or some objective transcendent) ground of religion . . . assumed as the really existent and generative source of religious language’.¹⁸ He argues that ‘once supernatural cases have been renounced . . . the student of religion is forced to search out psychological and historical causes’.¹⁹ But Preus’ way of putting the matter cannot be right. A belief that a religion is God-given is not an explanation of that religion, since it is itself a religious belief. What is happening here is that the use of a religious perspective is being confused with talk *about* the perspective, as though one were grounding it in some simple way. Similarly, to say that miracles are of God is not to

¹⁵ Pals, *Seven Theories of Religion*, p. 280.

¹⁶ Preus, *Explaining Religion*, p. xvi.

¹⁷ Quoted by Preus, *Explaining Religion*, p. xvi, from Frank E. Manuel, *The Eighteenth Century Confronts the Gods*, New York: Atheneum 1967, p. 243.

¹⁸ Preus, *Explaining Religion*, p. xvi.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 40.

explain miracles. 'Miracles' is already a religious conception; they are revelatory of God. Again, believers do not praise God because he is their Creator, since 'Creator' is already a term of praise.

Saying a religion is from God is not like tracing the author of a book. It is rather to say 'Amen' to it; it is itself a religious or spiritual judgement. Thus we cannot say, as Van Harvey does, 'that religious "sense" . . . itself contains an implied explanation because this sense is alleged to arise out of or to have been caused by contact with an unseen presence, a "More"'.²⁰ 'Contact with an unseen presence' does not explain the religious sense, since it is that religious sense which gives meaning to what might be meant by 'contact with an unseen presence'. It is as though we explained prayer as 'talking to God', when it is the grammar of prayer which shows what such talk comes to.²¹ Confession is being confused with explanation.

Thus we have seen that religious beliefs are not counter-explanations to the explanations found in the hermeneutics of suspicion. In that sense they are not explanations at all, and cannot therefore be seen as defensive explanatory strategies to avoid the threat of naturalistic explanations of religion.

3 BEYOND INTERPRETATION TO CONTEMPLATION

So far, I have argued against the accusation that the hermeneutics of contemplation is the hermeneutics of recollection in disguise. I have tried to show that its aims are not apologetic, and that it is not a defensive strategy against the hermeneutics of suspicion. Nevertheless, it may still be felt that there is a task of interpreting religion which the hermeneutics of suspicion attempts, at least, but which the hermeneutics of contemplation, like the hermeneutics of recollection, shies away from. What are the philosophical roots of this misgiving? Many are to be found in the assumption that all concepts are interpretations, and the consequent failure to realise when interpretation has to stop.

From the standpoint of the hermeneutics of suspicion, it often seems that religious thinkers evade criticism of their religious explanations by appealing to a notion of religious experience which

²⁰ Van A. Harvey, *Feuerbach and the interpretation of religion*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1997, p. 94.

²¹ This is a major theme in my *The Concept of Prayer*, London and New York: Routledge and Kegan Paul and Schocken Books 1965; paperback edn Oxford: Blackwell pbk. 1981.

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is independent of all concepts. Schleiermacher is often held to be guilty of such an appeal. But, even if we said, with Kierkegaard, that proof is from the emotions, this would not by-pass concepts since, as Van Harvey points out, 'we cannot even ascribe emotions to ourselves or to others without concepts'.²²

Why should this emphasis on concepts be so important for the hermeneutics of suspicion? The answer is to be found in the ways it identifies 'concepts' with 'interpretations'. Since interpretations are essentially contestable, it would follow that religious concepts are contestable interpretations. But the identification of 'concepts' with 'interpretations' is logically problematic. It is an identification which Harvey seems to endorse. He makes the general claim 'that emotions themselves arise out of or are functions of interpretations'.²³ He is able to say this because he holds that 'as there are no theory-free perceptions, so there are no uninterpreted emotions. We have learned that interpretation "goes all the way down" so to speak.'²⁴ If we have learned this, we need to unlearn it as soon as possible.

Interpretations, like theory-laden perceptions, are parasitic on concepts which are not interpretations, and on perceptions which are not theory-laden. For example, there are situations where we need to interpret whether someone is angry or sorrowful. But were there not situations in which what we mean by 'anger' and 'sorrow' does not call for interpretation, the call for interpretation, in other contexts, would be unintelligible. If 'anger' and 'sorrow' were not appreciated by someone in the situations where no interpretation is called for, we would conclude that they did not understand what is meant by 'anger' and 'sorrow'. To be sure, we can be puzzled, philosophically, about such concepts and that may call for elucidation. Such elucidation, however, seeks to give a perspicuous representation of the role those concepts actually have, not to get to something 'behind' them of which they are supposed to be interpretations. When the concepts in question are religious concepts, contemplating them, too, will involve making clear the use they actually have, not searching for something 'behind' them which they are supposed to interpret.

These logical points have a crucial bearing on the practice of the hermeneutics of suspicion. That this is so can be brought out by an

²² Harvey, *Feuerbach*, p. 93.²³ *Ibid.*, pp. 93–4.²⁴ *Ibid.*

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examination of the claims of one influential example, namely, Wayne Proudfoot's treatment of religious experience.²⁵

The problematic assumptions on which this treatment is based appear early in the book's introduction. Proudfoot draws attention to what he regards as the successful attack on the alleged metaphysical basis of religion in the work of Hume and Kant, and says: 'The turn to religious experience was motivated in large measure by an interest in freeing religious doctrine and practice from dependence on metaphysical beliefs.'²⁶ Schleiermacher's *On Religion* had this explicit aim, and resulted in the claim that:

Religion is grounded in a moment of experience that is intrinsically religious, so it need not be justified by metaphysical argument, by the kind of evidence considered by proponents of the design argument, or by appeals to its importance for the moral life. Moreover, because religion is autonomous, all possible conflict between religion and science or morality is precluded. Any attempt to assimilate religion to nonreligious phenomena is an attempt to reduce it to something other than it is. Reductionism is thus the chief error to be avoided in the study of religion.²⁷

There is no doubt that Schleiermacher's claim is too ambitious. Granting the value of freeing religion from certain metaphysical criticism, this does not secure, at a stroke, the immunity from criticism Proudfoot describes. This is because, as William James showed in his *Varieties of Religious Experience*, religion is a mixed bag. 'Religious experience' covers many different phenomena. The hermeneutics of contemplation insists on saying that what these phenomena come to is discovered by paying attention to the place they occupy in human life. As we shall see later, nothing is presumed about whether this place reveals confusion or contradictions.²⁸ This is because the hermeneutics of contemplation is not a presupposition one brings to the phenomena in question, but the result of giving the phenomena the attention they deserve. Proudfoot cannot give this kind of attention to the phenomena because he does approach them with a confused philosophical conflation of 'concepts' and 'interpretations'.

Proudfoot is critical, as Harvey is, of the claim that the moment of religious experience is linguistically unmediated. This claim then

²⁵ Wayne Proudfoot, *Religious Experience*, Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press 1985.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. xiii.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. xiii–xiv.

²⁸ See pp. 13–17.