

Developing Philosophy of Religion in a Theological Context

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Abstract

This article's concern is to look into the Religious Philosophical rethinking from the theological event. Theological philosophy from time had not been moving toward the same angle, but in this paper the researcher might want to recycle other sub-disciplines such as philosophical theology, systematic theology and Christian ethics. Question has been raised by scholars on why philosophy of religion and theology has always been at other end, this publication will look into it. Theological education and philosophy need to move together because one is the branch of the other. This publication is interested in the philosophy and theological tradition.

Initially in our locality the perception of the people is to pay lip service to the theological education, but in this publication there will be re-development of theology in rethinking of philosophy of religion. In Nigeria is there any agenda for theology in Nigeria? This is part of what this publication would answer. In this work the voices of the philosophical and theological scholars will be considered. We shall see to the relationship between theological discussion and philosophical argument. This work will discuss the difference between philosophy as process and philosophy as product. It will be explained in this publication that the role of philosophy of religion in a theological curriculum is corrective and relationship rather than subordinate. The question to be considered in this publication is whether philosophy is religion, is a necessary element in the encyclopedia of theological science.

Introduction

In recent years philosophy of religion seems to have fallen on hard times in theological quarters in Nigeria. This might also be said of other sub-disciplines such as philosophical theology, systematic theology^s and Christian ethics. In shaping its curriculum, current theological education appears to place the emphasis on biblical, historical, or pastoral studies, as confirmed by recent

appointments. Although budgetary cutbacks alight account for this narrowed emphasis, one might still ask why the primacy of these particular branches. Few appointments or announcement have been made in the areas of philosophy of religion, or philosophical or systematic theology a fact suggesting that philosophy of religion is somehow being edged out of the curriculum. Further, in the last few years at least five institutions with responsibility for theological education have appointed deans, principals, or directors who seem to accord little or no significance to philosophy of religion or its cognates; and yet in all likelihood will set the agenda for Nigeria theological education for the next decade.

This initial Perception of theological- education paying lip service to philosophy of Religion (recall Farley's complaint in *Theological*) prompts reflection on whether philosophy of religion has become redundant, irrelevant or simply a disruptive force in the theological enterprise, in our small nation, we have had a good theological tradition: 'solid biblical and historical theology, venturesome analytic, systematic, and even philosophical theology' Sola Ayegboyin as reflected on the thirtieth anniversary of the Nigerian Theological Society². But with the lull in philosophy of religion today, have our theological education and reflections ceased to be venturesome? Without the presence of philosophy of religion to encourage that venturesome edge, theological education is reduced to the status of a gelding, compared to that of *the* stallion it should be, and contributed to confusion about the sub-discipline itself.

The work of philosophy of religion appears in theological education to be, at best, a luxury or, at worst, a disruptive force. This appearance might be the result of the faith orientation of philosophers; subtly influencing the character of their philosophical enquiry, to the extent that philosophy of religion as become a force of apologetics or it may be that working on this borderland of theology, philosophers of religion are seen to be making. According to Donald McKinnon, 'protesting raids upon *the* theologians' cherished homeland; considered as philosophy of religion is no longer indispensable for theological education, how then can the movement between philosophy of religion in theological quarters be stirred? That question might be answered by first examining the more basic question of whether philosophy of religion properly belongs in the agenda of theological studies: As anticipated front conversations to set the theme for the session, the positions taken by Wiebe and Schnier regarding the relationship between philosophy of religion and theology were indeed quite divergent. Wiebe

paying attention to the distinction between the subjective and objective genitive, conceded that philosophy of religion taken as, a subject genitive is beneficial for theology, but declared that, as an objective genitive it has no role to play in either theology or religion. Slitter looked at the position that philosophy as an element in theological construction unavoidably enters into the shape of a theological curriculum whose goal is the formation of persons. In response Gooch dismissed as unsatisfactory any apologetic relationship between philosophy and theology as implied by Schnier, agreed that philosophy has a place within theology, and spelled, it out after first distinguishing between philosophy as process and philosophy as product. That distinction allowed to the contribution that philosophy has yet to make in the area of biblical theology. Despland, however, noted that Gooch and Schnier commented in the place of philosophy instead of philosophy of religion, that Wiebe picked the right theme but got the philosophy of religion wrong, and that the role of philosophy of religion in a theological curriculum is corrected and autonomous rather than subordinate.

The discussion at the session, having struck a chord with a number of participants, encountered three new voices to join the debate by committing their reflections to writing. Kenneth Hamilton, succinctly critiquing positions advocated by the four panelists, sized up the relation between philosophy of religion and theology in terms of a tension arising out of an arranged marriage 'Mom' a descendant of a desert tribe, while the other side grieves over the like hood of the heirs adopting the pagan outlook of their father's people. James Home, interpreting Wiebe's position as an extension of the challenge by Ayer, Flew and Nielsen, proposed that the methodology appropriate for 'philosophical theology' (the relation between the skeptical tradition in philosophy and the science of religion philosophy) is to be found in David Hume's works on morality. Joseph C. McLelland attempted to reconcile our own Thales (Wiebe) and Plato (Despland) with probing questions and suggestions to indicate that the theoretical rationale for philosophy of religion in both theology and religious studies requires new thinking in light of today's fragmentation of the traditional academic pursuit of truth. The developments suggested in these three new papers prompted the calling of a working session.

At some point in this publication, decisions might have to be made; as to what exactly is meant by theology and philosophy of religion. In the case of theology this would mean looking not only at current materials but going back to the

Canadian Journal of Theology which first appeared in April, 1955, and within five years published over 110 articles by at least 65 Canadian authors, in addition to distinguished theologians such as Buitmanu, Tillich Torranc and Pittinger. According to its editor at the time, Eugene R. Fairweather, roughly 34 of those articles can be called theological or philosophical. 5 for philosophy of religion, a work such as *Analytical Philosophy of Religion* introduce the range of concerns and styles of tour Canadian philosophers of religion over the last three decades: Terenee Penelhum, Kai Nielsen, Alastair McKinnon and Donald Evans; and presents accompanying critiques by John King-Farlow, Benoit Garceau, Leslie Armour and Jacques Poulain respectively. Terence Penelhum has also written *Religion and Rationality* where he provides, among other things, an understanding of the philosophical context in which a contemporary philosopher of religion must function. These sources provide a sense of the direction of theology and philosophy of religion over the last twenty-five years in Nigeria.

In the collection in this issue of the publication, some authors recognize that our present theological education has a new diversity, and consequently that philosophy of religion as a traditional sub-discipline in theology is being forced to redefine its role. No doubt such recognition was one of impulses in forming the proposal for the session at the Nigerian Theology Society. Since that formulation and the ensuing debate, I have come to recognize that what is being - called into question is the nature and direction not just of the philosophy of religion, but also of the theological curriculum itself. To take a cue from McLlland's reflections, what is needed is not only a hardier breed of philosophers of religion, but also that there be progress in several interrelated debates as this is urgently needed in the present Nigerian context, especially if we are to become clear about our different intellectual roles in a theological curriculum being shaped for the next century.

Popularly understood, philosophy is concerned with the meaning or significance of life and in that regard, is usually associated with questions of ontology and metaphysics - with questions about the ultimate elements or building blocks of the universe and the processes of transformation they undergo. Its concern, so to speak, is with the world as a whole and with our place in it. Understood in this way it has very much a religious quality to it, for religion also is concerned with intimacy and meaning with the world and this meaning of our lives in it. On the

other hand, there is good reason not to see philosophy essentially as a first-order activity concerned with determining the structure of a world that produces a body of doctrine to be affirmed, but rather as a second-order activity, essentially analytical, that reflects critically on the sciences (and meta-sciences) that concern themselves directly with the world and the elements of which it is composed.

The division of philosophical labor by the use of the genitive structure, a modern development; only further complicate matters. Reflection on religion, to be sure, antedates the emergence of the philosophy of religion as a sub discipline in the university curriculum in the 18th century, but there is a sense in which religion did, for the first time, quite consciously and explicitly become a distinct focus of philosophical reflection. Philosophers like Hume, Kant and Hegel began to focus attention on religion as a distinctive social reality. Sense can be made of the paradox of philosophical reflection on religion antedating the emergence of the philosophy of religion, I think, by distinguishing the variety of meanings implicit in the genitive structure of the phrase the philosophy of religion.

As a descriptive genitive, 'philosophy of religion' points to that systematic reflection on the world and the meaning of our existence in it that in some sense or other rests on the belief in a world beyond this world; it is a mode of thought that rejects a purely naturalistic view of the world. As a subjective genitive, 'philosophy of religion' is the application of rational reflection to and metaphysical elaboration on the notions, ideas and beliefs explicitly or implicitly contained in religious revelation vouchsafed to particular communities; it is, so to speak, philosophy done by religion. In this sense, I think, philosophy of religion is undistinguishable from what has come, relatively recently, to be known as 'philosophical theology' (that phrase appeals to be a pleonasm, however, for it is important to recognize that 'theology' already refers to the concern to rationalize to provide a rational account of these, in the same sense that biology is the concern to provide a rational account of living matter). Finally, as an objective genitive, philosophy of religion clearly distinguishes the realms of religion and philosophy as different from each other as language is from a metalanguage in *which* that language can be discussed.

Consequently, it becomes obvious that in the philosophy of religion in this instance, the results of philosophical reflection are not themselves religious products but rather, simply, objective statements about religion and religious concepts, ideas, beliefs, etc. In the etymological sense of theology it needs pointing out, the philosophy of religion as just described is theology, for it so far as it attempts to explain the nature of belief in god(s) it is. Even if only indirectly, rational discourse about god(s). It hears repeating, however, that such discourse about the gods is not a form of religious discourse and I suggests that we distinguish the religious from the nonreligious form of god-talk by means of scare quotes. Theology therefore is a religious undertaking, whereas theology/philosophy of religion is simply one of several approaches to be taken in the objective, academic study of religion.

Not only are 'philosophy and theology' philosophical problems, the term 'religion' is; as well. I shall not pay much attention to that here, however, for fear that [will not get down to answering the question put to us for this seminar]. Suffice it to say that I do not see religion and theology as in any way identical; theology, that is not a religious mode of thought even though it is taught about religious events, persons, processes, etc. That much follows from the preceding discussion and will. I think, he borne out in the argument to follow, our concern in this seminar is with the role of philosophy and the philosophy of religion within a Christian context, at least to begin with, assume we have a roughly similar notion as to what Christianity is. I shall in due course, however, suggest that what Christianity is not what it was, nor, more controversially, what it should be. Moreover, I will suggest that once having established what it was and still ought to be, the role of philosophy will be seen to be meager indeed. All of this, however, can only be sketched out briefly and without developing the kind of argument required if it is to be persuasive. I do hope nevertheless that it will at least be intelligible and interesting.

The Christianity to which we are presently tied, especially so in the seminary/divinity school setting, is rising Harry Wilson's phrase; a thoroughly philosophized Christianity⁹ and if we are to understand it philosophy, quite obviously, will be a necessary tool. Philosophy was introduced into Christianity in the second century and has had a continuous history, as Wilson points out, among both the Greek and Latin fathers and beyond. Consequently, as Diogenes Allen has recently insisted, 'everyone needs to know some *philosophy* in order to

understand the major doctrines of Christianity or to read a great theologian intelligently' philosophical theology, he rightly claims 'enables one to appreciate more deeply the meaning of virtually every major doctrinal formulation and every major theologian. This kind of engagement with *philosophy*, however, is not that in which the Christian fathers, or their successors, early or late, were involved. What Allen refers to is not the join of philosophy but rather becoming aware of the Philosophical views and methods of thought employed by philosophers and taken over by the theologians. The latter is a first-order philosophical activity concerned with the interpretation and elaboration of revealed truth, whereas the former is primarily activity.

Whether the kind of constructive philosophical exercise adopted by the fathers ought to have been used, or ought not to have a role in the interpretation and elaboration of the Christian faith seems to me to be a much more difficult issue to decide. There is certainly no necessity laid on us to accept the historical assumption of the fathers that philosophy is necessary or even helpful to understanding more deeply the Christian revelation. If that deeper understanding of the Christian revelation may be referred to as 'theology', then, rephrasing the claim, it is not obvious that philosophy is necessary to the 'doing of theology' even though it is necessary to understanding 'theology' since the time of the Greek and Latin fathers. Indeed, I think it can be shown that philosophical thought is both discontinuous and incompatible with religious thought in general and Christian thought in particular. Christian thinking - and religious thinking more generally - is mythopoeic and is not bound, nor can it be bound, by the logical structures of philosophical thought. I have shown the these two modes of thought in my book *The irony of theology and the Nature of religious Thought* will not attempt to spell out this argument in any detail here, but will try instead to illustrate its point as found in Edwin Hatch's analysis and assessment of the influence of Greek ideas on Christianity

That Hatch is at least vaguely aware of the different modes of thought is obvious by the fact that he also sees a stark contrast between 'Greek thinking' and what he calls the 'Palestinian thinking' which characterizes the early Christian community. For Hatch, the former is analytical, logical and metaphysical whereas the latter is pragmatic and practical in *the* sense of being concerned with ethics and behaviour. Furthermore, he notes that the latter recognizes an authority outside itself that the former, as autonomous, could not. It is true

that despite the obvious tensions between Greek and Palestinian thinking, I latch assumes that the rapid change of the centre of gravity in the Christian-faith from ethics to belief and from practice to theory can only be explained by 'the fact' of 'a special and real kinship' between the leading ideas of current philosophy at the time in the leading ideas of Christianity. But it is also true that he is not sure that the hellenization of faith does not really constitute a loss of faith. 'Christianity, he writes 'has won no great victories since its basis was changed.' The victories that it has won, it has won by *preaching* not Greek metaphysics, but- the love of God and the love of man in its darkest pages are those *which* record the story of its endeavouring to force its transformed Greek metaphysics upon men or upon races to whom they were alien. The only ground of despair in those who accept Christianity now, is the fear - which I for one cannot entertain - that the dominance of the metaphysical element in it will be perpetual'.⁴

Harry Wolfson's sociological accounting for the rapid rise of a philosophized Christianity is far more persuasive, I think that, Hatch's metaphysical / religious account of an essential identity of the two modes of thought and sets of doctrines, the change in Christianity occurred, Wilson tells us, because:

1. Pagans who had been trained in philosophy were converted to the faith;
2. Because philosophy was useful in helping Christians construct a defence against a variety of accusations hurled at them and
3. Because philosophy provided or so it appeared a kind of immunization against the heresy of Gnosticism."

More recently, Eric Osborn has argued an essentialist position that sees philosophy as integral to the Christian faith.¹⁶ He maintains that in the religiously pluralistic context which Christianity emerged it become increasingly difficult for Christians to be as he puts it, ignorant of their faith and in taking up philosophy as a means to deepen their knowledge of the faith, he sees its legitimate development because, according to him, it preserved the faith. He seems unaware of the distortion this may have involved, however; the irony of Id' claim that in combating heresy, Christianity more and more becomes a doctrine or a philosophy. In admitting that development, he does not like Hatch, have doubts about the value of the transformation. Rather, like Armstrong and Markus in their assessment of the value of Greek philosophy to the Christian

faith, he like many others, sees the dialogue between the two as a model for contemporary Christian thinkers, who face a similarly pluralistic world. For Osborn then, philosophy and metaphysics are not in acceptable even only temporarily helpful transformations of the faith, but rather extensions of it. A lot of argument was necessary before a clear pattern of Christian truth could be found throughout the Church universal, he writes.

"The way was through argument, whether the threat came from Gnosticism or Marclon, just as the way to answer the Roman state, philosophers and Jews could only be through reasoning and evidence' (emphasis mine). Although I find Wolfson's sociological thesis more persuasive as an account of that ancient development, I cannot entirely dismiss Osborn's view. I think however, Hatch's hesitancy on the similar view he held far more appropriate. I believe there is some truth to the assumption that underlies Osborn's view: namely, that there is an affinity between Greek philosophy and the Christian faith. But the true nature of that affinity is not what it has been taken to be due to the failure of most analysts to distinguish the varieties of Greek *philosophy* that existed. The affinity is not between the philosophic mode of thought that first emerged with the Milesians and their break with a mythopoeia tradition preceding it, but rather between *post* Milesian thinkers like Plato and Christianity. That is not so surprising because Plato's philosophy is essentially a religious philosophy which emerged reaction to the naturalism of Milesian *thought*. Unlike the philosophic thought of the Milesian tradition, Platonic *thought* rejects autonomy and deliberately subordinates itself to revealed truth of a pre-philosophical kind. As Michel Despland has put it, Plato's philosophy of religion strives to interpret the fears and hopes expressed in the Greek religious practice of his (lay and tries to set ill motion a healing process). There is something of the paradoxical in this claim for, so it seems, Plato wishes to change religion while yet remaining schooled by it - seeming to require of philosophy both autonomy and subordination.

Seeing this diversity in Greek philosophy and the stark contrast between its embodiment in a naturalistic and religious form, it seems to me that we ought to be more carefully to talk not about the hellenization of the Christian faith but rather of its Platonization. Then the affinity between Christianity and philosophy will be immediately apparent because of the religious nature of Platonic thought. Furthermore, it ought to be noted that Plato's form of

philosophizing amounts to a distortion of philosophy as it first emerged as a distinctive mode of thought, over against the mythopoeia.

Plato's philosophy, I argue, is not really philosophy so much as religion. It is a hybrid mode of thought, combining elements of both religious and philosophical thinking. Since the two modes are logically/structurally incompatible, one is ultimately wholly subordinated to the other. The Platonic influence on Christianity, therefore, is twofold. On the one hand, the religious intent and other worldliness served as a source for a systematic reformulation and elaboration of Christian belief. 'On the other hand, it introduced into Christianity a new mode of thinking incompatible with its own and which will ultimately be, it seems to me, destructive of it the seeds of destruction are found in the autonomy of philosophy that is still implicitly present in Plato's thought. All trace of that Milesian character of philosophy has not, amid cannot, I believe, be eradicated from such hybrid modes of thought. The philosophy now present Christianity is bound eventually to reveal what Plato had so skillfully concealed. Indeed, that problematic autonomy begins to reemerge in the 11th and 12th centuries in the debates over the nature of theology, and with the emergence of theology as an academic discipline. There seems no sounder way to read the nature of the collision between Peter Abelard and Bernard of Clairvaux over the question of the nature of theology. Uurkheim, recounting the history of education in France; acknowledges that the scholastics no more than the monastic deliberately cast doubt or aspersion on the truth of the Christian faith but did so *nevertheless* because they insists, the very need to examine and elaborate the faith implied doubt.²³ The need to understand the faith more deeply, that is, even without the question as to whether it might be false, constitutes a remarkable innovation that opened the door to a great deal more. As he puts it, the moment one introduces reason into a set of ideas which up to that time has appeared unchallengeable it is the beginning of the end; the enemy has gained a foothold. If reason is not given its fair share, then from the moment that it has established a foothold somewhere, it always ends up by casting do the artificial barriers within which attempts have been made to contain it.

As in the past, theology today is frequently shaped by philosophical *thought*, and often takes *philosophy* of religion to heart. But the *philosophy* of religion of value to contemporary theology is, as I have suggested characterized either as a

descriptive or a subjective genitive. In either case it is a hybrid mode of thought taken over and used by the theologian - it involves argument constrained by commitments to pre-philosophical wisdom of some kind. Consequently, philosophy is still both: a source for further reflection on the Christian faith and a potential disaster to it. Only if the distortion of its truly philosophical character is maintained by the commitment to some pre-philosophical truth will it be of value to Christianity - the *value* deriving not from *philosophy* but from its peculiar distortion. This becomes quite obvious, I think, in Etienne Gilson's discussion of the value of philosophy to theology in his *The Philosopher and Theology*.²⁵ Gilson there insists that it is really quite impossible for a Christian ever to philosophize as if she or he were not Christian. Can philosophy, he asks, 'be thus used by theology toward ends that are not its own without losing its essence in the process? His answer: 'In a way it does lose its essence, and it profits by the change?'¹ Such distortion amounts to its virtual destruction, although Gilson maintains it is its reclamation, he elaborates on the nature of how philosophy profits as follows:theology is not a compound, it is not composed of heterogeneous elements of which some would be *philosophy* and the rest *Scripture*, all in it is homogeneous despite the diversity of origin. Those who resort to *philosophical* arguments in Holy Scripture and put them in the service of faith, do not mix water with wine, they change it to wine. Translate: they change philosophy *into theology*, just as Jesus changed water to wine at the marriage feast in Cana. Thus, can theological wisdom, imprinted in the mind of the theologian as the seal of God's knowing, include the totality of human knowledge in its transcendent unity?

That nothing of original philosophy and its autonomy remains is doubtful however, for Gilson also maintains that philosophy needs to retain its rationality if it is really to be of service to theology, and the echoes of autonomy sound clearly in the claim. Philosophy of religion, then, taken as an objective genitive, is of little relevance to religion and theology for it rigidly maintains its autonomy from religion. Taken as a subjective genitive, however, it may be of benefit, but only because it has already been transformed from *philosophy* to something more nearly like religion. As a hybrid node of *thought*, it thus retains traces of philosophic autonomy and its use therefore; lays Christianity open to the threat of a reemerge autonomous reason *able* to explain religion rather than simply providing a deeper understanding of it.

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