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Renewing our understanding of religion: philosophy of religion and the goals of the spiritual life

Mark Wynn

Abstract

In this paper, I consider how a renewed understanding of religion can contribute to a renewal in the philosophy of religion. In making this case, I seek to retrieve an older conception of religion, which has receded from view in recent discussion. On this conception, religious commitment is not fundamentally a matter of belief, from which various practices then flow, nor fundamentally a matter of practice, from which various credal commitments then flow, but instead an amalgam of belief and practice, of the kind that is required for the pursuit of distinctively spiritual goods. A philosophy of religion that is rooted in this conception of religion, I argue, can deepen our appreciation of religion's role in the wider economy of human life, and help us to identify new varieties of spiritual good, so contributing, potentially, to the development of new forms of religious and spiritual practice.

Key words: Thomas Aquinas; infused moral virtue; spiritual life; religious belief; religious practice

1. Introduction

On one familiar picture, religious commitment is founded upon religious belief, which generates the various practices that we associate with religious traditions. This picture has a ready appeal. It may be urged, for example, that it makes no sense for a person to engage in the practice of worship, if they do not first of all believe that there is a God. Both as philosophers of religion, and as potential practitioners of religion, should we not start, then, with the question of whether there is a God, or with the question of whether the Sacred otherwise understood exists, and only then consider which religious practices, if any, are appropriate?

A broad swathe of work in the philosophy of religion on themes such as the proofs and dis-proofs of the existence of God, and the epistemic significance of religious experience, could be understood in these terms: here, philosophers are trying to settle, in large part independently of reference to religious practice, the question of whether there is a God or a transcendent domain of some other kind. Of course, a philosopher of religion could be interested in these matters without being committed to the view that belief belongs at the foundation of religious commitment. But to the extent that the philosophy of religion literature has tended to concentrate on proofs and dis-proofs, and kindred questions concerning the epistemic rationality of religious belief, that might plausibly be

explained, I suggest, by supposing that many philosophers of religion subscribe to what I shall call the belief plus practice model of religious commitment, where it is religious belief that properly comes first, and that provides the rationale for religious practice. On this view, if only we can settle questions of belief, then we can settle, relatively straightforwardly, the question of which forms of religious practice, if any, are appropriate. So here we are concerned with epistemically justified belief, and its role in grounding religious practice.

Of course, there is in the literature another approach, also influential, which has tended to work in the opposite direction: here, we are to begin with our moral or other practical commitments, and move from there to an account of what the world must be like if those commitments are to make sense. Indeed, Pierre Hadot has argued that in the ancient world, Epicureans, Stoics, and the members of the other philosophical schools were all of the view that philosophical enquiry should have this structure: on this account, philosophical reflection should begin with a commitment to a certain way of life, and only then adopt a “philosophical discourse,” or representation of the nature of things, whose role is to enable the philosopher to enact that ideal of life.¹ A similar style of argument is evident in more recent discussion. To mention just two examples, George Mavrodes has argued that the phenomena of moral obligation are in some deep way, both motivationally and ontologically, tied to a theistic metaphysics, and John Cottingham has proposed that some familiar conceptions of the good life, notably, those that count humility and gratitude as virtues, point in the direction of a theistic “background of significance.”² And there are, of course, various antecedents for these strategies, in addition to those that Hadot proposes, perhaps most obviously Kant’s account of the existence of God as a postulate of the moral life.³ Again, as a reading of religious commitment, this general approach makes some sense: here, we are invited to recognise that we are all of us already immersed in the flow of life, and to ask what must be true of the world if our established practical commitments are to count as appropriate, or are to be more fully motivated. For ease of reference, I shall call this perspective the practice plus belief model, while recognising that this is to use the notion of ‘belief’ in a somewhat specialised sense, though one that is familiar, I think, from religious contexts. Here, the fundamental role of ‘belief’ is to support practice, rather than to track the truth; so on some such approaches, the ‘belief’ that p need not involve the judgement that p is more probable than not, or more probable than relevant alternatives. Here we are concerned, then, with pragmatically justified belief.

I am not proposing that either of these accounts (beginning with belief and moving from there to practice, or vice versa) should be abandoned. The renewal in the philosophy of religion that I am envisaging turns not so much upon giving up enquiries of these kinds, as upon adding to them a

¹ Hadot 1995: Ch. 11.

² See Mavrodes 2011: Part IX, Ch. 4, and Cottingham 2009: 154.

³ Kant 1991.

further kind of enquiry, one that does not privilege belief over practice, or vice versa, but instead understands the religious life as, from the outset, a commitment to an amalgam of belief (or 'belief') and practice. In the course of the discussion, I shall give some reasons for supposing that this general approach is to be preferred to those which privilege belief or practice. However, my primary goal is not to defend any such ranking, but instead to advocate an expansion in the concerns of the philosophy of religion, which will follow from this extension in our conception of the ways in which a religious life may be structured. The proposal I am developing is intended fundamentally as a recommendation for philosophers of religion: when as philosophers of religion we consider a given religious or spiritual tradition, we can assess, and perhaps develop, the beliefs and practices that comprise the tradition using the belief-with-practice model. At the same time, I believe that this model, while not much in evidence in recent philosophy of religion, has deep roots in religious traditions. So the model conforms, I think, to the self-understanding of many reflective religious practitioners, and this is a further reason for taking an interest in it. So my suggestion is that we can renew the practice of philosophy of religion in our time, by retrieving an older conception of religion, one that has largely receded from view.

I am going to begin by setting out the conception of the religious and spiritual life that is apparent in the work of Thomas Aquinas. It would be possible to proceed rather more directly, by simply introducing the claims with which I shall be concerned, rather than trying at the same time to associate those claims with the work of an historical figure. However, there is good reason to take this indirect approach. The belief-with-practice model that I am proposing to defend will be of deeper interest, I think, if it evidently concerns not just a theoretical possibility – a form of religious or spiritual commitment that a person might in principle adopt – but a possibility that has in fact been enacted in the mainstream of at least one important religious tradition. In that case, the renewal in the philosophy of religion that we are considering will throw new light on religion as it has been practised, and that would be a result of some importance in ethical terms, because it would bring into new focus the significance that attaches to the lives of many of our forebears. Moreover, I shall also be concerned with the question of whether the philosophy of religion might help to broaden our conception of the range of humanly accessible spiritual goods, and contribute thereby to spiritual practice. And the discipline will most plausibly be able to play that role if it builds on an established and long enacted understanding of the structure of the spiritual life. Otherwise, there is a risk that any proposals it has to make, whatever their interest in theoretical terms, will not be humanly practicable.⁴

⁴ We can distinguish between the content and the structure of the spiritual life, so that innovations with respect to content – for instance, new conceptions of which beliefs and practices should be integral to the spiritual life – can conform to an established model of structure – say, the belief-with-practice model. My proposal is that if innovations with respect to content adhere to an established structure, then, to that extent,

For these purposes, Thomas Aquinas makes an apt interlocutor because of his standing as a spiritual as well as intellectual authority for one central strand of the Christian tradition. And while I shall not defend the claim here, it seems to me that, in structural terms, his account of the religious and spiritual life can be applied very readily to all the major faith traditions; and for this reason too, his approach is of some importance.

2. Thomas Aquinas on the religious life

Aquinas's account of the religious life turns on his not often remarked distinction between the "acquired" and "infused" moral virtues. To explain this typology, he distinguishes between the kind of good that is relative to our human nature, and the kind that is relative to our "super-natural" calling to share in the life of God in the beatific vision. For present purposes, I am interested simply in the structure of this account, in so far as it involves a distinction between "natural" and "more-than-natural" ends. And I invite the reader who finds the details of Aquinas's proposal implausible or for some other reason unattractive to attend simply to its structure in this respect.

To see more exactly how Aquinas understands the acquired and infused virtues, let us consider his treatment of an example. In the following passage, he is discussing the acquired and infused virtues of "temperance," with particular reference to the regulation of our appetite for food:

It is evident the measure of desires appointed by a rule of human reason is different from that appointed by a divine rule. For instance, in eating, the measure fixed by human reason is that food should not harm the health of the body, nor hinder the use of reason; whereas [the] divine rule requires that a man should *chastise his body and bring it into subjection* [1 Cor 9:27], by abstinence in food, drink and the like. (*Summa Theologiae* 1a2ae 63. 4)⁵

Here, Aquinas introduces, first of all, the good that is realised in so far as our habits of eating are appropriate relative to our human nature. For the identification of this sort of good, we can rely simply on the relevant rule of "reason." This account seems straightforward enough: allowing for variations between human beings, there is indeed a habit of eating that is appropriate for creatures of our nature, one which would not be appropriate for, say, a porpoise or a tortoise; and if we want to determine which patterns of consumption are appropriate for us as human beings, then we can refer to the relevant empirical investigation. The second kind of good Aquinas mentions consists, by contrast, in the alignment between our habits of eating and our theological context, and accordingly this kind of good cannot be known, at least, its fundamental nature cannot be known, independently of reference to that context. So on this picture, the virtues of acquired and infused temperance can

we will have rather more reason for thinking of them as practicable – because in this case, we will have a record of human beings actually ordering their lives in accordance with the structure.

⁵ Unless otherwise indicated, translations of the *Summa Theologiae* have been taken from Aquinas: 1963-74. Hereafter, I use the abbreviation *ST*.

be distinguished by reference both to their goals and their epistemology; and for Aquinas, each has in addition a distinctive aetiology, since the acquired form of the virtue derives, in the normal case, from a process of habituation (here, he is following Aristotle, of course), while the infused form cannot be produced by any amount of human effort, but depends directly on the initiative of God.

We can refine this account of the infused moral virtues, and get a readier understanding of their importance for the spiritual life, by noting Aquinas's distinction between these virtues and the theological virtues, which are also, of course, both God-directed and infused. Thomas explains the difference in these terms:

The theological virtues are enough to shape us to our supernatural end as a start, that is, to God himself immediately and to none other. Yet the soul needs also to be equipped by infused virtues in regard to created things, though as subordinate to God. (*ST 1a2ae 63. 3 ad. 2*)

So the infused moral virtues and the theological virtues are both directed to the goal of flourishing in relation to God, but whereas the theological virtues aim directly or immediately at that goal, the infused moral virtues remain "moral" in the sense of being concerned, in the first instance, with the person's relationship to the material order. So we can think of the goods that are the object of the infused moral virtues as having a hybrid character. By contrast with the goods that are the object of the acquired moral virtues, which concern simply our well-being in relation to the material order, and by contrast also with the goods that are the object of the theological virtues, which concern simply our well-being in relation to God, the goods that are the object of the infused moral virtues concern our well-being in relation to the created order, but "as subordinate to God" (to use the phrase of Aquinas's translator above). In sum, these goods are concerned with the appropriateness of a person's relations to the material order, where the measure of appropriateness is provided not by their human nature, but by theological context.

Very briefly, I want to note two further features of Aquinas's account, before considering the implications of this picture of the structure and goals of the religious life for the philosophy of religion. First of all, we need to clarify, at least a little, the nature of the "appropriateness" to which I have just alluded. Aquinas touches on this matter when discussing the rationale for neighbour love. Neighbour love is, of course, for Christians, the cardinal moral virtue, and on Aquinas's understanding, it is an infused virtue. In the following passage, he is considering whether the angels are properly the objects of neighbour love – a theme that might seem somewhat far removed from the question of how the philosophy of religion is to be renewed in our time! However, what Aquinas says on this point is representative of what he says more generally when examining the scope of neighbour love, and whether it extends to our enemies, or to "irrational" creatures, or to our own

bodies, and so on. Here again, what matters fundamentally for our purposes is the structure of his account. He writes:

the friendship of charity is founded upon the fellowship of everlasting happiness, in which men share in common with the angels. For it is written (Mt. 22:30) that “in the resurrection ... men shall be as the angels of God in heaven.” It is therefore evident that the friendship of charity extends also to the angels. (*ST 2a2ae 25. 10*)⁶

Here, Aquinas seeks to ground the appropriateness of love of the angels, here and now, in a claim about our eschatological future: it is because we will one day share with the angels in the fundamental good of the beatific vision that we ought to love them here and now. We are all familiar with the idea that the history of our relationship to another person can make a difference to the quality of our moral relations to them in the present. If I have wronged someone, then, of course, that truth can exercise a moral claim upon me in the present; it might then be appropriate for me to offer an apology, for example. Here, Aquinas appears to be extending this kind of reasoning, by supposing that we can move from claims about our future (and eschatological) relations to other human beings (and the angels) to a conclusion about our moral relations to them in the present.

The good that is realised in neighbour love is, evidently, a hybrid good: it consists in the alignment between the person’s relationship to the material order here and now (specifically, their relationship to other human beings) and some feature of their theological context (specifically, the fact that they will one day share with others in a relationship of fellowship in the beatific vision). Aquinas’s handling of this example indicates that the “alignment,” or appropriateness, that is relevant here is not to be understood fundamentally in causal terms: it is not that I ought to extend neighbour love to others in order to improve my chances of attaining the beatific vision. Instead, he is suggesting, this way of living is appropriate for me as a fitting acknowledgement of an already established truth concerning my relationship to others in our shared eschatological future. So here the alignment is, we could say, more existential than causal.

There is one final question we need to address, if we are to appreciate the overall structure of Aquinas’s account of the religious and spiritual life, and its relevance for the project of renewing the philosophy of religion. The picture I have been sketching turns on the idea that there are distinctively spiritual goods, which are realised when our relations to the material order are properly ordered relative to our theological context. And we need to know: what moves the Christian to affirm a given account of our theological context, for instance, the idea that there is a beatific vision? On the basis of what I have said so far, the reader might well have surmised that Aquinas is an

⁶ Here I am following the translation provided in Aquinas (1947). The ellipsis is in the original.

advocate of what I earlier called the (epistemically justified) belief plus practice model of religious commitment. He seems to be suggesting, after all, that once we have established that there is a beatific vision, with a certain shared, social character, then we can simply read off the implications of that commitment for our relations to others, and in this way determine the practical dimension of the religious or spiritual life. But that is not his position.

At the very beginning of the *Summa Theologiae*, Aquinas notes that “God destines us for an end beyond the grasp of reason.” (ST 1a 1. 1) On this account, the end that God intends for us, a central component of which is of course the beatific vision, cannot be established by means of any purely philosophical enquiry, not even, I take it, as a matter of probability. Instead, for Aquinas, truths concerning our theological context are to be affirmed in “faith,” which is not founded on the weight of the evidence or on “signs” but is, rather, voluntary.⁷ And what is it that elicits this voluntary assent? Aquinas comments:

it is clear that faith’s act is pointed as to its end towards the will’s object, i.e. the good. This good, the end of faith’s act, is the divine good, the proper object of charity. (ST 2a2ae 4. 3)

So the believer affirms the beatific vision, along with the other articles of faith, because of the good that is involved in their truth. It would require some exegetical subtlety to draw out the full sense of Aquinas’s treatment of these questions, but to put the point briefly, his view seems to be that the Christian is moved to affirm the beatific vision, and kindred claims, and to act accordingly, because of the prospect of realising thereby a particularly significant hybrid good, which will obtain if there is indeed a beatific vision, and if our relations to the material world here and now are properly ordered relative to that truth.

Now, finally, let us turn to consider the implications of this account of the structure of the religious life for the practice of the philosophy of religion.

3. Religious commitment as belief-with-practice

The reader has been patient in allowing me to expound these central features of Aquinas’s account of the religious life. On this view, the basic truth of that life, so far as it concerns our relations to the material order, is that it is ultimately aimed, not at natural goods, of the kind that can be identified by reference to the relevant rule of reason, but at hybrid goods, which arise in so far as our relations to the material order are properly aligned with our theological context. And for Aquinas, when we aim at these hybrid goods, we do not start from a belief (such as the belief in the beatific vision) and move from there to a set of practices that can be derived from the belief (such as the practice of

⁷ See Aquinas’s comment that “the act of faith is belief, an act of mind fixed on one alternative by reason of the will’s command.” (ST 2a2ae 4. 1) For the point that genuine, or “formed” faith, is not produced by signs, see Aquinas’s discussion of the faith of the devils in ST 2a2ae 5. 5. ad. 3.

neighbour love). We cannot proceed in this way, he would say, because it is not possible to establish the truth of the relevant beliefs simply by “reason.” Contrast the case of dietary practices, where they are aimed at the natural good of bodily health: here, we can start from various truths concerning the body and its needs, which have been identified by means of the relevant empirical enquiry, and then read off the implications of those truths for our conduct.⁸

But when we consider practices such as those that define neighbour love, neither can we simply start with the recognition that these practices are good, and only then affirm a world view of the kind that will, in some relevant way, support them. Why? Because these practices have as their rationale the realisation of hybrid goods, and accordingly they can only be seen to be good, or worth undertaking, in the relevant respect, once we have introduced the appropriate theological context, alignment with which is the goal of the practice. So on this point, Aquinas’s approach also differs from what we earlier dubbed the practice plus belief model.

It is an implication, then, of Aquinas’s account of the structure of the religious life that rather than starting with belief, or with practice, we should instead begin with various belief and practice pairs, such as the belief in the beatific vision and the practice of neighbour love. The commitment of faith, on this view, is like other practically rational commitments to this extent: in faith, the person aims at a great good, under conditions of uncertainty, where the good is great enough to make the venture worthwhile, notwithstanding the uncertainty of success. This venture is distinctively spiritual in so far as it is aimed at hybrid goods, and is, therefore, different from conventional, secular practical commitments. It also differs from a venture such as that described in Pascal’s Wager, since it is focused upon goods that are realised here and now (and not simply the good of a life with God post-mortem), and is motivated not by the prospect of bringing about some future state of affairs (such as the person’s participation in the beatific vision), but by the prospect of living in a way that is fitting relative to some future, eschatological truth that is taken to be already established. Here in the form of a thumbnail sketch is a distinctive view of the structure of a human life, where that life is neither merely “natural” in its orientation, nor merely “supernatural.”

Let us turn now to a consideration of how the philosophy of religion can be renewed, if we take this account of the structure of the religious life as our starting point.

4. Renewing the philosophy of religion

The picture I have drawn from Aquinas invites us to suppose that much religious practice depends not on mere theism, or some equivalent for the Sacred otherwise understood, but on a relatively

⁸ On this account, the religious practitioner will hold a belief about which goods can be realised if the relevant doctrinal claims hold good – and that belief will need to be epistemically justified, I take it. But the creedal claims themselves do not need to be so justified, and that is a reason for distinguishing this approach from the belief plus practice approach.

fine-grained account of our theological context. (The practices we have discussed, of abstinence and neighbour love, evidently depend, for Aquinas, on a particular conception of our shared eschatological future.)⁹ If that is so, then we might suppose that much of the religious life, as it has been practised, and as it might realistically be practised, cannot plausibly be understood in the terms provided by the belief plus practice model. Why? Because even if bare theism can be established with a degree of probability on the basis of philosophical considerations alone (and Aquinas will of course grant that it can be), it seems unlikely that the details of a religious world view can be shown to be probable on this basis, and it appears to be such details that motivate central features of the religious life. This is not to deny that much religious practice might turn out to be irrational. It may be, for example, that much religious practice is founded on the belief plus practice model, and that the relevant credal commitments are epistemically unjustified. But here is a way of reading such practice more charitably; and this reading is readily available, I have been suggesting, in the thought of religious practitioners themselves.¹⁰

Aquinas's account also gives us some reason to suppose that the practice plus belief model invites, at least, elaboration. As formulated by Hadot, that model depends on the thought that we can recognise that "tranquillity of mind," along with the other mental qualities that were spiritually important for the Epicureans and Stoics, constitutes an appropriate ideal of life, before we consider the fundamental nature of things. But that may be doubted. Assuming that we are dealing with a substantive conception of the ideal life, rather than one that is specified in terms of a very thin evaluative vocabulary (as when we say that the ideal life is one that is "good"), then we should suppose that the attractiveness of a given ideal of life, even an ideal as unspecific as "tranquillity of mind," will typically be evident only when we have introduced various assumptions about the nature of things. Why? Because the goodness of that life will depend in large part on its appropriateness relative to context, and therefore upon its capacity to realise hybrid goods, that is, goods that will be realised only if the relevant world view obtains.

A more thorough investigation of these questions will form part of the renewal in the philosophy of religion that I am envisaging here. Needless to say, my own hunch is that this sort of enquiry will

⁹ No doubt there are practices that can be motivated simply on the basis of theism. But it is notable that Aquinas typically appeals to finer grained conceptions of our theological context, which involve specifically Christian affirmations; and he is right to do this, since bare theism would not generate the practical commitments that he is concerned to defend.

¹⁰ This is not to say that, on this reading, epistemic considerations are simply irrelevant. For instance, if we deem the probability of a given world view to be zero, then there will be (absent other considerations) no point in pursuing a hybrid good that can be realised only if the world view holds true. In practice, I suggest, religious practitioners will assign the world view that is presupposed in their pursuit of a given set of hybrid goods a probability that is significant without necessarily exceeding 0.5. And they may well suppose that there is no very precise way of estimating the relevant probabilities. On Aquinas's account, a fine grained world view of the kind that is relevant to standard hybrid goods will need to be revealed – and there are not too many contenders, I take it, for the status of truly revealed world view. So for these purposes, some world views will be especially salient.

lead philosophers to take a livelier interest in the belief-with-practice account of the nature of religious commitment.¹¹ If they do so, then we can anticipate some further transformations in the central concerns of the discipline.

Given Aquinas's picture of the structure of the religious life, it is natural to ask about the relationship between natural and hybrid goods or, as we could put it equally, about the relationship between the acquired and infused moral virtues. What difference will be made to a person's life, from a practical point of view, once they take their choices to be answerable to a theological context?

The examples I have taken from Aquinas already point to some relevant distinctions. Abstinence that conforms to a "divine rule" is unlikely to strike a non-believer as wrong. (On standard accounts, religiously motivated abstinence does not, after all, involve any harm of the body.) But from the non-believer's perspective, this practice is likely to seem under-motivated. Why? Because the practice does not appear to do any more to promote the natural goods of bodily health than do less stringent dietary practices. So here the introduction of a theological context has the effect of changing the status of an action that would otherwise have been permissible but lacking in point, so that it is now (if we follow Aquinas's account of the matter) obligatory.

Neighbour love also seems to involve a relatively demanding conception of our responsibilities to others when compared with the requirements of the corresponding "rule of reason."¹² But viewed from the vantage point of such a rule, neighbour love will appear to be, I suggest, not so much under-motivated, as praiseworthy, and indeed supererogatory. If that is so, then, in this case, the introduction of a theological context has the effect of constituting as obligatory an action that would otherwise have been supererogatory. In other cases, we might suppose that the consequence of introducing a theological context will be not so much an adjustment in our understanding of whether a given action is to be classified as simply permissible, or supererogatory, or obligatory, as a challenge to this whole way of thinking. Those forms of the religious life, and there are many, that invite us to think of our relations with others by analogy with familial relations tend to have this implication: they suggest that within a properly ordered community, moral categories will fall away,

¹¹ Some Wittgensteinian philosophers have given an account of religious commitment that is rather like what I have been calling the belief-with-practice approach. See for instance Peter Winch's claim that ceasing to pray is best considered not as a "consequence" but as an "aspect" of ceasing to believe (Winch 1977: 207-8). However, the approach I have been taking does not share what I take to be the metaphysical reserve of the Wittgensteinian tradition.

¹² It is pragmatically implied in Aquinas's discussion that the requirements of neighbour love are more demanding than those of the corresponding rule of reason – if the case were otherwise, then he would have little reason to consider neighbour love independently of the acquired moral virtues, and God would have little reason to reveal those truths that Aquinas takes to ground the appropriateness of neighbour love. However, on other approaches, for instance, act utilitarianism, the rule of reason that applies in this domain may be very demanding. However, just because of its stringency, act utilitarianism is, famously, hard to reconcile with many of our established moral intuitions. This suggests that a conventional conception of the relevant rule of reason may be closer to Aquinas's view of the matter than to the act utilitarian's.

to be replaced by the kind of unconditional regard that we associate with ideals of family life. In these and other ways, a renewed philosophy of religion can begin to think about the difference that the introduction of a theological context may make to our conception of the good human life, and in turn about the place of religious commitment within the larger economy of human life.

Having asked what difference is made by the introduction of a theological context, relative to the case where there is no such context, it is natural to ask next about what difference will be made by the introduction of one theological context rather than another. This question can be explored both within a tradition, and across traditions. If we address the issue from within, say, the Christian tradition, then we can ask about how varying understandings of the afterlife (all of them consistent with Christian teaching) may generate varying understandings of what constitutes an “appropriate” human life here and now, or about how differing conceptions of the doctrine of the Trinity may make for varying conceptions of the properly “aligned” human life here and now, and so on for other features of the Christian world view. And generalising to other religions, we can begin to move towards an account of the nature, range and significance of the goods that would be realised by the practices of various religious and spiritual traditions were their world views to be true. This sort of exercise is of some importance, I think, if we are to understand the motivational structure of the major faith traditions and to see how that structure has informed the lives and self-understanding of so many of our forebears.

On this same basis, though more controversially, we could think about ranking different faith traditions. Perhaps the practices of some traditions will enable a relatively wide range of hybrid goods, or will enable hybrid goods of relatively deep significance, granted the truth of the relevant world view. And in turn, therefore, we could ask about the relative practical reasonableness of different traditions: if the world views of two traditions are of similar epistemic standing, then their relative practical rationality will depend, in large measure, upon the range and significance of the hybrid goods that can be realised in the practices of those traditions should their picture of the nature of things prove to be true. The renewed philosophy of religion that I am envisaging will not be concerned fundamentally with the development of new forms of religious apologetic, with one tradition vying with another to establish its superiority in these terms. But it will seek to place axiological questions at the heart of our conception of the religious life: it will consider how varying assumptions about our theological context generate varying understandings of the nature and range of the spiritual goods that are accessible to us in our relations to the material world here and now. At its core, then, the discipline will involve the study of values, and specifically the values that are realised in hybrid goods.

As an extension of this same enquiry, a renewed philosophy of religion will also be concerned with the variety of dimensions along which a human life can contribute to the realisation of hybrid goods.

Aquinas does not spell out the point, but it is implied in his example of neighbour love that our feelings and attitudes, along with our thoughts and bodily demeanour, and I would add our habits of perception of the everyday sensory world, can all be assessed for adequacy relative to theological context, and all are capable therefore, in principle, of realising hybrid goods. In this way, we can tell a variety of stories about the nature of growth in the spiritual life, depending upon whether our focus is upon how experience, or thought, or behaviour, or some other dimension of our lives can be drawn into closer alignment with our theological context. A renewed philosophy of religion will examine these different vantage points on what a given tradition will take to be one and the same track of spiritual development, and ask how they are to be related to one another.

Finally, as well as considering the difference that is made to our conception of a worthwhile human life by the introduction of a theological context relative to the case where there is no such context, and the difference that is made by the introduction of one theological context rather than another, where both contexts have been propounded by established faith traditions, a renewed philosophy of religion will also seek to develop new and creative ways of conceiving of our religious or spiritual context, and to identify, thereby, new kinds of spiritual good that can in principle be realised in our lives here and now. In this way, the renewed philosopher of religion will be open to the possibility not only of studying the spiritual life, but of contributing to its further development.¹³

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