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ARTICLE

DOI: 10.1057/s41599-018-0182-9 OPEN

Philosophy of religion and the big questions

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ABSTRACT Whether philosophy of religion can have a robust future depends on whether it can develop forms that address the Big Questions of religion. I define religion heuristically, for the purposes of philosophy of religion, as the engagement of ultimate realities, and ultimate dimensions of experience, in cognitive, existential, and practical ways. This requires setting philosophy of religion within a larger scale of philosophy that can deal with ultimates, how they are known, and how such philosophy can defend itself against attacks against the possibility of philosophies of ultimate reality. Philosophy of religion is interesting only if it can say, with good arguments, whether we get ultimate realities right when engaging them. The threats to the future of philosophy of religion come from those forms of the discipline that talk only about how to talk about religion or that only describe religious experience without giving a critical normative account of what is experienced as ultimate. The key to advocating philosophy of religion that addresses the Big Questions is showing that it is plausible and possible to have a philosophy of ultimates. The bulk of this article proposes such a philosophy as a plausible hypothesis. Even if this hypothesis about ultimates is rejected in the long run, that will only be by the presentation of a better hypothesis about ultimates. The paideia for philosophy of religion dealing with the Big Questions is discussed, as is the development of an interested audience for such philosophy of religion.

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Introduction

The primary meaning of philosophy of religion is philosophy that says something important about religion. This is illustrated by the philosophers we discuss when teaching philosophy of religion historically. Courses with a Western orientation would include figures such as Plotinus, Augustine, Pseudo-Dionysus, Bonaventure, Anselm, Maimonides, Thomas Aquinas, Duns Scotus, William of Ockham, Descartes, Hobbes, Locke, Spinoza, Leibniz, Hume, Kant, Hegel, Schleiermacher, Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, Peirce, James, Dewey, Whitehead, Heidegger, Wittgenstein, Hartshorne, and Weiss. Those figures are familiar to English speaking philosophers of religion, especially if they have studied some American philosophy. Few courses would be able to include all of these, but we can dream. Individually we might have other favorites.

Below I shall argue for the importance of cross-cultural comparison, and so suggest that in addition to the mentioned Western philosophers, Islamic philosophers who say something important about religion include Al-Kindi, Ibn Al-Rawandi, Al-Farabi, Ibn-Sina, Abu Hayyan Al-Tauhidi, Al-Ghazali, Al-Hallaj, Ibn Arabi, Rumi, and Ibn Rushd. Among South Asian philosophies that say something important about religion are the Upanishads, the Bhagavad Gita, the Six Orthodox Schools of Hinduism, especially Yoga and Samkhya, Vedantins such as Shankara, Ramanuja, and Madhva, and Kashmir Shaivites such as Abhinavagupta. Philosophies in the Buddhist lineages include many texts from the Pali Canon, especially the *Dhammapada* and the Dialogue with King Malinda, and the philosophies of Nagarjuna, Vasubandu, Asanga, and Kumarajiva; on the Chinese Buddhist side are Seng-chao, Chi-tsang, Hsuan-tsang, Chih-I, Fa-tsang, Shen-hsiu,and Hui-neng. Chinese philosophers who say important things about religion include Confucius, Laozi, Zhuangzi, Mengzi, Zunzi, Wang Bi, Mozi, Zhou Dunyi, Shao Yung, Zhang Zi, Cheng Hao, Cheng Yi, Zhu Xi, and Wang Yangming. Of course there are many other philosophers from these traditions who have whole philosophies that say something important about religion. If many of these non-Western thinkers are unfamiliar to you, this bespeaks a weakness in those of us who think about philosophy of religion. I have culled these lists from standard histories and anthologies of translations into English, most of which have been around for decades (Fakhry, 2004; Radhakrishnan and Moore, 1957; Chan, 1963); but they have not been part of the paideia of many of us who teach and worry about philosophy of religion.

Nearly all of these thinkers and texts have large philosophies that deal with many topics beyond religion, including for most of them metaphysics, epistemology, ethics, philosophy of education, law, and politics (to use the Western labels); and most of them are systematic in one sense or other. Philosophy of religion is only part of their work. But many of their other topics have bearing on religion. For instance, most of the philosophers from all the traditions deal with permanence and change, freedom and determinism, the nature of the self, the grounds of value and obligation, and the nature of reference, although they have many different ways of formulating these question. Philosophers such as Plato and Aristotle, who said little about religion as such, should be counted as primary philosophers of religion and are often taught as such.

Despite the fact that the primary meaning of philosophy of religion is philosophy that says something important about religion, "philosophy of religion" has become something of a field of its own, with specialized courses, journals, and disciplines in academic training. This field of philosophy of religion is what we refer to when we ask about the "future" of philosophy of religion.

The thesis of this essay is that the field of philosophy of religion can have a robust future if and only if it can engage the Big Questions of religion.[1] These are the questions about ultimate things, as I shall argue shortly. Some of them are first-order theological questions, such as the nature and existence of God, or of Buddha-mind, or the Dao. Others are the second and third order questions such as how we can know about the first-order questions or what practices are helpful or harmful for living in appropriate relations to ultimate things. Shortly I will argue more explicitly about ultimate things and the questions about them. Here, the point is that they are Big Questions.

One reason philosophy of religion has a questionable future is that the kinds of it associated with analytic philosophy limit themselves to analyzing what is *given* that relates to religion. Sometimes these given things are matters of ultimacy, such as a given concept of God or traditional arguments for the existence of what is conceptualized. The legacy of David Hume, in his *Dialogues concerning Natural Religion*, has determined a large swath of analytic philosophy of religion, and it has allowed for an appropriation of certain elements of medieval Christian philosophy in the current discussion. Other parts of analytic philosophy have taken "the linguistic turn," to use Richard Rorty's phrase (Rorty, 1967), and talk about the talk about ultimate matters, not the ultimate matters themselves. One major problem with the Humean tradition is that a great many people interested in God no longer hold to the conceptions he dealt with. Hume's modes of analysis have little traction on conceptions of God in Hegel, Schelling, Schleiermacher, Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, or Whitehead, let alone those that have been influenced by or are actually found in South and East Asian traditions. Analytic philosophy of religion in the Humean legacy suffers now from being boring because most people have no investment in how the analysis or arguments come out. Some analytic philosophers are simply apologists for some particular religious conception, which is of little interest to people who are not interested in defending that concept. Analytic philosophy that strongly takes the linguistic turn finds itself hard pressed to convince people that talking about how to talk about religious Big Ideas is worth indulging when you never can talk about the ultimate things the Big Ideas are about. Denial of real reference to religious things tends to make discussion of religious talk uninteresting.

Recent Continental traditions of philosophy of religion also have a problem with real reference (Neville, 2013, ch. 2; 20a5, introduction, ch. 1). By the Continental traditions I do not mean those of absolute idealism such as Hegel's, Jacobi's, or Schelling's but rather the twentieth century philosophies of phenomenology and postmodernism. Phenomenologies, including hermeneutical philosophies such as Gadamer's and Ricoeur's, have contributed mightily to our understanding of religious experience. Yet they seem to stay within a Kantian aura according to which we experience our experience, not what our experience encounters regarding ultimate matters. In a strict sense, phenomenology is descriptive, not normative, and so cannot ask the serious question of whether our experience has got it right, which is what is needed for a robust philosophy of religion. The postmodern philosophies are often normative, by contrast, but usually focus not on the topics of our discourse but on correcting discourse. This makes it hard for a robust philosophy of religion for two reasons. First, it limits attention mainly to the historical discourse of the West and relegates the discourses of other traditions of both philosophy and religion to the roles they might play in the Western discourse, for instance as colonialized. No Indian Saivite or Chinese Confucian would want to enter the world conversation in philosophy of religion as a colonialized culture! Anti-colonialist postmodernism marginalizes the non-European traditions all the more, ironically. Second, the normative engine of most postmodernism for the criticism of Western discourse is usually the motive of liberating

some group, for instance a non-Western culture, women, or sexual minorities. Such liberation of oppressed people is all to the good, of course, but it can obscure critical questions about the truth of the discourse concerning ultimate religious matters. The liberation motive does not have much to do with whether the discourse refers to its objects correctly or fruitfully. For people wanting a robust philosophy of religion to explain matters of religious ultimacy, postmodernism often detours away from the goal.

To summarize the argument so far, the future of philosophy of religion as a field is in jeopardy because neither analytic nor Continental philosophies of religion deal consistently and robustly with the Big Questions in religion for which interested people want philosophical help. To develop this argument more positively now, I must go back and explain some things so far only glossed. First, I need to say more about what I think religion is as a subject matter for philosophy of religion and why I associate it with ultimacy. Second, I need to say more about the content of the Big Questions, and how they are related to ultimacy. Third, I need to discuss the erudition in world religions, religious movements, and secularism that is required for philosophy of religion. Fourth, I need to say more about the audience or public for philosophy of religion: to whom is philosophy of religion ideally accountable if it is to have a robust future?

A heuristic definition of religion

To be more specific about philosophy of religion and its Big Questions, it is necessary to have a heuristic definition of religion. Religion can be defined in many different ways, and some people say that there is no such thing as religion at all in any sense that applies across cultures. Nevertheless a heuristic definition can be proposed that helps organize and understand the inquiry in philosophy of religion. As "heuristic," its worth will be shown in how helpful it is in the long run. I propose the following as an hypothesis for defining religion heuristically (Neville, 2018).

Religion is the human symbolic engagement of ultimate realities in cognitive, existential, and practical ways. Religion is the harmonizing of many different elements to engage ultimacy. For instance, religion fits into social structures, even if the religious person is a hermit. Sociology of religion studies these structures. Most religions have their own organizations, for instance congregations, monasteries, ecclesiastical structures, in widely variant forms, and political science studies aspects of these. Religions have their own traditions and histories through time, studied by historians of religion. Religious people have their own psyches and developing psychological states, studied by psychologists. Religious people have bodies that bear upon religion, studied by biologists. Religious people have thinking processes, studied by cognitive sciences. Religions have cultures that develop over time, studied by evolutionary and cultural anthropologists. Religions have large-scale features studied by big-data modeling and small scale features studied or exhibited in literatures of various kinds. Religions have changing and interacting symbol systems, studied by semiotics, as well as history and anthropology. Religions have various artworks, music, and architectural components, studied by art historians and critics. Contemporary inquiry into religion is extremely multidisciplinary and is changing quickly as new angles of analysis pick up on different components of religion. Philosophy of religion needs to be conversant with these fields.

What is essential about religion, however, is how these various components harmonize so that ultimate realities (ultimacy in some sense, ultimate matters) is engaged. I shall deal with ultimacy in the next section. Whatever the various components of religion are in a given situation, they are religious only to the extent that they contribute, working together in dynamic harmonies, to the engagement of ultimacy. When they do not contribute to engagement of ultimacy, they are merely social structures, political organizations, psychological states, historical traditions, beliefs about the world, and the rest. Just as all these can be components of religion, so religion in any circumstance can be a component of them. Religion can be studied, not as religion per se, but as a component of social structures, political organizations, the history of art, and so forth. Religion itself is not present unless these conditions harmonize to constitute engagement of ultimacy. Every major religious tradition has had prophets to rail against the falseness of religion in society, the corruption of religious organizations, the craziness of some psychological states purporting to be religious, and all the rest. My heuristic definition says that to be religious, the components must harmonize so as to make for genuine engagement of ultimate matters. Any of these components can be out of harmony with what is necessary to make for living engagement of ultimacy, and then should be called "religious" only by courtesy. As Josiah Royce liked to say (Royce, 1918), much that passes for religion "lacks the living waters." An essential element of philosophy of religion is the ongoing task of discerning genuine engagement of ultimacy.

The heuristic definition of religion says that engagement is cognitive, existential, and practical. By cognitive engagement I mean all forms of conceptualizing ultimate realities and matters, including myths, legends, stories, geographic representations, scriptures, religious beliefs, any kind of sacred symbol system, theology, metaphysics, or philosophy concerning ultimate matters (Neville, 2013). Cognitive engagement would include any kind of thinking that involves signs that refer to ultimacy, directly or indirectly. Cognitive engagements include general references and responses to ultimacy, as well as interpretations of local and personal circumstances on which ultimate matters bear. Many philosophers of religion define religion itself in terms of beliefs, especially beliefs in supernatural beings. Several traditions of philosophy of religion define their tasks almost exclusively in the criticism of cognitive engagements of ultimacy. Cognitive engagements are also involved in existential and practical ones.

By existential engagements I mean those engagements that define the religious person's or community's own identity in relation to ultimacy (Tillich, 1951; Neville, 2014). The most dramatic instances of existential engagement are often conversion experiences, especially the kinds discussed by Kierkegaard and defining deep subjectivity. The existential "decision" to be a sage is central to the Confucian tradition, as is the vow of a bodhisattva to Mahayana Buddhism. The entire *Bhagavad Gita* is the existential project of reconstituting Arjuna. Less dramatically, just about anyone in any tradition that claims a religion claims that it is ultimately significant in defining their identity.

By practical engagements I mean repeatable ways by which life can be organized in relation to ultimate realities, guided of course by cognitive and existential engagements (Neville, 2015, 2016). Rituals, prayers, participation in religious services and communities, work toward spiritual maturation, the development of spiritual friendships, and both deep and shallow habits of life that are shaped by how people cognize and existentially relate themselves to ultimacy, fall under what I call practical engagements. The condition under which practices are religious is that they are involved in genuine engagement with some relevant ultimate. As noted earlier, many kinds of practices, say in a congregation, might be only political, or only cultural, with no implicit or explicit intentionality of engaging ultimate things. No sharp lines exist between cognitive, existential, and practical engagements and many religious "phenomena" are engagements that involve all three.

Part of Big Question philosophy of religion is to sort and relate these various kinds of engagements of ultimacy.

Five kinds of ultimacy

So far I have used the terms "ultimate realities," "ultimates," "ultimacy," "ultimate matters," and "ultimate dimensions of life" as rough cognates. We need to be more explicit. Colloquially, "ultimate" means the last in a series of conditions beyond which you cannot go. Sometimes the ultimacy language is about the "highest" condition or the "deepest," or "farthest," or "most inward." To say that you "cannot go beyond" a condition in a series of conditions might mean only that you cannot imagine a further condition. For instance, believers in an ultimate storm god cannot imagine global meteorological conditions beyond storms, and beyond that are the laws of expanding gasses. Something is genuinely ultimate if in fact there is no further condition. Very often in religious symbol systems, something that seems ultimate but is not in fact functions as a metaphor for something that is in fact. When this metaphoric function is in play, the engagement with the only seeming ultimate is also an engagement with a genuine ultimate, as philosophers of religion, or theologians, or seers, can make the interpretation. For religious engagement, it is the ultimacy in the series of conditions, not the condition at which the series stops, that makes the engagement religious. Nevertheless, such a variety of articulations of ultimates in conditioning series exists that philosophy of religion needs to tack back and forth between criteria of ultimacy and concrete claims about ultimate conditions.

In order to make my earlier discussion of religion and its Big Questions plausible, I need to propose a plausible hypothesis about ultimate reality. Some people might reject the definition of religion as engagement of ultimacy by claiming that nothing is ultimate, that everything is in a series that extends through an actual infinite of conditions. Therefore, I will present my hypothesis about ultimate realities. If you already are satisfied with some theory of ultimate realities, such as Thomas Aquinas's, Abhinavagupta's, Al-Ghazali's, or Zhou Dunyi's, feel free to speed-read to the end of this section. Otherwise, read the following as an "esse proves posse" argument for the plausibility of defining religion in relation to ultimate realities.[2]

My hypothesis has two steps. The first is to address the question of how or why there is any world at all. This is the "ontological question," the question of being (Neville, 2013, pt. 3). The answer I propose will be called the "ontological ultimate." The second step is to note that any cosmos that exists has to be determinate in some respects, "this" rather than "that," "something" rather than "nothing at all." The abstract requirement that the cosmos has to be determinate in some respects leaves a wide range of candidates for what the cosmos consists in and we do not have to address that empirical question here. The abstract nature of determinateness yields four more series of conditions with ultimate endpoints, as I shall explain shortly. These can be called "cosmological ultimates" because they would obtain in any cosmos.

Step one is to propose an hypothesis to answer the ontological question. That question can be posed in many ways. Why or how come there is something rather than nothing at all? What is the being in the many beings (one of Heidegger's formulations)? What is the One for the Many? The world's philosophical and religious traditions have shaped, addressed, and answered this question in many ways. Here is my proposal.

The most abstract consideration of things, applying to anything with an identity, is to regard them as determinate, this rather than that, something rather than nothing. A determinate thing is a harmony with two kinds of components, conditional and essential. Conditional components are the ways other things relate to the harmony so that it can be different from them, caused by them, located relative to them, participate in them, cause them, and so forth. Essential components are those that integrate all the components so that the harmony has its own being. Without essential components there would be no harmony to be conditioned, or in turn to condition other things, nothing to stand in relation to those other things. Without conditional components a given harmony would not be determinate with respect to anything, and thus would not be determinate, something rather than nothing, this rather than that. Any harmony is related to every other harmony with respect to which it is determinate.

How, then, are harmonies together? First, they are together in all the ways they condition one another; I call this "cosmological togetherness." But they must also be together in a deeper way, because the essential features of other things are always external to the harmony they condition; otherwise those other things would not be other, only mere elements within the harmony, and the harmony could not be determinate with respect to them, reducing the harmony to indeterminate homogeneity. Things have their being on their own and in relation to one another, partly internal through conditions and partly external through each harmony having essential components that give it its own-being. I call this deeper togetherness "the ontological context of mutual relevance." What can this context be? It cannot be something determinate, such as a space-time container, because that would presuppose a deeper context to relate the determinate things to the ontological context of mutual relevance. I propose that the only thing that could be the ontological context of mutual relevance is an ontological creative act that has the determinate things together as its terminus.

The ontological creative act has no nature of its own except what comes from its creating the world. The act creates time and space, and hence does not take place at a time or in a place; it is not temporally first or omnipresent. The common connotations of the word "act" include an actor, but that is not what is meant here. Because potentialities are determinate, the act has no potentialities of its own: it just happens. The act has no internal process through which the world emerges, because such a process would have to have determinate steps, steps marking differences within the process. Therefore the act cannot be modeled: no internal structure exists to model. Instead of speaking of an ontological creative act, we can speak of the things existing together, each its own thing but related to the things external to itself with respect to which it is determinate: the ontological togetherness of the beings is being-itself. The relevant distinction to note is that the ontological causation giving rise to that togetherness is not the same as any kind of causal conditioning within the world. Worldly causal conditioning presupposes that the ontological causation makes the world be something that has worldly conditioning within it. Because the world has the act of existing together, with all its changes and temporal and spatial relations, I prefer to call the ontological context of mutual reliance an ontological creative act.

Despite the fact that the ontological creative act has no nature of its own apart from what it creates, and thus cannot be described or modeled with an iconic theory, we do have to refer to it and have done so in many ways for centuries. Among the Axial Age religious traditions three main metaphoric systems have been developed, though with countless variations and intermixings. The West Asian religions have taken the notion of a person as creative agent to develop monotheisms. Monotheistic gods carry connotations of intentionality, intellect, will, and agency, with personal characteristics such as goodness and forgiveness. To be sure, these notions are determinate and hence not

the ontological ultimate. Augustine's creator of space and time, Aquinas's Pure Infinite Act of To Be, Allah, and Ein Sof are not persons in any ordinary finite sense. But they carry personalistic connotations by analogy and feeling tone. The South Asian religions consider intentionality and agency to be subject to the laws of karma and as such cannot be ultimate. But they take consciousness from their understanding of persons, purify it, and treat it as a metaphor for the ontological creative act, as in Saguna and Nirguna Brahman, Buddhist emptiness, or Kashmir Saivism's Shiva. East Asian religions do not take personal models for ultimacy, although like the others they often refer to lots of supernatural agents. Rather, they take metaphors of spontaneous emergence as in the Dao that cannot be named or the Ultimate of Non-Being/Great Ultimate as ways of referring to the ontological creative act. I myself take metaphysical metaphors from the comparative history of philosophy to point indexically to the ontological creative act and to circumscribe its functions relative to the created world (Neville, 2013, pt. 4).

Anything determinate is existentially dependent on the ontological creative act in order for it to be with the other harmonies with respect to which it is determinate. Equally, however, the ontological creative act is existentially dependent on the determinate things in its terminus in order for it to be the ontological creative act. If there were nothing created, there would be no creative act. Therefore, the transcendental traits of determinate harmonies are also ultimate, as ultimate as the ontological creative act (Neville, 2014). There are four such traits: form, components formed, existential location, and value-identity, according to my hypothesis. Every harmony has form or pattern according to which its essential and conditional components are together. Every harmony has a multiplicity of components, some conditional and some essential. Every harmony has a location in an existential field constituted by its determinate relations with other harmonies with respect to which it is determinate. And every harmony has the value of getting its components together according to its form in its existential location relative to other things.

I recognize that these are very large philosophical claims. Together they constitute my hypothesis about ultimacy, and I have defended them at great length elsewhere (Neville, 2013, 2014). Here, however, they only need to illustrate my position that religion can be defined in terms of engaging ultimate realities on at least one theory of ultimates. How do these claims about the ultimate conditions of form, components, existential location, and value-identity bear upon religious engagement?

Form bears upon human life in every harmony with respect to which people might be determinate. But it functions primarily as an ultimate condition of human life insofar as it constitutes future possibilities that contain alternatives with different values. People often have to make choices among alternative possibilities, and in fact do so in minor ways all the time, mostly unconsciously. In this way, people are among the decision-points that determine what gets actualized, what its value is, and what values are excluded from actualization by the choices. On the one hand, the choosers determine what happens to some extent, and on the other hand their choices determine what kind of choosers they are. Some choices are merely different, such as deciding whether to plant peonies or rose bushes, or becoming a philosopher versus a prizefighter. Other choices are between better and worse alternatives. In both cases it makes sense to say that people live under obligation in the sense that they determine part of their own worth by what they choose, and this is an ultimate condition of human life. It is an extremely complicated condition and gives rise to a vast problematic of righteousness that every religion deals with one way or another. The alternative possibilities need to be interpreted for the sake of choosing, and religions differ in the signs that have for that interpretation (Neville, 2015). Some assign complex roles for caste behavior; others look to the pronouncements of scriptures; others have supposedly self-justifying rules; others have more of a situation-ethics approach. All religions need to cope with bad choices, and issues of punishment, sometimes by exclusion from the community. All religions have mechanisms of reconciliation or rejection of reconciliation. For some philosophers of religion, these issues of righteousness, engaging the ultimate condition of having to make choices among possibilities of different value, constitute most of religion. All these issues are ways of engaging the ultimate of form.

People also need to integrate their many components to make up a self. Willy-nilly, the components of a person have a form or pattern, developed over time. But better and worse ways of integration exist and religions parse these differently. Among the components are bodies as they age and encounter disease, metabolic circumstances, family roles, social and historical conditions, friendships and family relations, and the accidents of life that make each person's situation unique. Some religions think that rising above suffering is the main agenda of building a self; some seek inner peace; others emphasize becoming an effective agent; yet others seek internal harmony that harmonizes with external harmonies. Because every person as a harmony needs to integrate humanly relevant components, the quest for wholeness in all its complexity is a religious engagement of the ultimate reality of internal multiple components.

Through their mutually conditioning relations people relate to other people, institutions such as families, neighborhoods, schools, and economic systems, and to the rest of nature in larger environmental senses, and they do this through time. These conditioning relations constitute existential fields in which people are located relative to one another and to other things. This can be imagined as a space-time field, but there are many other kinds of fields, such as relations in a family or a school. Each of these other people and things is a harmony of some sort or other and to engage them in the existential field is a normative obligation to attend to what they are worth in themselves, in their own matrix of relations. Nearly every religion has some version of the Golden Rule according to which a person should not engage others only in respect of how they serve or threaten the person's interests but also in respect of the other people's perspectives. We now relate to much of the rest of nature with an intent to respect it as constituted in its own existential locations. The ultimate condition of having location in existential fields relative to other things lays upon people the general obligation to respect others as they are in themselves to the extent we can.

People engage the ultimate condition of value-identity when they ask about the meaning of life. That question is raised in many different ways, from conceiving life's purpose to be getting to heaven to conceiving life's purpose to be to live life well in small things. Purpose language may be limited to West Asian religions. South Asian religions think of enlightenment and stopping the cycle of rebirth. East Asian religions find life's meaning in harmonizing with larger wholes through time. The basic question is, given a person's actually achieved value and taking into account the other values that could have been actualized, what does it add up to?

In addition to the problematic of righteousness in engaging form, the problematic of personal wholeness in engaging the components of a life, the problematic of engaging others in existential fields, and the problematic of life's meaning with regard to achieved value-identity, there exists the problematic of engaging existence itself, its radical contingency and its groundedness in what I have called the ontological creative act. This problematic is manifest in mysticisms of various sorts, but also in many kinds of existential determinations of how to affirm, enjoy,

and accept, or negate, hate, and deny, the very existence of the world itself. Many people think this is the real heart of religion.

I have sketched this abstract and possibly idiosyncratic hypothesis about ultimacy and how people relate to it to accomplish four things. First, I have shown that it is possible to have a theory of ultimacy so that religion can be defined in terms of engaging ultimates. If you have a different theory of ultimate realities, that will serve for my definition of religion. But you cannot say that we cannot talk about ultimate realities and that therefore it is foolish to define religion in terms of it. Second, I have illustrated my point that the primary form of philosophy of religion is having a larger philosophy that says something important about religion. To defend the hypothesis sketched in this section I would have to have an epistemology with a robust sense of reference, contra-most postmodernism, a metaphysics that deals with the conditions of determinateness, a cosmology that relates human life in time to ultimates, and so forth. One cannot be *only* a philosopher of religion. Third, I have gestured toward a very broad agenda of issues in philosophy of religion such that just about any problem a philosopher of religion might want to address is to be found somewhere in the human engagements of form, components, existential location, value identity, and existence itself. Of course I have not provided any knock-down argument for this agenda, and my gesturing depends on taking a very broad comparative look at the ways religions have engaged what I have claimed are the five basic ultimates. Fourth, I have presented a way to conceive religion as itself a complex human way of engaging something real, the ultimates; it is not necessary to think of it merely as a social construction with no reality in its object. Just as every society has to engage the realities of its climate, it has to engage the ultimates at least in terms of the problematics I have mentioned.

Paideia for philosophy of religion

My claim that philosophy of religion must rest on considerable depth of erudition in comparative religions (and compared with secularity) is daunting. Nearly every specialist in a religious tradition already is daunted by the feeling of not knowing enough. The more you know, the more you realize what you do not know. Add to that the task of knowing a lot of specialties and then the task of inquiring into just how they compare, and you have what might seem a life's work before you can get started on philosophy of religion. But let's be realistic. We can get to work on robust, comparatively based, philosophy of religion while working toward changing conditions to make it easier. Here are some conditions to change.

First, we can work toward better cross-cultural religious literacy in primary and secondary schools in America. Many European countries already have curricula that introduce religious studies earlier. No student should get to college and encounter any significant religious tradition for the first time.

Second, we can work toward cross-cultural literacy as the norm in college courses. For instance, literature courses can study the literature of many cultures. History courses can be cross-cultural. Religion, of course, needs to be interpreted in its representations in literature and history, and cross-cultural humanistic education is a basic background condition for comparing religions.

Third, we can work toward developing curricula that have courses in religion that work cross-culturally. There can be courses on why there is something rather than nothing, explored cross culturally, courses on the grounds of obligation, on the nature of the self, on modes of relating to others as others, on the meaning of life, all cross-cultural in the things studied. (These suggestions come from my scheme in the previous section.))

Fourth, we can work toward expanding the vision of philosophy in academic philosophy departments from an almost exclusive focus on Western philosophy to a broader paideia in world philosophies. Bryan W. Van Norden's *Taking Back Philosophy: A Multicultural Manifesto* is an extremely important book that identifies a crucial condition for philosophy of religion having a future.

Fifth, we can then work toward graduate curricula for philosophy and religion departments that might entertain academic training in philosophy of religion. Those curricula would have to insist on training in the philosophy side, and also training at the graduate level in at least some array of religions where comparative competence is produced. It does not matter much where you start so long as you do both. We should remember that the philosophy side should include Big Question philosophy, not narrowly defined philosophy of religion.

The result of this should be an academic community where everyone has talking acquaintance with a wide range of religious traditions and religious phenomena. Each person will be more expert in some than others, but would be able to talk with specialists in other things. This would be an environment of study with an easy erudition for comparison.

Earlier I mentioned that religion consists in a harmony for engaging ultimacy that includes many components studied by other disciplines, such as social structures, psychological matters, political and historical issues, cultures developing through time with their evolving practices and symbol systems and the arts. All of these and many others are components of religion. Moreover, religion itself is a component in each of these, contributing to social structure, politics, history, culture, symbols, and the arts. Just as experts in the evolving disciplines studying these fields should be literate in comparative religions, so philosophers of religion should be literate in the state of these other disciplines. Philosophy of religion needs multidisciplinary literacy (Wildman, 2010).

This too is daunting. I am not saying that philosophers of religion need to be trained at the graduate level in each of these fields. But they should be able to read the results of current research in these fields as it bears upon what they are studying in religion. Too often, philosophers of religion have read only writings in philosophy of religion, which then leads them to limit themselves to conceptual problems such as analyzing arguments for the existence of God or freewill. Philosophers of religion need to be able to interpret human engagements with ultimacy across the board, and therefore need to be educated to a literate level in all the disciplines that study the components of those engagements. Very much of philosophy of religion is empirical, studying how the components of engagements of ultimacy work. The interpretive hypotheses in philosophy of religion need to test themselves by how well they incorporate knowledge about those components.

My focus on comparative and multidisciplinary training in the paideia for philosophy of religion as a disciplinary specialty perhaps seems idealistic. Surely it flies in the face of the juggernaut power of STEM (science, technology, engineering, mathematics) in the curricular formation of colleges and universities. Indeed it flies in the face of the recent conviction held by so many that the purpose of college and university study is job training above all else. I have been advocating a new version of liberal education. But think of what is at stake! With robust philosophy of religion as I have described it, we might very well come to new and far better understandings of religion!

If I am right that religion consists in engagements of ultimate realities, then it must be studied by philosophy of religion that can handle ultimacy. Most other disciplines, even those studying components at the heart of religion such as sociology,

anthropology, and psychology, methodologically avoid studying ultimate conditions. So long as they do, their understanding of religion can at best be only partial and at worst is systematically biased, like the study of climate that systematically refuses to consider atmosphere. To the extent religious studies does not include the philosophy necessary for a disciplined treatment of ultimate realities, it cannot study religion, only religion's texts and traditions, social organizations, and so forth. It should be obvious by now why the philosophy necessary for philosophy of religion needs to be large and systematic, including all the sub-disciplines necessary for a philosophy of ultimate realities and its justification.

Publics for philosophy of religion

Whether philosophy of religion has a robust future depends on whether there is and will be a public for it, people who are interested in learning philosophy of religion. If philosophy of religion seems to be dying in the academy now, this is because there is an insufficient public for philosophy of religion as it is now practiced. Who would be interested in philosophy of religion as I have proposed it here?

First of all, Big Question philosophy of religion should be of interest to religious thinkers in all religions who are interested in the Big Questions as raised in their religion. These would be theologians, even apologetic theologians who are committed to defending their religion, or expanding it to incorporate what can be taken to be true from other religious points of view. Robust philosophy of religion provides ways of understanding ultimacy that are philosophically grounded, not depending on revelation for their authority, and this can only be helpful for those theological traditions that *also* make claims for revelation. Philosophy of religion definitely is not apologetics for some religion or other. But it adds to the understanding of those who do have an apologetic intent. This would be true, however, only if philosophers of religion can be literate enough to address the theological traditions in all the world religions. We need to be able to write for the Buddhists, Christians, Confucians, Daoists, Hindus, Jews, and Muslims, to name only some of the large traditions in alphabetical order. Although their thinkers have some obligation to learn the philosophical conversation, we cannot write without registering and respecting the plausibility conditions of thinking in the broad range of religions even when we disagree with them. This point supposes that religion has a deep cognitive interest in engaging ultimacy and that this interest is expressed variously in many religious publics.

Second, religion is an enormously important component in the human situation, affecting our politics, cultural relations, senses of identity, and the spiritual tones of many communities. Many intelligent people are deeply concerned about religion in global life where it has so many different forms. Big Question philosophy of religion of the sort I have described would be of interest to that group of thinkers in many public venues. This is especially true of public intellectuals and journalists. Of course, philosophy of religion would have to be written in ways that could be understood by an intelligent general public, not just philosophers of religion and theologians. Hegel, William James, and Whitehead all have been widely influential beyond professional philosophy in what they have said about religion, so it can be done.

Third, philosophy of religion would find a wide audience as part of liberal education. To be sure, liberal education is under attack now. Nevertheless, curricular emphases in the academy are subject to pendulum swings, and I foresee new and creative attempts to find new forms for liberal education that would include philosophy of religion. Philosophy of religion is not only learning about some aspects of religion, like some forms of religious studies; it is about improving ways of engaging ultimacy. Just as liberal education should make students better philosophers, better in their historical understanding, and better in their scientific understanding, it should make them better in their religious sophistication. Teaching philosophy of religion in this sense is how most philosophers of religion will make a living.

Fourth, philosophy of religion in the Big Question sense would be of great interest to philosophers of religion themselves who would find its new insights, its systematic philosophical vision, its comparative erudition, its multidisciplinary literacy, and its integration into global intellectual life to be heady stuff. Big Question philosophy of religion is extremely interesting, great fun, practiced collaborative by people from many different cultures and fields, and intrinsically attractive. This can build a grand justifying public.

Received: 2 June 2018 Accepted: 25 September 2018
Published online: 23 October 2018

Notes

1 I take the phrase "Big Questions" from Wesley J. Wildman (Wildman, 2010, p. 1–13) with whom I am in agreement on big questions in philosophy and religion and on the need for comparative and multidisciplinary study in philosophy of religion. Although we develop these notions differently, our basic agreement is solid. It is not clear who developed the ideas first, but his book is dedicated to me and Neville 2013 is dedicated to him. I taught him Peirce's theory of inquiry from which we both develop our approaches to philosophy of religion.

2 I realize it is somewhat flip to assert that my hypothesis, only briefly sketched here, shows that a philosophy of ultimacy is possible. The cases against metaphysics of this sort are multiple. I have dealt with most of them in detail, however, in Neville 2013, 2014, and 2015.

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Data availability

Data sharing is not applicable this paper as no datasets were generated or analysed.

Additional information

Competing interests: The author declares no competing interests.

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