Svensk Teologisk Kvartalskrift. Årg. 78 (2002)

Religion as a Philosophical Challenge

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Return of Religion?

The climate and the agenda of the philosophy of religion seem to have changed significantly during the last two decades. While in the seventies, religion was still discussed primarily in relation to irreligiosity,[1] we now face a return to or revival of religion or religions.[2] The revival implies a rediscovery inasmuch as we have once more begun to realize how religion can form human culture. This also means that the issue of religion and modernity has changed in that religion returns as a challenge to modernity.

With this change of climate, the focus lies on the *revival* of religion. What are the consequences of the return of religion on the public agenda? The question, however, must also be reversed: in what form does *religion* return? How does the return of religion affect religion itself? On the one hand, we are confronted with the revival of fundamentalist interpretations of religion; on the other hand, religion returns in forms which might be called aesthetic in the sense that religion is turned into an instrument for forming the image of who we are. In the latter case, religion is a matter of choice. The complexity of the situation might give rise to the suspicion that fundamentalism can also be a (post)modern possibility in that it is itself chosen among other possibilities in order to gain some identity in a world of change. The classic problem of authority and choice is thus repeated in new forms.

This change of climate — with religion returning to the agenda — calls for a philosophical rethinking of *religion*. In the following, however, I would like to shift the focus once more. I will be speaking not so much of the philosophy of *religion* as of the *philosophy* of religion. Let me briefly explain what is meant by this shift of emphasis.

A Philosophical Challenge

Emphasizing *philosophy* in philosophy of religion means emphasizing religion as a philosophical challenge. My point will be that when we approach the issue this way, we deal exactly with the significance of *religion*. When religion is considered as a philosophical challenge, it is no longer placed in a sphere of its own.[3] Instead, the critical question becomes: what does religion mean for the way we look upon the world? We will only be able to understand what religion can

[1] Cf., for example, the work of the Danish philosopher of religion, K.E. Løgstrup: *Skabelse og tilintetgørelse*, Gyldendal, Copenhagen 1976, esp. the preface.

[2] Cf., for example, Martin Riesebrodt, *Die Rückkehr der Religionen*, C.H. Beck, München 2000.

[3] A prevalent model for thinking about religion suggests that we are either inside or outside religion. This model simplifies what it means to have presuppositions. We can have presuppositions in different ways. Presuppositions can question the one having them. We can have presuppositions so that they constitute a problem for us. This is evident in the fact that religious traditions are not monolithic, but are interpretations of presuppositions (which they themselves might try to cover up). This way of dealing with the question of presupposition could already be a philosophical challenge.

mean if we ask what it would mean for the way we see the world in which we live.

This second shift of emphasis will also affect the way we do philosophy of religion. Philosophy of religion often proceeds according to a model whereby we begin with a philosophy and then transfer it to the area of religion. Transferring Heidegger's *Daseinsanalytik* or Wittgenstein's philosophy of language to philosophy of religion could be cited as examples. Philosophy of religion is thus carried out as a sort of applied philosophy — namely, philosophy applied to the area of religion. Religion, however, is not an area of human life, at least not if it is considered as a *philosophical* challenge.

In what sense then can religion be a challenge to philosophy? As a point of departure we only need to reflect upon the complex history of the relation of religion and philosophy. Religion has been a companion and a rival of philosophy throughout its history. Philosophy would not be what it is without its relation to religion. What is at stake in this relation is human rationality, which is the business of philosophy. Religion has been the ‹other› for philosophy by challenging rationality. My point is that religion, as the ‹other› for philosophy, makes it possible for philosophy to reflect upon its own rationality. Religion is a *philosophical* challenge inasmuch as the meaning of rationality is at stake in the relation between religion and philosophy. In this sense, religion makes it possible to ask the question of philosophy itself.

What I will argue for, then, is the *philosophical* ambitions of a philosophy of religion. Religion should not be viewed as an interesting phenomenon which we might eventually reflect upon philosophically, but as a challenge to philosophy itself. Philosophy is not self-contained but, as reflection, is related to sources outside itself.

Rationality: Self-accountability

The very concept of rationality is what is challenged by religion. But how is it challenged? Traditionally, the challenge to rationality has been understood *via* the alternative between a rational and an irrational position. The alternative between rationality and irrationalism, however, is not a genuine one. We cannot chose irrationalism as an alternative to rationality; or if we do, it is a position we chose from outside. If irrationalism is a position we take, we are already placed in a sphere where we can argue for or against this position. This points in fact to a more basic concept of rationality.

I will argue for a concept of rationality which is tied to the obligation to account for ourselves. The rationality implied in self-accountability is what makes us human. This means that rationality in this sense is not a matter of choice. If we would chose not to be rational, we would have to take a double position: we would know on the one hand what we were doing, while on the other hand we would pretend not to be aware of it. The possibility of asking ourselves what we are doing implies the obligation to do so. Of course, this does not mean that we cannot behave irrationally. To be human implies asking what we are as humans. Rationality implied in the demand of self-accountability has to do with the fact that we are already relating to ourselves — also when we might feel attracted by forms of irrationalism.

If we take a look from the other side, it should be clear that in order to understand religion itself, we need a stronger concept of rationality than the one yielded by the schematic opposition of the rational and irrational. We do so because religion itself makes truth claims. The interpretation of religion is only possible because religion itself is thinking (in metaphorical forms) and as such, challenges us to think. Using a phrase borrowed from Paul Ricoeur: religion gives to think (*donne à penser*).

Up to now I have described the philosophy of religion as a classic discipline dealing with the relation between philosophy and religion. Historically, religion has been a challenge to philosophy. The task now is to reformulate this challenge. My suggestion will be that religion as a philosophical challenge has to do with the question of the perspectival nature of human rationality. A prevalent feature of modern philosophy is that it takes finitude as *conditio humana*, even if it does not take the form of an explicit philosophy of human finitude. Finitude means that we as humans are bound by our own perspective. This also seems to apply to human

rationality which itself becomes a matter of perspective. Religion, however, raises precisely the problem of human perspective.

How, then, is the task of philosophy of religion to be reformulated? In the following, I will reformulate it through two connected *leitmotifs*: First, the philosophy of religion is characterized by a ‹redoubling of perspective›. Its object, religion, is in itself a perspective on human reality. Second, through the ‹optics› of religion, the philosophy of religion deals with the question of the limits of human understanding and action. These two motifs — the redoubling of perspective and the question of the limit — point to religion as a philosophical challenge. First, not only philosophy but also religion itself presents, or claims to present, a perspective on human reality as such, the claim of religion being that it deals with what is ultimate or of ultimate concern. Second, religion challenges the concept of rationality in that its optics gives significance to limit situations in which humans face their own limits of understanding and action. This reformulation of the philosophy of religion points to the modern problem of perspective and subjectivity. In order to unfold and substantiate this programmatic outline, let me start by explaining the significance of the idea that the philosophy of religion deals with a ‹redoubling of perspective›.[4]

Redoubling of Perspective: the Optics of Religion

I have been arguing that religion ought to be considered as a philosophical challenge. But why take *religion* as a challenge to philosophy? The answer is that religion itself is not only part of human reality but itself an interpretation of this reality, and what is more, it is an interpretation which claims to deal with this reality as such. Religion claims to give a total, maybe even ultimate, perspective on human reality. This is why religion and philosophy can be rivals at the same level. Two qualifications, however, are needed which reflect the condition of finitude. First, philosophy can claim to deal with the *question* of reality as such, without giving some sort of total perspective. Second, religion can by contrast claim that it is an interpretation of a final perspective which is not human, but given to humans. The claim of dealing with human reality as such can thus be problematic in both cases.

It is crucial to see that religion is not an area or region of human existence. It can viewed this way, but then one misses the point that religion itself is an interpretation of human existence, and an interpretation of a peculiar kind, inasmuch as religion addresses itself to us — it changes our way of seeing the world. Thus, we do not understand what religion is about if we do not ask what the optics of religion means for the way we look upon the world.

Consequently, philosophy of religion is not a regional philosophy, it is philosophy challenged by religion. It is not philosophy applied to one region of human reality; through the optics of religion, philosophy of religion deals with the question of human reality as such. This means the perspective is redoubled. Philosophy itself deals with the question of human reality, but this question is reflected through the optics of religion.

The next question then is: what characterizes the optics of religion? In what sense is it a challenge to philosophy? My answer — much too brief — is that the optics of religion is characterized by a displacement. Religion speaks of the world by speaking of something *other* than the world: God or the sacred in contrast to the worldly or profane. What does this displacement mean for the way we see the world in which we live? What can we get to see through this optics of religion?

Transcendence and Limit

The difference between philosophy and religion seems to turn on this peculiar feature of religion: that it speaks of something *other* than the world. This feature should then account for the ‹otherness› of religion. However, claiming a tran-

[4] This (the concept of the redoubling of perspective) can be seen as a reinterpretation of Hegel's foundation of philosophy of religion: absolute spirit means that spirit deals with its own interpretations of reality.

scendent reality is also a philosophical option. And second, religion can speak of the world in speaking of what is other *than* the world. A more challenging question might then be the following one: how is it possible to speak of the world if not through a movement transcending the world?

The critical question is how the ‹other› than the world is to be understood. If it is conceived as another world, the critique of a two-world-thinking obtains. In Hegel, we can read the following argument: if the infinite is conceived or imagined as a world next to or beyond this world of finitude in which we live, the infinite itself becomes finite. Instead, the infinite is the truth of finitude making it possible to understand what is finite. And in Nietzsche, the argument reads: if religion posits another world beyond this one, the other world being the true one, then this world in which we live is emptied of truth. And this is nihilism.[5]

This critique affects a religious or metaphysical thinking operating with two worlds. Now, if the ‹other› is not to be understood as another world, how then is it possible to make sense of it?

My suggestion will be to introduce the second *leitmotif*: the question of the limit. Philosophy of religion not only deals with the borderland between philosophy and religion, the issue of borderline or limit is its basic theme. First in limit situations, with death and birth as primary examples, religion reflects the experience of life as already being marked by ‹otherness›. Second, the limit is to be understood as the limit of our own understanding and action. When we relate to the limits of our existence, we relate to ourselves.

Thus, we only understand what transcendence means through experiencing the limit of our existence. This is not only a limit from outside, but a limit challenging our self-understanding. In order to substantiate this claim, I will briefly read the motif of what I call the dialectics of the limit from Kant, through Hegel to Kierkegaard. This line of thought can be seen as a foundation for a philosophy of religion.

Dialectics of the Limit: the Other

Kant's critical project was to draw the limit of reason as the limit of human understanding, but this turns out to be a limit *for* reason in the (dialectical) sense that it can only be drawn through reason itself. The significance of Kant's critique for the philosophy of religion not only consists in the conditions set up for the attempt to think transcendence. The critical project itself pertains to philosophy of religion in the sense that it draws the limit of a reason which is the reason of a finite being. This finitude of a human being can only be understood by way of a counterpoint, namely the idea of an infinitude which is not human.

Hegel's criticism of Kant in the «Introduction» to *Phänomenologie des Geistes* unfolds the dialectics of the limit: to draw a limit presupposes that one has an idea of what is beyond the limit. In order to meet this difficulty, Hegel translates the dialectics of the limit into a dialectics of experience: when we experience something, we are ourselves changed. Experience thus implies self-transcendence, though *not* in the sense of transcending the limits of experience (and thus returning to some sort of dogmatism), but in the sense of transcending our world-view and self-understanding by seeing the world and ourselves anew or once again. The great methodological *novum* of Hegel's *Phänomenologie* consists in this relation of world-views and self-understanding, with the implication that in this relation, a self-transcendence can take place.

The dialectics of the limit is intensified in Kierkegaard's *Philosophical Fragments*, chapter III, on the absolute paradox. Kierkegaard begins with the paradox of self-knowledge. Socrates, famous for his knowledge of what it is to be a human being, was himself in doubt as to whether he was a monstrous being or simple being. Kierkegaard then points to the paradox of thought: to think what it cannot think. The point is that the experience of the limit can mean self-fulfillment. As a model for this self-fulfillment,

[5] For Nietzsches criticism of the conception of two worlds, cf. e.g. the short reductio: «Wie die ‹wahre Welt› endlich zur Fabel wurde» (in *Götzen-Dämmerung, Werke* (ed. Schlechta) III, Hanser, München 1969, p. 963).

Kierkegaard refers to the experience of love that is fulfilled in a meeting with what is other than the self. We come to ourselves as humans in the encounter with ‹the other›. But how is it possible to think what is, in this sense, other than human? This is the dialectics of the limit in an intensified mode. Kierkegaard points out that every attempt to think the absolute other, God, is ambiguous: is it not our own *Vorstellung* or projection? The answer indicated in the chapter on the absolute paradox is that we can only relate to what is absolutely other when we understand ourselves as determined or defined as other: in the consciousness of sin. This is a broken form of self-understanding, thus intensifying the initial paradox of self-knowledge.

I have given this brief outline of a complex story in order to show, first, how the question of transcendence is a question of limit, but also, second, that the question of transcendence turns out to be more complicated. This will be relevant in understanding the challenge made by religion.

Perspective and Transcendence

In order to reformulate the task of the philosophy of religion, I have pointed to the issue of perspective and finitude. The problem of transcendence is to be reformulated along this line: if finitude means that we as humans are bound by our own perspective, how is transcendence to be understood?

As indicated, however, the problem of transcendence should also be reversed. We are not only facing transcendence as a problem within religion, maybe even as the problem *of* religion. As humans we can seek to transcend the human condition, not only by asking questions which cannot be answered, but also by idealizing and idolizing, e.g. by forming ideas of perfection, thereby providing a counter-image of ourselves. Examples of this can be seen in conceptions of the reconstruction of what is to be a human being through bio-technologies. The problem of such an enterprise is also recognizing that we as humans are subjects, both in the sense of forming — maybe even seeking to reconstruct — our own history, but also in the sense of having a history where we are subjected to what we are doing. It is thus a problem to recognize our own finitude. If transcendence in this sense is already a *human* problem, a revised criticism of religion is needed. Religion is also a philosophical challenge in the sense that it brings the problem of human transcendence to the fore. This has to do with the ambiguity of religion.

The Ambiguity of Religion

Religion is an ambiguous phenomenon. On the one hand, it confronts us with the limits of our lives, and the limits of our understanding and action, and in this, it questions our self-understanding. On the other hand, religion can be much too human in its mastery of what is other — including others. As indicated, we still need a criticism of religion. It is a critical issue whether religion itself is able to open up interpretations and, indeed, open up a critique of human religiosity.

Religion, however, also gives us the possibility of reflecting on our own ambiguity. What we can come to see through the optics of religion is exactly this ambiguity — the ambiguity of our own subjectivity. Religion challenges the way we see ourselves. To conclude, let me briefly try to substantiate this claim.

Subjectivity: Activity and Passivity

With the *leitmotif* of the ‹redoubling of perspective›, the guiding question is: what is the implication of the optics of religion? Religion is about vision, it aims at transforming our way of seeing the world. What then can be seen through the optics of religion?

My argument was that religion is not only an ambiguous phenomenon, it also gives us the possibility of seeing our own ambiguity. Let me take two issues, first the problem of the will. Through the optics of religion, the problem of the will turns out to be complicated with regard to the relationship of activity and passivity. If we do something which we choose to do, we do it *ourselves*. We are, in an emphatic sense, the subject of our doing. But in what sense is our will something of our own doing? In doing what we choose to do, we can also be captured by ourselves, captured, for example, by our ambitions.

This means that the will can be a problem for us. It is a problem also in the sense that we ourselves can suffer from what we do when we do what we choose to do. The relation between activity (doing) and passivity (suffering) is thus complicated: we are subjects, not only as subjects of what we do, but also as subjected to what we do.

The optics of religion not only reflects this complicated relation of activity and passivity. It does so by maintaining an infinite dimension in which, for example, the phenomenon of guilt and conscience is reflected. Is conscience something we ‹do›? Are we subjects of our conscience? In what sense is guilt something of our own doing? Definitely in the sense that guilt concerns what we have done, but it adds a dimension. We do not ourselves master the significance of what we do. There is a transcendence which appears precisely with respect to our own actions.

As the second issue, let me — as the opposite of our own doing — take the experience of something irrevocable. When we experience a loss that cannot be replaced or reversed, especially a loss of love, it is reflected in an infinite dimension. The problem of sorrow can be exactly how one limits the significance of the loss. The experience of the irrevocable also bears on the first issue: we can experience the significance of our doing as irrevocable. This is reflected through the optics of religion inasmuch as religion maintains a dimension of infinitude.

The ‹otherness› of religion must therefore be sought in a reflected transcendence: it pertains to the limits of our own understanding and action. And it points to a transformation of vision through the interplay of cognitive, volitional and affective attitudes.

Interpreted along this line, the optics of religion is a philosophical challenge as it makes stronger demands on a theory of subjectivity. The rationality implied in the obligation of self-accountability is challenged, not by a position of irrationalism, but by a reflective interpretation of human existence.