

Introduction: Is our task impossible or impolite?

SKEPTICISM REGARDING COMBINING RATIONALITY AND RELIGION

There is a great deal of skepticism in our culture about any effort to argue that any religious belief is true or that any religious belief is false. Such attempts are often found offensive. Those whose beliefs are defended may feel that if the case for their beliefs is too strong, and this becomes known, then faith will be impossible. They worry that evidence may endanger faith. Those whose beliefs are criticized may feel that they are being subjected to personal attack. Regarding these matters, two things should be said. One is that there are accounts of religious faith wherein having faith and having strong evidence are perfectly compatible. At least philosophically, and arguably on religious grounds as well, these are more adequate conceptions of faith than those where the presence of evidence threatens faith. My faith in my good friends is not threatened because I have good evidence of their existence and integrity. Why should things be different concerning religious faith? The other thing that needs to be said is that the endeavor to tell if a religious doctrine is true, even if its outcome suggests that the doctrine is false, is not an attack on anyone who believes that doctrine. It is not even an attack on the doctrine. It is just an attempt to find out whether something (presumably something important) is true. Of course someone may still feel abused by an inquiry regarding the truth of some cherished belief. Then that person need not participate in the inquiry or read its results. But

Introduction

for any interesting question there will be someone who has a stake in the answer's going one way rather than the other. If on those grounds we avoid raising any interesting question, we shall have made ourselves the intellectual prisoners of other people's fears.

Some people find it tempting to argue along some such lines as these:

- (a) What we know is limited to things that lie within the reach of our senses and our limited cognitive powers.
- (b) Discovering the truth or falsehood of religious claims is beyond the reach of our senses and our limited cognitive powers.

Hence:

- (c) We cannot know whether religious claims are true or false.

Now (a) is intended to say more than simply that what we can know is limited to what we can know. It is intended to say what the limits of our knowledge are. But it is not clear what those limits are or what determines them. In trying to become clearer, we can make a useful simple distinction. To know the *truth-value* of something is to know that it is true (if it *is* true) or that it is false (if it *is* false). To know *whether* something has truth-value is to know whether it is true or false. You can know whether something has truth-value without knowing whether it is true as opposed to false. I know that *George Bush ate all of a hot dog yesterday* has truth-value – I know that it is either true or false – without knowing what its truth-value is. What the (a–c) argument suggests, then, is that while no doubt claims like *God exists* and *Nirvana can be attained* are either true or false, we cannot discover which they are (even though we want to know).

The argument has slight credentials. We seem to be able to discover that there are black holes, quarks, and neutrinos. If we discover that after all there are not these particular things, our doing so is likely to involve our discovering that they do not exist, because at least equally strange things exist with

Introduction

which black holes, quarks, or neutrinos cannot coexist. We can discover that, surprisingly, axiomatic systems of a certain power cannot be proved to be both consistent and complete. We can tell what the limits of our cognitive powers may be only by using them, and who knows what we may discover?

The argument does not need much by way of credentials in our current intellectual atmosphere. The assumption is that religious and moral matters are subjective. What this amounts to concretely came out nicely in two recent comments by students of mine. One asked in all innocence, "Why can't everybody just make up their own religion?" In contemporary America, the notion of do-it-yourself religion joins do-it-yourself home repair with no sense of disparity. My response was that I had no objection to this so long as no one claimed that his or her religion was true. Another student informed me, with great charm and earnestness, that truth in religion, like truth elsewhere, always was only *truth for me*. I pointed out that this amounts to saying that the objective truth for us all is that truth is subjective, which is self-contradictory. *A is true for me* just means *I believe that A*, which means *I believe that A is true*. One cannot sustain the notion of belief if one dissolves the notion of *truth* into that of *believed true*. In a world in which such basic points are news, an argument like (a-c) has nothing to fear. In fact, (a) is so vague about our limits that one cannot tell what follows from it. So (a) leaves us in the dark about why we should accept (b). The conclusion (c) follows from (b) alone; indeed, (c) just *is* (b) restated. So we are left with the vagueness of (a) and the sheer assertion of (b). Yet the (a-c) argument appears with regularity in student papers supporting the view that religion lies beyond reason's range.

The view the argument expresses is much like a view David Hume held, a view that goes like this:

- (a') Anything that we cannot verify or falsify we cannot know to be true or false.
- (b') The propositions that we can verify or falsify are lim-

Introduction

ited to propositions that we can see to be contradictory (this will falsify them) and those that we can see to have a contradictory denial (this will verify them) and those that we can either verify or else falsify by reference to sensory experience or introspection.

- (c') Characteristically, religious doctrines are not expressed by propositions that fall into any of the favored classes referred to in (b').

Hence:

- (d) We cannot verify or falsify religious doctrines.

Hence:

- (e) We cannot know religious doctrines to be true or false.

A problem arises regarding (a'): Given (b'), we cannot verify (a'). No sensory or introspective evidence verifies or falsifies that anything we cannot verify or falsify in the way (b') describes we also cannot know to be true or false, but (a') is not a necessary truth. So if we can tell whether (a') is true, we must be able to falsify (a') (by seeing that it is contradictory). If we can falsify (a'), then (a') is false, and if we cannot even in principle falsify (a'), then we cannot tell whether (a') is true or false. Then determining the truth-value of (a') is beyond our mortal knowledge. But if (a') is either false or such that its truth-value is not discernible by us, then we cannot use it as a premise in an argument to show that we cannot discern the truth-value of religious claims.

This nicely illustrates a deep problem with a priori attempts to show that we cannot discern the truth-value of religious claims. The premises of the argument for this view must be *strong* enough to yield the desired conclusion but *weak* enough so that we still can know that the premises themselves are true. I know of no set of premises that meets these conditions. So far as I can see, any interesting or plausible argument for the conclusion that we cannot discern the truth-value of any religious doctrine rules itself out of

Introduction

contention – it disqualifies itself because, on its own terms, we cannot know its premises to be true.

In spite of this, it is widely assumed that there is an argument that is valid, *plausible*, and has the conclusion *No human being can discern the truth-value of any religious claim*. A successful argument of this sort would have to meet certain conditions. The premises must have these features: (1) Their being true is compatible with their being known to be true; (2) their being true is compatible with their being verified; (3) they are not distributively or collectively contradictory; (4) what they assert to be generally true is compatible with their own truth. It is enormously hard, if not impossible, to deliver such an argument. I know of no successful argument to this effect for the intended conclusion, though I note that an argument could meet all of these conditions and have only false premises.

It also seems easy to think that it is somehow improper to suggest or even believe that someone else's beliefs – at least their religious beliefs – might be false. No doubt it is true that walking up to someone whose religious beliefs you know, and telling them their beliefs are unfounded, unreasonable, false, inaccurate, and really stupid, is not nice. But, besides this, what exactly is being forbidden? Consider these suggestions:

- (i) It is wrong to hold any belief such that, if that belief is true, then some religious belief is false.

On (i), it is wrong to hold any religious belief, for given pretty much any religious belief you like, if it is true, then *some* other religious belief is false. Given (i) it is wrong to be a materialist, for if materialism is true, then some religious beliefs are false. Indeed, it is wrong to think that you and I are distinct persons, since if that really is so (and not merely how things appear), then certain religious beliefs are false. Since it is not wrong to believe that there are distinct persons, (i) is false. In fact, some religious traditions hold (as part of their religious beliefs) that you should hold certain beliefs, and (i) is not among them; but holding (i) also is

Introduction

incompatible with some religious beliefs, and thus if (i) is true, it is wrong to accept (i). There is no reason, then, to take (i) seriously. It is false and self-defeating.

- (ii) It is wrong to hold any belief such that, if you sincerely accept it and are consistent, then you also hold that some religious belief is false.

The descriptions *believing that the Koran is the Word of God* and *believing that those who think that the Koran is not the Word of God are mistaken* do not describe *two* beliefs; they describe but one belief. If you do not hold a belief accurately described by the second description, you do not hold the first belief either (or you are confused about this matter and it is hard for you even to tell what you believe). Since for almost any religious belief you like, if it is true, some other religious belief is false, then if (ii) is true and you sincerely hold any religious belief and are consistent, you are wrong to hold that belief. Again, various religious traditions hold beliefs that are (and that they would recognize are) incompatible with (ii). So if (ii) is true, it is wrong to believe that (ii). So (ii) fares no better than (i).

- (iii) It is wrong to try rationally to assess any religious belief – wrong to try to tell whether any religious belief (that anyone holds, anyway) is true or false.

This is an extraordinarily curious view. Why should we inquire into truth about everything else except religious matters? Because they are not important? On what standards, and how are those standards justified? Because we know that all religious claims are false anyway? If we know that, the assessment is already done – but where, and by whom, and what are the arguments? Because such assessment is another instance of cultural imperialism? First, many endeavors in rational assessment of religious belief occur *within* the same culture – arguments back and forth among Jains and Buddhists or Buddhists and Vedantins or between Jews and Christians or Protestants and Catholics, for example. They

Introduction

often occur *within* a single religious tradition – arguments back and forth among various schools of Vedanta or Islam, for example. Some of the things appealed to in these debates are shared perspectives, agreed on by the disputing traditions, *within* a culture; some of the things appealed to in these debates are not shared by the disputing traditions but nonetheless occur within a common cultural context. These *intracultural* assessments cannot be matters of cultural imperialism in which one culture tries to dominate another; so even given the present objection they are proper. A religious tradition often will transcend any one culture; that is, it will exist in various cultures. Are intratraditional debates that involve representatives from different cultures wrong just because they involve them? If so, why? If not, what then is wrong with debates between religious traditions, or between a tradition and its secular critics, even if they belong to both different cultures and traditions?

There is little rational basis for the suggestion that religious belief cannot be rationally assessed or that it is morally improper, or even impolite, to attempt such an assessment.

RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE

Cross-culturally and over time, human beings report religious experiences. Judging from the reports, the contents of these experiences vary in interesting ways. There is not a division in which each culture contains its own brand of experience; various basic sorts of experience appear to occur at many times and in various places within diverse cultures. Our question is whether these experiences are evidence for anything besides social science generalizations about human beings and societies. Is religious experience evidence for religious belief?

This general question carries many other questions with it. For example, if some religious experiences are evidence for religious belief, must they all be evidence? What, if anything, are they evidence for? How could one tell?

Introduction

It is on these issues that the ensuing argument centers. What is offered here is a sustained argument with various steps. Most of the steps are controversial, and so require and receive defense. Critical consideration should be, and is, given to alternative views. By the time one has considered all of the relevant topics, a decent amount of the theory of knowledge, or epistemology, has been traversed.

PARALYSIS QUESTIONS

The question *Does religious experience provide evidence for religious belief?*, like the query *How can one know anything?*, is a paralysis question. Facing it, one is likely to experience intellectual paralysis, sunk into insensitivity by a Socratic sting. Behind the paralysis often produced by *How can one know anything?* is the pair of assumptions that there must be one way of knowing whatever one can know and that one must start from scratch, giving no heed to what one thought one knew but beginning all over again. Of course there is no one way of knowing what one comes to know, and no beginning from scratch. So, given the assumptions, one is finished before one can begin. So long as a skeptic can keep one from asking whether, and if so how, one knows that the assumptions are true, one remains paralyzed, at least until fatigue or the demands of one's environment break into one's reflections. Once it dawns on one that there is no single way by which one knows that one exists, that nothing can have incompatible properties, that elephants are larger than mice, and that torture for pleasure is morally wrong, and remembers that one does know them, one can escape the paralysis and break down the question into its various, more manageable parts.

Similarly, *Does religious experience provide evidence for religious belief?* invites paralysis. Whose religious experience? What sort of experience is it? Evidence to whom? Evidence for what? In fact, the class of subquestions is richer and more complex than this short list indicates.

Introduction

THE CHAPTERS

We possess a variety of descriptions of religious experiences, and a set of prospective claims that various religious traditions have related to these experiences, claims that these traditions characteristically, by way of description or evidence or inference, derive from these experiences. We thus, as it were, have a sampling of prospective legitimizers and prospective claimants. We do not possess much by way of general agreement, in precise terms, concerning the meaning of “religious” or “experience” or “religious experience.” Thus our opening chapter, by way of definitions, examples, and a very modest typology, indicates what is meant here by “religious experience.” Chapter 2 adds to the perspective begun by Chapter 1: It sketches in broad outline some of the central concepts of the theory of knowledge, or epistemology, as they relate to our overall enterprise. In Chapter 1 I discuss some of the salient characteristics of the structure and content of religious experiences, and in Chapter 2 I present some of the structure and content of epistemology of religious experience.

In Chapters 3–5 I discuss two sources of skepticism about the possibility of religious experience providing evidence. Both radically empiricist and positivist theories of meaning and zealous defenders of divine mystery proclaim the inaccessibility to language or concepts of what is religiously important. The claim is widely made that philosophical and religious considerations support the thesis that religious experience is ineffable. What is ineffable cannot be described. Since experience is evidence only under some description, ineffable experiences, on this view, cannot be evidence for anything. Unless these challenges can be defeated, the short answer to our overall question is negative; religious experience does not provide evidence for religious beliefs. Radically empiricist and positivist theories of meaning yield this result by denying that there *are* any religious beliefs, and hold that our question is misleading insofar as it suggests

Introduction

otherwise. Some detailed arguments for such views are presented and assessed.

Chapters 6 and 7 deal with the question of whether social science and other nonreligious explanations of religious experience are not both obviously available and evidentially sufficient to cancel any evidential force that religious experience might be thought to have. Thus the notion and the consequences of nonepistemic explanation of religious belief require exploration.

Some have maintained that the subjects of religious experience enjoy a privileged status regarding not merely the content but also the cogency of religious experiences so that subjects are viewed as unchallengeable experts as to what their experiences are evidence for. Or, differently, some have held that religious experience, conceived as having evidential force, should be dealt with in the context of certain of the practices that define the religious tradition within which they occur (and which are constructed to favor those experiences). A sharply contrasting view contends that such experiences, imprisoned as they are in the conceptual cages of particular religious traditions, are thereby robbed of evidential significance. The first two sorts of views argue from the allegedly sheltered character of religious experience (its individual privacy or its occurrence within practices loaded in its favor) to its evidential power. The third sort of view argues from a differently conceived sheltered character of religious experience to its evidential impotence. In Chapters 8 and 9 I argue against all of these views.

Perhaps the philosophical core of the volume is formed by Chapters 10–12. The focus is on how best to formulate a defensible principle of experiential evidence – a clear and defensible answer to the question of what conditions must be met by an experience in order for it to constitute evidence for a proposition. Various candidates for the correct principle are considered, and while one version is defended in the context of the argument in Chapter 12, other versions could serve the same role in yielding the conclusion that the argu-