

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-42104-1 - Religions, Reasons and Gods: Essays in Cross-Cultural Philosophy of Religion

John Clayton

Excerpt

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CHAPTER I

*Claims, contexts and contestability**

Philosophy, a distinguished member of this Society has suggested, is akin to a service industry – and can be likened perhaps to window cleaning.

Through the ages, people as different as Socrates and Luther have noted philosophy's similarity to a variety of service industries, but no one to my knowledge had, prior to Professor Lash, observed its kinship to window cleaning. Neither so noble as Socratic midwifery nor so ancient as the profession to which reason was consigned by Luther, cleaning windows is nonetheless a congenial way to picture the philosopher's trade – assuming, that is, that I have not got the wrong end of the chamois, so to speak.

For I take it that by having likened philosophy to cleaning windows, Professor Lash wanted to make us more attentive to the way that philosophical analysis can sometimes enable us to see more clearly that which has been there – albeit obscurely – in front of our eyes all along. But, whatever his intentions may have been, that is how I would construe the task of philosophical analysis.

Not all philosophers, of course, are content with their lot as window cleaners. Some philosophers insist not only on cleaning the windows, but also on advising their clients where to look. Other philosophers may complain that their customers have the wrong sort of windows or that their windows are ill placed for the best views. And a few may even chide householders for having had the audacity to attempt to clean their own windows, rather than engage the services of a professional philosopher.

Philosophers of religion, like philosophers generally, can be divided in different ways for different purposes. My present ends are sufficiently served if we distinguish broadly between those philosophers, on the one hand, who are inclined to think that religious people would not be able to distinguish sense from nonsense without the assistance of a philosopher

* Editors' note: This chapter was prepared as a paper given to the 'D' Society, in Michaelmas 1991.

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(preferably of the analytic variety) and those philosophers, on the other hand, who are willing to allow the possibility that they could, even without the external intervention of a philosopher, analytic or otherwise.

Members of the latter group will be inclined to allow the possibility that Bonaventura and possibly even others knew what they meant when they said that God is not a being, but is 'Being Itself'; that the Chandogya Upanisad was not necessarily making a category mistake in asserting that 'Brahman and Atman are one'; and that the Buddhist dialectician Nagasena was not talking through his hat when he told King Milinda that 'rebirth occurs without anything transmigrating' – nor for that matter was the Apostle Paul when he proclaimed that what is sown a physical body will be raised a spiritual body.

Philosophers of the first group, by contrast, would not be inclined in such cases to concede what I would like to call the *presumption of competence*, which is another (and I hope less condescending) way of expressing something of what Donald Davidson has endorsed by commending 'charity' toward the Other. The presumption of competence allows that the basic claims of major religious traditions are likely to be justifiable as 'true' to members of the community concerned. Moreover, where such claims are contested, the communities themselves are competent to deal with issues of what is and what is not acceptable belief or behaviour.

To the presumption of competence, I would add what might be called *the practice of empathy*: namely, the imaginative participation of the observer in the spiritual and cognitive world of the religious tradition under scrutiny.

This is a necessary addition to the presumption of competence because otherwise there is no effective bridge between the observer and the observed, save the culturally imperialist one of accepting as meaningful, etc., only those individual items from the Other's doctrinal scheme that are translatable into one's own cognitive system. Even if every single proposition in one scheme were translated without remainder into one's own system, we might still miss the pattern of the Other's scheme, because what would not thereby be carried over is the network within which the individual propositions were connected with each other and in terms of which their specific location in the scheme is defined.

'Understanding' *in the sense required* is holistic, not atomistic. For 'understanding' in the sense wanted, one requires empathetic participation in the Other's doctrinal scheme.

From the presumption of competence and the practice of empathy, I would generate something that might be called *the maxim of reticence*,

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which is akin to Husserlian *epochē* except that in my preferred maxim the brackets around judgment are not so firmly closed. (After all, would I be a responsible window cleaner if I failed to tell the customer about necessary repairs, or if I failed to open the window to allow the escape of the occasional trapped fly – to allude to an earlier Cambridge philosopher whose name now dare not be spoken?)

Neither the presumption of competence nor the practice of empathy nor the maxim of reticence in itself precludes the properly philosophical consideration of truth questions, though someone who adopted these guide-lines might be inclined to linger rather a long time over the question *What would it be for such-and-such claim to be true?* and also over the question *What would count as reasons for holding such-and-such claim to be true?* before asking whether such-and-such claim *is* true.¹

The presumption of competence, the practice of empathy and the maxim of reticence are intended to have the standing merely of what Kant would have called ‘counsels of prudence’, not that of what he termed ‘the categorical imperative’. They are simply recommendations to be followed in order to achieve certain results. They may not conform to everyone’s self-definition of philosophy, but they help me clean windows.

The particular window I have set about cleaning in recent years looks out on the roles of rationality in religious contexts. By ‘rationality’ I mean *giving reasons* for beliefs or practices. In order not to create expectations that are only later disappointed, however, I should make clear that I do not intend here to offer or defend some general theory of rationality, or even a more localized theory of religious rationality. My present aim is more modest. By attending to some of the varied roles of certain arguments within a variety of religious traditions, Eastern and Western, I hope to elucidate something of the range of motives and ends served by ‘giving reasons’ within religious contexts.

In declaring an interest in the problem of rationality, I am well aware that I am not the first one to have had a go at the precarious panes in that particular window. Since at least the time when I was a student, problems about rationality have been dogging the best minds in wide-flung disciplines within the natural and social sciences. Important contributions to

¹ Editors’ note: At this juncture, the annotated version apparently prepared for oral presentation contains the following marginal addition: ‘Not committed to holding that correspondence theory of truth is adequate in relig[ious] contexts: pragmatic theory may be more appropriate. Not everyone will be happy with this. Not even all pragmatists, some of whom deny that prag[matism] offers a “theory” of truth.’

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the clarification of the issues involved have been made by several members of this Society.

Prudence alone would seem sufficient to deter most guest speakers from choosing to raise topics about which the local audience is far more knowledgeable than oneself. But, as I have been forced to concede more than once in my life, prudence was never a Texan's long suit.

Discussion about rationality has tended to focus on issues such as relativism and realism. In the philosophy of religion (at least of the analytic variety) it has been linked more often than not to difficulties concerning the justifiability of basic religious claims, such as the existence of God/s or the veridical nature of at least some religious experiences, etc. These are staple issues for the philosophy of religion, and it is right that they should be regularly canvassed.

Concentrating so much on just the justificatory uses of argument, however, may unwittingly encourage our vision of the religious uses of reason to become constricted, so that we fail to notice much that lies there before our very eyes, and that has lain there all along. As a corrective, I want to suggest a change in the field of focus, so that what has been in sharp focus for a very long time is displaced at least momentarily by some things which have been present only to our peripheral vision. By bringing to the centre of our field of vision features of the scenery which had been pushed to the edges, we may come to see some individual details we have not noticed before, but we may also come to see the whole landscape in a different way. We may even come to see in a new relation those very features, such as the justificatory uses of argument, which were previously the centre of our interests.

I make a simple, even banal, observation: *Religious claims are made and contested in a variety of contexts.*

The observation could be left unsaid were it not for the fact that the philosophy of religion is so often practised in a way that suggests its point had not been taken. No one denies that religious traditions sometimes make claims, or that these claims can be contested, but it is sometimes evidently forgot – *at least methodologically forgot* – that religious claims can be contested in a variety of different contexts. Methodologically forgot because it is so frequently overlooked that what count as 'good reasons' in one set of circumstances may not so count in another. 'Reasons' are always reasons for someone; they become persuasive when they are regarded as 'good reasons' by some audience.

As a way of introducing some distinctions in a rough and ready way, I want to identify three obviously different contexts in which reasons

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might be given for or against some religious claim: the intra-traditional, the inter-religious and the extra-religious contexts.

Particular claims may be made or contested *within a single tradition*. Let us call this *the intra-traditional context*. What count as ‘good reasons’ may be predominantly tradition-specific, as would be the mechanism whereby a dispute could be resolved.

Secondly, a claim made within one religious tradition may be contested as a result of a challenge from a second religious tradition. This can be called *the inter-religious context*. Some things that might count as ‘good reasons’ within an intra-traditional context (citing from authoritative scriptures, for instance) might not count as good reasons in a doctrinal dispute between different religious traditions. Hence the practice of ‘giving reasons’ would be likely to have different dynamics within inter-religious contexts.

Finally, a religious claim may be contested as a result of a challenge from outside the religious sphere altogether, for example by a ‘secular’ critic of religion. This I suggest we call *the extra-religious context*. ‘Giving reasons’ in this context may differ from the intra-traditional context in some of the same ways that it would differ from giving reasons in an inter-religious context. Because of this fact some people, including William Christian, fail to distinguish between reason giving in inter- and extra-religious contexts. But this seems to overlook the way that tacitly religious considerations may affect doctrinal disputes between religious traditions – e.g., both parties would be likely to think that religious issues matter and might both be inclined to accept as reasonable certain features of the world that a more secular mind would question. The presence of such tacit assumptions in discussions across traditions would seem to be sufficient reason to want to distinguish between inter-religious and extra-religious contexts. Even if we are inclined to agree with my colleague John Milbank that some putatively ‘secular’ mentalities are ‘paradoxically unsecular’, there would still seem to be practical usefulness in being able to distinguish these two contexts of possible dispute.

For entirely understandable cultural reasons, modern philosophy of religion – not least *British* philosophy of religion – has tended to occupy itself mainly with the last of these possible contexts, to the neglect of the other two.

From this point of view, it is natural that the discussion of rationality in religion should centre on the issue of the justifiability of basic religious claims in a religiously indifferent or intellectually hostile environment. How would the problem of rationality look, however, if we arranged

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things so that the *intra*- and not the *extra*-religious context were the field of primary interest? Would it then seem equally natural to use the issue of public justifiability as the way into the problem of rationality in religion?

In order to find an answer to that question, I suggest that we change the level of magnification, so to speak, in order to inspect more closely the roles of rationality within religions themselves. I am not recommending that we adopt the intra-traditional perspective as partisans, but that we make it the object of enquiry. Obviously, we can only make a modest beginning here. I shall in this paper do little more than assemble some examples of specific uses of 'reason giving' within religious traditions. I shall use theistic proofs as a test case of such reason giving.

This choice of test case will surely come as no great surprise, since that is the topic I have been researching of late and is the topic of the Stanton Lectures that I shall be giving next year. Even though it cannot come as a surprise, it may still seem at first an odd choice as a test case for *intra*-religious rationality, especially given that the choice is made by someone who has already dropped heavy hints that the issue of the public justifiability of basic religious beliefs may not be the most appropriate point of entry into the question of the roles of rationality in religious contexts.

Surely theistic proofs are justificatory arguments *par excellence*. Are they not inextricably bound up with the attempt from Greek times to the Enlightenment and beyond to find independent and generally compelling reasons for belief in the existence of a Supreme Being, which is not specifically identifiable in detail with the concept of God in any particular religious tradition?

Although theistic arguments have sometimes been put forward for that purpose, not least in post-Enlightenment Europe, it is worth reminding ourselves that most of the theistic proofs that have paraded themselves in front of us in modern times had a kind of pre-history in a less secular and more tradition-specific context. If we look at them within *that* context (or, rather, plurality of contexts), we may see something quite different from their more familiar face. We may find, for instance, that on the whole they seem to have served specifically intra-traditional ends. Although they were sometimes aimed at groups outside the community of faith, we cannot assume from that fact that they were being used in – say – the thirteenth century in much the same way that they were in the seventeenth.

This point could be made by contrasting the place of theistic proofs in the writings of Thomas Aquinas and those of John Locke, each of whom

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can be regarded for these purposes as representative of their age. They were in fact all along engaged in different projects. For Locke, it is reason which determines what is to count as an authentic revelation, whereas for Thomas it is revelation which determines what is to count as rational. That is to say, if it were to transpire that the teachings of tradition-embodied revelation and the results of rational enquiry into divine things were at variance, Locke would use reason to purge the tradition, whereas Thomas would hold that their variance was sufficient to show that reason had led us astray.

That – it seems to me – is an important difference which has implications for the authority of theistic arguments within religious contexts. For it gives us a criterion for preferring one proof of God over another, a criterion that is expressive of the faith of the community employing proofs apologetically. It may help explain in some cases how Thomas went about drawing up his short list of five ways from amongst the longer list of theistic proofs circulating in mediaeval Europe. It shows how the beliefs of a community can serve as controls on the choice and application of ‘rational’ arguments. It suggests that ‘natural theology’ (in some senses of that term) was not itself ‘natural’ (in at least one sense of that term). Moreover, it suggests that what are regarded as ‘good reasons’ for the existence of God are reasons that are regarded as good by the community itself.

In an article that I published last year, I suggested that there are some cases in which it seemed that what counted as ‘good reasons’ were reasons that were regarded as good by the community, *even when they were not regarded as ‘good reasons’ by the audience outside the community to whom they were addressed.*

If we look closely especially at the uses of theistic argument in religious traditions prior to the Enlightenment, we come to realize that the proofs were not always aimed at individuals and groups outside the community concerned. Frequently, they were from a variety of motives intended for internal use only. For instance, they were used fairly regularly for polemical purposes, in order *to correct defective or deviant beliefs about the nature of God.*

This polemical use of theistic argument was fairly widespread within mediaeval Islamic and Jewish thought. The likes of Saadya Gaon and al-Ghazali, for instance, formulated proofs for the existence of God from the necessary temporality of the creation in order to counter the growing influence of Aristotle’s causal proofs within Judaism and Islam. The existence of God was not directly at issue, but proofs for God’s existence

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served as a way of showing an opponent's concept of God to be defective and dangerous to the life of faith. Begin with Aristotle, it was said, and you will end with Strato.

Within text-centred religious traditions, Eastern and Western, theistic arguments have sometimes been used hermeneutically, that is, to assist *with the proper interpretation of sacred texts*. Theistic arguments have been employed in order to clarify the meaning of an obscure text (Ramanuja), in order to reinforce the traditional interpretation of a controversial text (Ghazali) and in order to legitimate a novel interpretation of a given text (Averroes).

Here I offer only one such example, drawn from the writings of Ramanuja, the eleventh-century Vedantan philosophical theologian. Ramanuja did not actually propose any theistic arguments; he was indeed one of their most outspoken opponents within the various Vedantan schools. According to Ramanuja, God is known in his grace through scripture alone, not through inference.

Ramanuja does not reject the validity of inference as such. It was after all one of the six ways of coming to know things that were accepted by Vedantan thinkers of all persuasions. Ramanuja is content to use inference in other matters – including the critique of theistic arguments – but not as a means of showing the existence of God. In his commentary on the Brahma-Sutras, he offers a devastating critique of any possible argument for the existence of God, in the process anticipating by some seven hundred years David Hume's objections to the design argument. What I find more interesting, however, is the use to which that critique is put in Ramanuja's commentary.

The Brahma-Sutras were an attempt to summarize in a systematic way the teachings of the Upanisads, writings which had particular authority for the Vedantic systems. But the Brahma-Sutras, also known as the Vedanta-Sutras, are often cryptic and obscure. They were written in a way that was easily memorized and served mainly as reminders of more elaborate instructions given to those trained in Vedantic thought. Because of their obscurity, however, it was necessary to have commentaries or *bhasyas* in order to guide one through the scriptures. Not just anyone could write such a commentary, but the great teachers did write *bhasyas* on the *sutras*, offering in the process accounts of their distinctive interpretations. These commentaries in turn became the basis of schools, and had meta-commentaries written on them by subsequent leaders of the schools. They had, therefore, an importance for the tradition that was in some cases only slightly less than the *sutras* themselves.

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Shankara had written a particularly influential *bhasya*, in which he indicated that the third *sutra* could be read in one of two ways and that the first reading is to be favoured:

From its being the source of scriptures [i.e. that Brahman is the cause or author of the Vedas]

From scriptures being the source of its (knowledge) [i.e. only the Vedas can prove to us that Brahman is the cause of the world, etc.].

Shankara favoured the first reading, but Ramanuja favoured the second as the only valid interpretation.

In order to substantiate that interpretation, Ramanuja went through all the sources of knowledge acknowledged by the Vedantic philosophy, eliminating in turn all save one as a possible source of knowledge of divine existence. The point of the procedure, including the repudiation of natural theology, being to give weight to his preferred reading of the third *sutra*. And this, it seems to me, is a fairly clear example of discussion concerning theistic arguments serving hermeneutic ends.

Such a use is far from isolated in the history of religions, but – as already indicated – it is limited, of course, to religious traditions in which sacred texts figure centrally. However, it would be a mistake to assume that the absence of reference to sacred scriptures is itself sufficient to show that a given proof is not being used to fairly specifically religious ends.

The place of theistic proofs in the classical Greek philosophical tradition is sometimes held to be different from their place in religious traditions such as Judaism, Islam and Christianity in virtue of religious considerations being more explicitly associated with the latter than with the former, which is held thereby to represent a purer form of ‘rational theology’. It is the case that Jewish, Muslim and Christian writers do sometimes cite sacred texts in association with their theistic arguments and Greek philosophers do not. But it would be wrong to infer from this that specifically religious considerations are absent from the use of theistic proofs within Greek philosophy.

Although other examples come to mind, mainly from Stoic philosophy, Socrates is reported on one occasion to have offered a theistic proof – a version of the design argument – not in order to show that the gods exist, but in order to encourage Aristodemus the dwarf to fulfil his responsibilities to make sacrifices to the gods. The worry expressed to Socrates was not that the Deity might not exist, but that the gods were too exalted to need our sacrifices or to notice whether we make them. Socrates’ reply,

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recorded by Xenophon, is that the Divinity who took such care in the design of the world, down to the smallest detail, would indeed notice whether sacrifices were made.

This last example serves as a bridge to the final and possibly most important group of uses of theistic arguments within intra-traditional contexts: namely, those applications which build up the community, its sense of well being and its solidarity. This group of uses I would call, following a suggestion in a rather different context by Richard Rorty, *edificatory uses of argument*.

Theistic proofs have been used as aids for prayer and devotion (Udayana, Anselm, Cleanthes) and as a basis for meditation (Anselm again, but also Bonaventura). They have also been used as a means of educating followers of a particular religion into its basic beliefs (Ghazali). They have also been used to exhort us to a pious life (Socrates) or simply to express awe and wonder at ‘the heavenly stars above and the moral law within’.

All of these – and more – applications of theistic argument were fairly common before the Enlightenment. They show that before the Fall of Modernity, theistic arguments tended to be used to a wide range of ends in addition to the justification of basic religious beliefs to someone who did not already in large measure share those beliefs. They seem to have been used predominantly to enhance the community’s sense of solidarity, and when they were aimed outside the community, they were sometimes used in order to reinforce the identity of the community. This seems to suggest that ‘giving reasons’ served more a practical than a theoretical function. Though this may give us a better understanding of the location of this particular ‘reason giving’ within the religious past, it may also serve to increase our sense of alienation from ‘their’ projects.

One main function of these arguments, if not the primary function, would seem to be to enhance the community’s sense of solidarity (not quite in Rorty’s sense). All of these examples have been taken from the distant past, well away from our own times, defined as they are by the Enlightenment and its aftermath. We might feel comfortable with admitting that they used theistic arguments in that way, to those ends, without feeling it necessary to make connections with our own, more ‘enlightened’ (in both senses) uses. They were, after all, pre-moderns, and we have moved beyond all that. Their ‘otherness’ therefore reinforces our own sense of uniqueness and enhances our own sense of superiority by increasing the distance between them and us.

Although I have not used in this talk any modern examples or taken the story into more recent times, I do plan to do so in the Stanton Lectures.