

A PHILOSOPHICAL STANDPOINT

There are two reasons why a philosopher should discuss society and God together. One is practical and obvious. In various parts of the world today the worship of God is thought to impede the smooth running of society. In China both Muslims and Christians of various denominations are still being imprisoned and 're-educated'. In the democratic West, we are told, opinion polls reveal that half the population believes that over the course of human history religion has been the primary cause of war between nations, of oppression within them and of unhappiness to individuals. Two questions seem to emerge in informal discussions. Is belief in God, on the whole, good or bad for society? And is it possible to have a society in which several different religions co-exist comfortably with each other and with people of no religion?

The other reason, though this is not widely recognised, is that society presents something of a problem to those theologising about God. Christianity, and the same goes for Judaism and Islam, is supposed to provide a system for relations between God and human beings; but does God deal with us as individuals, or in and through societies?

Let me take these reasons in turn.

In 2015 a commission set up by the Woolf Institute in Cambridge published a report on 'Religion and Belief in British Public Life' which made a number of recommendations summarised on pages 80-5 for 'living with difference' which included creating 'a shared understanding

of the fundamental values underlying public life', 'measures to reduce selection of pupils and staff on grounds of religion' in 'schools with a religious character', replacing 'the requirement for schools to hold acts of collective worship' by 'a requirement to hold inclusive times for reflection', and obliging the British Broadcasting Corporation to include in its *Thought for the Day* 'speakers from non-religious perspectives such as humanists'. The Report began with a promise to say what religion is, but made no attempt to fulfil that promise. Perhaps the Commissioners thought that everyone knows the difference between religion and non-religion, and would agree that humanism is not a religion. Probably many people are equally confident that they know what society is, and share the opinion once associated with Margaret Thatcher that there is really no such thing – that the world really contains only numbers of many, many individual human beings. If, however, people are confused or mistaken about society and about what religion is, discussion of the two questions I mentioned just now is bound to be futile, and, if it actually seems to be futile, or to generate more heat than light, that may be because the participants in the discussion are confused or mistaken about these things.

Who can tell us what religion or society is? 'Sociology' means the systematic study of society, so should we consult sociologists? 'Biology' means the systematic study of life, but a biologist who is asked 'What is life?' is likely to feel caught on the wrong foot. Biologists will readily provide examples of life: plants, animals, perhaps microbes; not so readily a definition. Arithmetic is about numbers, but until the end of the nineteenth century no arithmetician was able to say what a number was. Physics for us is the paradigm of a natural science, but, if you ask a professor of physics what a science is, you may not get a ready answer. Most people would say that psychology has to do with the mind, but asking a psychologist what the mind is may be unfruitful. These very general questions can be answered up to a point by any intelligent person; beyond that, they fall to philosophers. Many natural scientists today might refer us to the philosopher Karl Popper for an account of what science is. Natural science itself began when the philosopher Aristotle tried to define nature. Frege, the first person to produce a definition of number, did so as a philosopher, not an arithmetician.

What, then, is philosophy? Universities contain departments of philosophy, and those in English-speaking countries are sometimes criticised for the time they devote to the analysis of concepts instead of to the enlargement of our knowledge of the world; but it is only by the analysis of the concepts which words like 'nature', 'life' and 'science' (and

‘philosophy’ itself) are used to express, that these very general questions can be answered in a systematic way. Philosophers, provided that they have some knowledge of human history and of cultures other than their own, are specially qualified by their training to carry this analysis through.

Tim Crane in *The Meaning of Belief* recognises that the concept we use the word ‘religion’ to express is problematic and comparatively recent, and he brings to bear on it the techniques of analytical philosophy which I try to use here. Although he holds that religion has, so to speak, a social dimension, he does not discuss society as such; nor, I think, does he bring out the extent to which our thinking about religion is shaped by the role of Christianity in European history.

In the chapters that follow I first discuss society and the part it plays in all rational life. Against the liberal tradition in political thought, I argue that human beings are essentially social beings, that they need society for all that we count as rationality. Only in Chapter 4 do I come to what today we mean by ‘religion’. I argue that our concept is taken from Christianity, that Christianity is our paradigm. Such has been its influence on European history that we assume that every society up to now must have had a religion, and we apply the label ‘religion’ to whatever in societies other than our own most resembles Christianity. Since Christianity is in fact the offspring of Athens and Jerusalem, combining elements of Jewish and Greek culture, we should not expect to find close matches for it outside Europe, but we look for them.

H.J. Rose observes in his article on religion in *The Oxford Classical Dictionary* (p. 758): ‘No word in either Greek or Latin corresponds to the English “religion” or “religious”; nor does any word in any non-European language. When atheists and humanists speak of religion, Christianity is what they primarily have in mind, and, when people today discuss problems that religion may cause society, they often have in mind problems caused by Christianity. Christians in fact, in societies with European languages, despite their sectarian divisions, form the principal sub-society that has a culture in competition with secular liberalism. Even current discussions of threats from Islam are conducted with regard to teaching derived by Christians from the Jews about sheltering and helping alien refugees.

Religion causes problems for society because any sub-society which has a different culture from that of the larger society within which it exists will cause problems for the larger society. The concept of religion, however, and the concept of belief which, as we shall see, enters into it, are confined to European culture. People from other cultures may concede to speakers of European languages that they have a religion, if

not religious beliefs, but, even if they are monotheists, neither concept is part of their thinking and, when they form sub-societies within states with a European culture, it is reasonable to attribute any threat they seem to pose more to their culture as a whole than to religion. The general concept of religion is provincial and unhelpful.

The second reason for a philosophical discussion of society and God is more theoretical than practical. Philosophers since the seventeenth century have taught what I dispute in Chapters 2 and 3, that language and society are products of human intelligence, and theologians have not questioned this. They have thought of the Judaeo-Christian God as dealing with human beings as rational individuals. It has occasionally been noticed that the Old Testament represents God as dealing with a society, the Jewish nation, and some theologians, for instance, Karl Rahner, have recognised that we are essentially social, but I do not think any theologian has considered the implications of this fact about us for the presentation of Christian teaching generally. That is something a sympathetic philosopher can attempt. In Chapters 6 to 9 I argue that the view we take on whether we are essentially social beings ought to make a difference to how we understand the three doctrines upon which all Christians are agreed, those of the Trinity, redemption by Christ and life after death.

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In writing, then, about society and God, and concentrating on Judaeo-Christian monotheism, I hope, on the one hand, to make clearer how religion as we conceive it can cause problems within a society, how tensions between religion and politics arise and why they are hard to reduce, and, on the other, to offer a fresh view of some central doctrines of Christianity. I could not do the second without arguing that we are essentially social. I might argue that we are essentially social without discussing Christian dogmatic beliefs. These do, however, have implications, which I shall try to bring out, for life in society, and they are integrally bound up with the traditional moral principles of Christianity, which are themselves a set of social customs. Furthermore, if we want to understand the tensions that now exist in Western states because of religious and other ethnic sub-societies within them, Christianity has played so large a part in creating Western culture that we cannot afford to ignore any beliefs that are integral to Christianity.

Christians, like everyone else, have beliefs about how the world is, which (thanks to their legacy from ancient Athens) they formulate in creeds, and customs concerning the three central occurrences in human

life, birth, procreation and death. I look at both; but first, while discussing society, I look at the notion of belief itself. In Western society we talk much about beliefs, but we seldom consider why that is so or what we mean. The best the Woolf Commission, p. 14, could do in the way of explaining it was to say:

In international legal documentation the equivalent of the English phrase *religion and belief* is in French *la religion et les convictions*. The French word *convictions* has connotations of firmness, weight, intensity and commitment, and refers to something which is fundamental in someone's sense of values, self-worth and identity. To count as a belief so far as the law is concerned a point of view or *une conviction* must 'attain a certain level of cogency, seriousness, cohesion and importance, be worthy of respect in a democratic society and . . . not incompatible with human dignity'.

The quotation is from a publication in 2015 by Peter Edge and Lucy Vickers (*Review of Equality and Human Rights Law Relating to Religion or Belief*, pp. 15-6) and, if they are right, we cannot expect to find our concept of belief in societies which do not share our conceptions of seriousness, democracy and human dignity. Crane in *The Meaning of Belief* (pp. 14-16) attempts a philosophical analysis. 'What makes a belief *a belief*?' he tells us 'is the same in every case', and he lists as 'the features that philosophers identify as essential to belief: . . . accessibility to consciousness, the connection to action and the aim at truth . . . *belief aims at truth*'.

Discussions of consciousness and truth are peculiar to Western philosophy. So, I shall claim, are the general philosophical concepts of belief, which we extend to cover practical principles or 'convictions', and our concept of religion, which relies upon it.

Christian 'beliefs', both doctrinal and practical, are often said to depend on faith, and, as a preliminary to looking into their content, in Chapter 5 I ask what faith is and how it relates to practice. Christians call faith a virtue, and a virtue distinct from charity; I argue that the two are aspects of a single thing.

I then turn to the doctrinal beliefs Christians formulated long ago in creeds, and consider how today they are best understood. The first, of course, is that there is one God, 'creator of Heaven and Earth'. Christians took from the Jews the idea, alien to Greek and Roman thinking, that the whole natural order has its source in a person who does not himself belong

to it. The gods whom we know from Greek and Latin literature were conceived as important parts of the natural order. In Greek mythology they are not creators but themselves generated by processes analogous to human procreation: Hesiod was the first writer to attempt anything in the way of cosmology, and his work is correctly called *Theogony*, the Generation of the Gods. The question whether we are essentially social does not bear on this primary belief, but another does: how should we conceive creation?

We all have a concept of skill or craftsmanship. We are able to bring vases into being by acting on clay, houses into existence by assembling bricks, wine by treading grapes. Theologians have tended to model creation on the causal action of skilled craftsmen, to think that God made the universe in the way a potter makes a pot; and this does appear to be a cosmological speculation comparable to the theory that the universe just popped up in a big bang a finite time ago, and the theory that it had no beginning but has existed for infinite time. In Chapter 6 I argue that we need not understand creation as causation and that a decision on whether the universe was created should be sought in the same sort of way as decisions in a court of law.

A second central doctrine of Christianity is that Jesus of Nazareth was the Son of God. This is not a piece of genealogy; it is bound up with the idea that he is our Redeemer. The earliest creeds present that doctrine in terms of incarnation, resurrection and a divine Trinity. Christians say they believe in God the all-powerful Father, and in Jesus Christ, his only Son, 'conceived through the Holy Spirit and born of the Virgin Mary', who was crucified, was buried and rose from the dead. Today, while Christians still recite these creeds, at least in the West theologians and preachers put more emphasis on the unconditional love of God for every human being than on the miraculous conception of Jesus and his actual return from the dead. In Chapter 7 I contrast what I call atomistic and holistic views of the Incarnation and of God's redemptive activity. The holistic approach which I favour (unlike the view of creation I propose in Chapter 6) involves accepting the view of human nature advocated in Chapters 2 and 3.

Debates about whether or not we are essentially social are a comparatively recent phenomenon. Since before Christianity started thinkers have asked whether each of us is one thing or a conjunction of two, a body and a soul. Plato was the first person to distinguish our physical qualities from our mental or psychological powers and activities. His distinction caught on and became current in Greek thinking. It does not appear in the Old Testament or in the Gospels. Plato himself argued that physical and mental properties belong to different *things*, and that a

human being consists of a body which has only physical properties and a soul that has mental powers. Jews who were not influenced by Greek thought took it that a human being is just one thing, a psychosomatic unity. Both ideas have been current among Christians, and which they favour inevitably affects their thinking about a life after death. I show how this comes about in Chapters 8 and 9.

From these doctrinal beliefs I proceed in Chapters 10 and 11 to practical convictions about matters of concern to all societies, birth, death and sex. These conflict with the convictions of some, though by no means all, non-Christians, and they are not agreed by all Christians.

Among Christian denominations, Catholics have stood out in claiming that traditional Christian teaching about sex can be defended by basing it on natural law. Bad arguments for a position not only fail to support it; they discredit it. In Chapter 11 I first describe some of the changes which have taken place in theories of natural law since Classical times, and argue that no natural law theory will do the work required.

I then contrast two general approaches to ethics. One is to found the difference between right and wrong upon law. It is right to do what law commands, wrong to do what law forbids. The first books of the Bible are books of law; in Western Europe emphasis on law increased from the twelfth century, when law was codified in the law school of Bologna, down to the eighteenth, when the German philosopher Kant came near to founding a religion of rule-worship. In contrast to this approach, Plato and Aristotle declared that no legislative skill whatever could formulate a law that says what is best and most right for all people at all times. To act rightly in particular situations, they held, we need good practical judgement, for good practical judgement we need good moral character, and good moral character is acquired by controlling our emotions and reacting rationally to circumstances. This approach was rediscovered in the thirteenth century when translations of Aristotle's writings reached Paris and Oxford, but it did not prevail over law-based thinking, which became increasingly popular as the Enlightenment brightened. It was tried again in the twentieth century when English-speaking philosophers started reading Aristotle and Plato in Greek, but the so-called 'virtue ethics' which resulted found little favour with theologians trained in Continental philosophy. Nevertheless, it accommodates the idea that we are essentially social beings, and I suggest that it provides a better way of defending traditional Christian moral principles than natural law theory.

A philosophical standpoint is not one of neutrality. On the issues I discuss I have my own views. I should not write about them if I had not and, in Chapters 2 to 4 and 12, where the issues are, it seems to me,

straightforwardly philosophical, I put them forward. I argue that we are essentially social, and that a multicultural society, though preferable to civil war and the persecution of sub-societies, is fundamentally unstable. In Chapters 5 to 11, which deal with specifically Christian ideas about the world and how we should live, I do not write as if I had no opinion on whether they are right or wrong, and I do not believe any philosopher ever has. Certainly, Bertrand Russell, John Mackie, Antony Flew, Elizabeth Anscombe, Richard Swinburne and Alasdair MacIntyre have left their readers in little doubt about where they stand. In a passage to which I shall recur, John Stuart Mill suggested that teachers, when they come to 'disputed topics', should not consider 'the truth or falsehood of opinions' but confine themselves to 'the matter of fact that such and such an opinion is held on such grounds, by such authors, or schools, or churches'. Mill was speaking of teachers, not philosophers; but it would be strange if a teacher who came to an urgent 'disputed topic' such as global warming or gender showed no interest in the truth or falsehood of opinions, and dealing with religious beliefs in this way would give a clear message that the teacher thought them all false. On the other hand, philosophy is not apologetics. Apologists for any set of ideas inherent in a culture do well to draw on philosophy, but I confine myself here to saying how I think someone defending Christian ideas can best do so; I am not trying to convince a jury, but offering a counsel's opinion on how a case can best be presented.

Nor is a philosophical standpoint that of one specialism among others. Ours is an age of specialisation. We have many separate academic subjects, physics, biology, history, economics, philosophy, theology, and, more recently, sociology, linguistics, cognitive science – every year they multiply. Anything important that requires thought has many different aspects which raise questions for different disciplines, history, science, philosophy and so on. The relation between society and Judaeo-Christian monotheism has such a plurality of aspects. In this book I try to treat them together. That may seem overambitious. We are apt to refer the questions that come up to the appropriate experts for them to pursue separately; but the lack of contact between experts in different fields ought to breed misgivings about this strategy. If you want to pass an examination in theology, history or even philosophy, you must read specialised books, but, to form a responsible opinion on any of these important subjects, you must take a comprehensive view. A crucial function of philosophy, I believe with Mary Midgley (*What is Philosophy For?*), is to help people to do that.