

Episode 9: Religion as an Area of Knowledge

The Nature of Religious Claims

Our topic for today is religion as an area of knowledge, and we begin by considering the nature of religious knowledge. Claims in religion are basically metaphysical propositions--that means that propositions that cannot be tested empirically because they're beyond the realm of the senses. They can't be measured or quantified. And the most primary of these metaphysical propositions serve in religion much like axioms do in mathematics, and unquestioned starting point for religious belief. Each set of these metaphysical propositions, ascribes to its own ideology with no overlap with other religious systems.

Four Viewpoints on the Existence of God

Within religion, there are four viewpoints that we might take regarding the existence of God. There is theism, the belief that there is a God, there's pantheism, and polytheism, which is a belief in many gods, there's atheism, the belief that there are no gods, or agnosticism which claims we don't know whether or not a higher power exists. We are going to examine three approaches that all attempt to understand religion

Three Approaches to Understanding Religion

Evidentialism

Our first approach is evidentialism, which attempts to understand religion by understanding the nature of God. That is, it tries to offer proof of the existence of God. So, some people began the quest to understand religion by looking at this question, since everything hinges upon the existence of a deity. Now, we often have an anthropomorphic view of God, which many thinkers reject. The anthropomorphic view simply views God in our image, We often get a philosophic view of God as the ultimate guiding force. And this brings with it its own issues. We call them paradoxes. One is the paradox of omnipotence. Could God created a being that God could not control, the paradox of change? How can a perfect God intervene human history--to do so would make God imperfect. Or the paradox of suffering--how can all-knowing and loving God allow suffering? And the paradox of free will --if God is all powerful, then is everything predestined? Is free will then just an illusion? On the opposite end of the spectrum, there's logical positivism, which just simply claims that if you can't give a definite meaning to a word, then it has no sense it has no reference. So, in their eyes, God is a meaningless term. Well, let's move on to our discussion of evidentialism by considering the justifications, the proofs that are offered for God. Well, one is the argument from religious experience, that we have a direct experience of God. The claim is that people have this direct experience, and that's proof enough of God. The second is the argument from design. Everything that has a purpose and design has a creator, the world, the universe has a purpose and design, therefore it must have a creator, and that creator is God. There's the argument of cosmological origins, everything has a cause. God is the first cause, or as Aristotle said it, the uncaused cause, and finally, the problem of suffering. God gave us free will, and our choices make human suffering, suffering spurs us to action. As they point out, you can't have a mountain without a valley.

Pluralism

Critics who find evidentialism unconvincing opt for another approach, pluralism. Pluralism uses reason to understand religious systems. So, if evidentialism doesn't provide the answers we seek, maybe we would do better to examine the nature of religious belief systems. This has the benefit of using reason to understand how religion functions, this would also make it

more accessible as shared knowledge. First of all, at the risk of being glib, it seems that most religions follow a basic pattern that includes a goal, a problem and a solution. The goal is an individual entity, seek some type of eternal reward, which is characterized by some blissful state. However, this goal is thwarted by a problem something impedes our progress towards our goal, and the ultimate reward. The religion then offers a solution a series of steps and a text or set of practices to help us overcome the problem and achieve the goal and its reward. Taking Christianity as an example, the individual soul seeks heaven, which is characterized by a state of eternal life and bliss. Sin gets in the way of our progress towards heaven and that eternal bliss. So, we follow the 10 commandments and the Bible to help us overcome the problem of sin and achieve heaven and eternal bliss. How many religions can we find that fit into this equation? Well, certainly Christianity, Islam, Judaism, Hinduism, Buddhism, Taoism, Zoroastrianism, and probably many more fit this description. If this characterization is accurate, there then seem to be three options in our search for religious truths.

- One, all paths lead to the same truth.
- Two, to one religion is truer than the rest. T
- Three, all religions are false.

Well, I think we can put the second and third ones aside for right now, because it's going to be hard to talk about one religion being truer than the rest unless we know how to evaluate religions. And number three, all religions are false, is not terribly helpful for our current interests. This leads us to use reason to investigate a second approach, pluralism. Pluralism is the argument that all paths lead to the same truth. The arguments in favor of pluralism are well, one, it's intolerant to assert that one religion is the true religion. Also, contrasting claims do not prove one is true and the other is not. Pluralism often uses the example of the blind men and the elephant. Three blind men each touch a different part of the elephant, the trunk, the tail, the legs, each give a different description. All religions describe different parts of a shared reality. And finally, the third argument in favor of it is all religions share a common core set of values such as the golden rule. However initially appealing pluralism is, there seem to be two deficiencies with this view. First, it's unable to adequately account for conflicting truth claims. And, secondly, to avoid this problem, pluralism radically reinterprets the belief of each tradition in ways that fundamentally distort their beliefs. So, the fundamental problem arising from these criticisms is the problem of conflicting truth claims. There are three areas of disagreement between major religious systems. For example there a vast chasm between the claims of monotheism (only one God) and the pantheistic view (many gods) as well as an impersonal deity in some cases, and a personal deity in others. Secondly, there is the fate of individuals that death are they judged as in Christianity and Islam, or are the reborn as in Hinduism or Buddhism? Finally, each religion has a different universal problem afflicting humanity. For Hinduism it is the Samsara, the endless cycle of birth and death. For Christianity It's the separation from God. The problem here is that under normal circumstances, two conflicting truth claims cannot be correct. There is however, another way of looking at this by claiming that religious language is highly symbolic, and the claims were never intended to be literally compared as a measure of their truth. This move saves religion from conflicting truth claims, but only at the price of making these claims virtually meaningless. Competing truth claims are based on the assumption that what they describe is independent of our own subjective realities. They're not merely statements of our subjective emotional states. However, to say thatthey're symbolic is to agree with Freud that such truth claims in fact don't have any objective

meaning. He said God exists, merely expresses certain psychological needs. Another weakness of the pluralistic approach is the seemingly persuasive example of the three blind men touching the elephant. Each religion is like one of the three men only able to see the elephant from their own perspective. However, the example assumes a knowledge that can see the entire elephant but that is exactly what faith is shown to be impossible. So, we're all limited to our perspective, and there is not one overarching, omnipotent perspective. So the ToK question emerges, how do we know that what each of the three men are describing is a part of a larger whole? It would seem that such a fact is unknowable. Further, each man can make claims about multiple elephants, and there would be no way of disproving these claims. Therefore, we do not know that all paths lead to the same. Pluralism, although high-minded and tolerant glosses over real differences. However, it does use reason and this allows us to investigate religious belief systems and to discuss and understand the differences between them. So, pluralism offers criteria for evaluating religious claims. It says they should be judged on logical consistency--are its beliefs and practices self-consistent? Adequate factual support--can its claims be investigated and verified? Experiential relevance—does it provide an experience of the Divine to its followers? Consistency with other fields of knowledge--how consistent are its claims? With what we know from other areas of knowledge and moral factors? Does it produce better human beings?

Reformed Epistemology

A third approach to understanding religion as an area of knowledge is reformed epistemology, it offers an alternative that might avoid some of the problems of evidentialism and pluralism. It argues religious beliefs are warranted provided they are grounded, which means that we have sincere reports of experiences and the events which lead or cause certain beliefs, and that these can be defended against known objections. This approach, referred to generally as reformed epistemology, basically relies on a body of evidence for its certainty. It stresses that what interests us in religious claims are the experiences and their effects, rather than merely their facticity. It argues that once a religious claim is established in this way, it can be built upon examination of this belief The belief continues to be true, so long as it agrees with the claims that came before it, and continues to provide a meaningful interpretation for people. It could be compared to the axiomatic system of knowledge that we find in mathematics. Reformed epistemology asserts that religious understanding is of a different type than the other types of knowledge we're familiar with. Now, it's not without its critics. It's certainly true that reformed epistemology does not offer a positive proof of religious experience, but simply defends it against attacks. Once again, it seems to imply that there are many paths to the truth and offers at best a utilitarian basis for judging them. So, when we consider the reformed epistemology, we find that it incorporates many of the criteria that pluralism had, but it does extend it. Looking over the three theories, we find that like our efforts in many areas, we began with a correspondence theory of truth in evidentialism. We are simply going to try to prove God exists. Next, we moved to a coherence theory of truth, there are many paths to the same truth, and as long as they are self-consistent, they are valid. And we ended up with a pragmatic theory of truth, reformed epistemology, which says, we evaluate religion, on the basis of the experience that it produces, and the consistency of the values that it advocates, so long as it is in line with other values. So, in wrapping up our discussion of religion at this point, we have two completely different positions about the nature of religious truth, religious truth should be based on evidence. But this did not turn out to be a very plausible, a compelling argument, or we accept that religion, religious truth is a different order of experience. Now, if we

accept that latter position, we could maintain that all paths lead to moral reality that tells us a lot about our lives, without us necessarily having to compare one to the other saying one is truer than the other. They all point to a different truth. And we will pick based on logical consistency, adequate factual support, experiential relevance, consistency with other fields of knowledge, moral factors, and yes, our own personal circumstances, which faith we choose to follow. The test of a faith is the change it produces within his followers. If we test religious faith to find out if they're grounded in a genuine experience, and they can be defended against known objections, then this allows us to establish further claims and so long as these conditions are met, then we can continue to investigate and produce new knowledge in this religious system. In short, perhaps we should try to give up using reason to prove the facticity of religion to prove that one religion is better than the other and use reason to examining the depth of the religious experience. We should certainly accept religious experience and try to deduce the principles that will lead us to be better people, comparing faith or trying to analyze it in an empirical way, is pointless.

Thank you for listening to this podcast.