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The Goals of Philosophy of Religion: A Reply to Ireneusz Ziemiński

Abstract:

In a recent article, Ireneusz Ziemiński (2018) argues that the main goals of philosophy of religion are to (i) define religion; (ii) assess the truth value of religion and; (iii) assess the rationality of a religious way of life. Ziemiński shows that each of these goals are difficult, if not impossible, to achieve. Hence, philosophy of religion leads to scepticism. He concludes that the conceptual tools philosophers of religion employ are best suited to study specific religious traditions, rather than religion more broadly construed. However, it is unclear whether Ziemiński means the goals he attributes to philosophy of religion to be normative goals that philosophers ought to pursue, or whether he is merely offering a description of how philosophers of religion actually operate. I argue there are difficulties for both the normative and descriptive interpretations. If Ziemiński's project is normative then many of its requirements for successful inquiry are implausible. On the other hand, if his project is descriptive he needs to do a lot more work to show that the goals he attributes to philosophers of religion really are the goals philosophers pursue. At minimum, more information is required to successfully evaluate Ziemiński's proposal.

I. Introduction

In a recent article, Ireneusz Ziemiński (2018) argues that the main goals of philosophy of religion are to (i) define religion; (ii) assess the truth value of religion and; (iii) assess the rationality of a religious way of life. Ziemiński shows that each of these goals are difficult, if not impossible, to achieve. Hence, philosophy of religion leads to scepticism. He concludes that the conceptual tools philosophers of religion employ are best suited to study specific religious traditions, rather than religion more broadly construed. In Section II, I outline the main takeaways from Ziemiński's article. In Section III I explore two different possible interpretations of Ziemiński's project. The first is that Ziemiński means the goals he attributes to philosophy of religion to be normative goals that philosophers ought to pursue. I argue that on this interpretation it's unclear whether the goals Ziemiński attributes to philosophy of religion are necessary for successful inquiry. For instance, I argue that an essentialist definition of religion isn't necessary for philosophy of religion. Additionally, the epistemic standard Ziemiński has in view is often obscure. And when it is clear, it is unrealistically high, especially when taken as a normative standard. The second interpretation is that Ziemiński is merely offering a description of what in fact philosophers of religion are already doing. While this interpretation is more charitable I suggest that Ziemiński needs to do more work in order to defend it. Some case studies of work from prominent contemporary philosophers of religion would go a long way in this regard.¹

II. Ziemiński and the Goals of Philosophy of Religion

¹ I'm grateful to an anonymous referee for prompting me to consider the descriptive interpretation of Ziemiński's project.

According to Ziemiński the three main goals of philosophy of religion are to (i) define religion; (ii) discover and/or justify the truth about religious claims and; (iii) rationalize religious behavior. He argues that none of these goals are achieved by philosophy of religion.

1. *Defining Religion*

Ziemiński believes that one of the tasks of philosophy of religion is to explain what makes its inquiry distinct from other subjects such as the psychology of religion, sociology of religion, history of religion, or comparative religious studies. He also observes that philosophy of religion often seeks to defend or criticize the truth claims of religion (Ziemiński 2018, 54). From this fact Ziemiński appears to infer that “regardless of the differences, both models (apologetics and critical) show that philosophy depends on everyday beliefs, our worldview or even emotional factors. Philosophers do not want to admit this problem, proclaiming the notion of knowledge based on unbiased arguments of reason” (Ziemiński 2018, 54). Philosophy is wrongly considered to be a foundational ‘science’ required as the basis of any religious inquiry. Still, Ziemiński does acknowledge that philosophy makes important and unique contributions to religious inquiry (Ziemiński 2018, 54).

Part of the problem is that according to Ziemiński, “philosophy is linked to the question about the essence of religion: what religion really is” (Ziemiński 2018, 55). And its essence is impossible to define. He believes that any definition of religion needs to be an essentialist definition, including any and all essential religious phenomena, while simultaneously providing a criterion by which to distinguish the religious from the non-religious. This definition need not only include both past and present instantiations of religious but all future (and hence logically possible) instantiations of religion (Ziemiński 2018, 56).

Ziemiński claims that appealing to either an *a posteriori* or *a priori* definition of religion is problematic. The former requires a knowledge of religion in order to be able to distinguish religious phenomenon from others, and hence is circular (Ziemiński 2018, 56). The latter requires a definition of religion which is apparent from reference to its historical instantiations and Ziemiński believes this will be impossible.² To avoid this problem philosophers of religion “initially assume a common and unfocused definitions, specifying them in the course of studies; but this definition is not, of course, [an] essential definition” (Ziemiński 2018, 57). Ziemiński suggests that in seeking an essentialist definition philosophers assume there is a ‘perfect religion’ and scholars can’t this requirement since it is assumed in their work. We need an essentialist definition in order to distinguish the important aspects of religion which ought to be studied (Ziemiński 2018, 57).

Another response to the problem of definition examines whether one can simply use Wittgenstein’s idea of family resemblance to define religion. This solution says that while even if we can’t offer necessary and sufficient conditions for religion, we can recognize religion when we see it. But Ziemiński suggests that “[t]he solution is not satisfactory because in the case of family relations

² It’s worth noting that Ziemiński recognizes that these problems of definition apply to other phenomena like art, knowledge, and human nature. In order for them to be studied one has to know how to distinguish them from other phenomena, just as one needs to do with religion.

there are more and less typical examples. Certainly, being a parent is a closer relationship than being a nephew or a niece” (Zieminski 2018, 58). Religion functions in the same way with respect to more and less typical examples. The similarity of traits suggest there is some essence of religion and hence the Wittgenstein answer reduces to a form of essentialism. Zieminski concludes “essentialism is a necessary assumption in studying religion, but it leads to skepticism in the case of [the] definition of religion” (Zieminski 2018, 58).

2. *The Truth Value of Religion*

Another problem Zieminski raises concerns the question of “whether religious claims (doctrines) can be true or justified (and if yes, than which one is true and the most credible)” (Zieminski 2018, 55). But “the problem is that in the case of religious statements concerning the existence of God or the afterlife, we do not know how to check if they are true” (Zieminski 2018, 59).³ The problem of confirmation can be illustrated by examining a number of debates including the consistency of God (i.e. the divine attributes) and the existence of God. With respect to the latter, Zieminski explains that we cannot know whether the concept of God is possible, and hence we cannot know whether the ontological argument is sound (Zieminski 2018, 60). We likewise cannot know whether the teleological argument or cosmological argument are sound either. Disproving God’s existence is equally problematic. For instance, it’s impossible to know whether a solution to the problem of evil like the greater goods theodicy is successful (Zieminski 2018, 61). According to Zieminski while we can know that the statement ‘God exists’ has a truth value, we cannot know whether it is true or false. So we are left with scepticism with respect to God’s existence, just as we are with respect to definition (Zieminski 2018, 61). Zieminski suggests that perhaps for the religious individual, the truth value of religious claims aren’t important. Instead, religion is important because it offers comfort and meaning. That religion is providing an accurate description of the world is less important than whether one is able to trust God. However, Zieminski believes trust in God presupposes God exists. Hence, “[t]he problem of God’s existence is therefore key to the truthfulness of religion, even though we cannot solve it” (Zieminski 2018, 62).

3. *Rationality of Religious Behavior*

Zieminski concludes with a discussion of the rationality of religious behavior, which he recognizes depends on the account of rationality one has in view. He writes that “[a]ccording to the ethics of beliefs defended by W.K. Clifford, only those claims which are proven can be considered true. Therefore, if there is no evidence that God exists, faith in Him/Her is irrational and morally wrong” (Zieminski 2018, 62). Zieminski explains if one follows Clifford’s epistemic standards then very few beliefs could be accepted as true, including religious beliefs. He writes “the lack of proof for God’s existence does not negate the rationality of religious cults because humans are celebratory animals, living in a world full of symbols, no matter if those symbols refer to some real and transcendent objects” (Zieminski 2018, 63). An alternative account of rationality is found in William James, who claims that:

[I]n significant cases one is allowed to follow emotions, and consider whatever brings more benefits to be true. Therefore, if a certain religion fulfills people’s expectations,

³ Zieminski thinks this matter is complicated because of competing definitions of truth. The correspondence theory of truth (or realism) is often assumed by philosophers of religion.

gives them a feeling that life is meaningful or hope for eternity, then they are allowed to consider such religion as true. Similarly, if religion brings more damage than good to individual and to society, then practicing it is not only irrational, but also evil from a moral perspective. (Zieminski 2018, 63)

Zieminski contends, however, that even if James is correct to think that pragmatic reasons can trump epistemic reasons, it's difficult to discern how to assess the pragmatic (dis)utility of religion, and should thus be sceptics about the rationality of religious behaviour (Zieminski 2018, 63).

4. Zieminski on the Meaning of Philosophy of Religion

Toward the end of his article Zieminski concludes that inasmuch as the main questions in philosophy of religion cannot be answered, it is a failed discipline. However, he also claims that even if philosophers of religion can never answer important questions about religion, they do have something to offer. Zieminski writes that “[p]hilosophers may not be gathering empirical knowledge, but they bring conceptual tools which can help us to understand problems of the truthfulness, consistency and rationality of religion” (Zieminski 2018, 64).

If, however, philosophers are to successfully employ these conceptual tools they must abandon studying religion broadly and focus on specific religious doctrines. In other words, “[i]f there is no perfect or essential religion, just specific historical religions, philosophers should not study fiction, which they consider to be the essence of religion, but should concentrate on the consistency, truthfulness and rationality of specific religions” (Zieminski 2018, 64). One way to do this is to focus on the philosophy of a specific religion. For instance, one could focus on the philosophy of Christianity or Islam. However, Zieminski believes the focus ought not to be apologetic in nature, but “as far as possible an objective analysis of its consistency, truthfulness and rationality” (Zieminski 2018, 64). Zieminski concludes that philosophers should be open to the scepticism as a legitimate result of religious inquiry. This isn't necessarily futile since it still, in some sense, expands our understanding of the field. He concludes that “scepticism is a natural, critical standpoint, taken by every scholar ... towards their own ideas. From this perspective, philosophy is... a critical self-knowledge of every scientist, no matter which branch of study of religion they represent (Zieminski 2018, 64-65).

III. Interpretive Problems for Zieminski

There are a number of difficulties with what Zieminski puts forward in his article. Many of these arise, at least initially, from issues of interpretation. In the first half of this section I explore problems for a normative interpretation of Zieminski's project. In the second half I examine some concerns with a descriptive interpretation, though they are admittedly less formidable than the problems associated with the normative one. In sum, one of the main questions is whether Zieminski holds philosophy of religion does in fact lead to scepticism, or whether it ought to lead to scepticism.

1. The Normative Interpretation

The normative interpretation of Zieminski's project understands him to be offering a research program for philosophy of religion. He is stating the goals philosophers of religion *ought* to pursue.

A. *Essentialism*

There are a number of problems with what Zieminski says with respect to an essentialist definition of religion. If Zieminski is suggesting that an essentialist definition of religion is necessary for successful inquiry, he fails to make clear *why* this is the case. After all, he realizes that philosophers often "initially assume a common and unfocused definition [of religion]" (Zieminski 2018, 57). So it seems clear enough that he recognizes that philosophy of religion in practice gets conducted without an essentialist definition. His suggestion, then, has to be the stronger claim that successful philosophical inquiry into religion is impossible without an essentialist definition. But again, he hasn't told us *why* this is the case. The failure to offer an essentialist definition about religion doesn't require a sceptical stance toward religion. Likewise, consider just how strong this claim really is with respect to what's required for successful inquiry. Since Zieminski believes no such definition is on offer his view entails that there has been *no past or present successful philosophy of religion*. Yet we seem to be doing a lot of philosophy of religion without offering (or trying to offer) an essentialist definition of religion. The implausibility of this as a necessary requirement lends support to the idea that, at least with respect to the definition of religion, Zieminski's project is descriptive rather than normative.

B. *The Meaning of Philosophy of Religion*

Zieminski concludes his article by suggesting that philosophy of religion is best suited to use conceptual analysis to assess the consistency, truthfulness, and rationality of specific religious claims. There are at least two different ways to understand this when it is taken to be a normative requirement, and they both are problematic. First, Zieminski could be claiming that this is what philosophers of religion ought to do, regardless of what they're actually doing. Zieminski could be right about what philosophers ought to do, but since they're already doing what he recommends it's difficult to understand why Zieminski mentions it. Contemporary philosophers of religion already use conceptual analysis to discuss the truth claims and the rationality of religious belief. Thus, Zieminski is making a claim that is true, but completely uninformative. So this first interpretation is implausible.

Second, Zieminski could mean that this is what philosophers of religion ought to be doing but currently aren't. While this might be a more reasonable way of understanding Zieminski, it's even more problematic than the first. This is because it is simply false that philosophers of religion aren't using conceptual analysis to assess the truth value, etc., of specific religious doctrines. Indeed, contemporary analytic philosophy of religion has been criticized for overly focusing on the Judeo-Christian conception of God to the inappropriate exclusion of other religions. Some have asserted that philosophy of religion *just is* the philosophy of Christianity. Still more, some argue that since many philosophers of religion are Christian theists that the field is infected with pernicious cognitive bias. Any survey of the speciality journals in philosophy of religion will

confirm that philosophers of religion are often focused on specific Christian doctrines.⁴ So this too is an implausible interpretation of Ziemiński.

C. *Epistemic Standards*

The most difficult aspect of Ziemiński's article to interpret is with respect to epistemic standards. For it is often challenging to decipher what epistemic standards Ziemiński has in mind. And when they are in view his standards appear unreasonably high. Ziemiński begins his article with some observations about the nature of philosophy in general. He chides philosophers for defending absurd positions (e.g. external world scepticism) which they cannot prove. He claims one problem with philosophy is that it "seeks final and absolutely certain solutions to fundamental problems like the nature of existence or criterion of truth" (Ziemiński 2018, 54). Ziemiński's criticism of philosophy is twofold: (i) philosophy makes absurd claims and; (ii) its cognitive ambitions are far too high. Likewise:

Philosophers attempt to solve these problems not empirically but only by conceptual analysis; they are not interested in detailed differences between historical religions, but in their essence. They do not examine the differences between different images of God, but the essential content of the concept of God and His/Her existence. Philosophers also do not ask what role do specific religions have in history and how they are used, but whether religious faith is rational (Ziemiński 2018, 55).

Much of what Ziemiński says about the philosophy of religion's inability to achieve its epistemic goals appears to assume that empirical confirmation is required for knowledge. And, of course, the confirmation Ziemiński has in view only exists in the 'hard' sciences. Yet Ziemiński is also aware that if Clifford's epistemic standard is followed, then very little can be rationally believed. It therefore just isn't clear what specific epistemic standards Ziemiński has in view. It's true that philosophical arguments aren't subject to confirmation in the same way that scientific hypothesis can (sometimes) be confirmed or disconfirmed. But contemporary philosophers of religion never claim otherwise. This problem, if it really is a problem, isn't unique to philosophy of religion. It's a problem for all philosophical arguments, and indeed all non-empirical types of inquiry. When this is understood as a normative requirement it's unclear *why* philosophers of religion should adopt it. Why favour this epistemic standard over a different (more achievable) one? This standard may well lead to scepticism about religion, but we need some reason to adopt it. It thus again seems unlikely that this is the most charitable reading of Ziemiński's project.

2. *The Descriptive Interpretation*

The normative interpretation of Ziemiński's project is implausible. In sum, providing an essentialist definition of religion isn't necessary for successfully inquiry into religion. It's also unclear how failing to provide an essentialist definition or use conceptual analysis necessarily leads to scepticism about religion. Philosophers of religion already use the tools of conceptual analysis

⁴ I have in mind journals such as *Faith and Philosophy*, *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion*, *Religious Studies*, and the *European Journal for Philosophy of Religion*. *Sophia* is perhaps an exception in that it appears to have a much broader focus because it often publishes articles on Eastern religions. But such articles are on specific aspects of specific Eastern traditions and thus still follows Ziemiński's advice.

in conducting inquiry. To hold that philosophers of religion ought to have confirmation in view as an epistemic standard is implausible. In what follows I explore a descriptive interpretation of Ziemiński's project which, as a whole, is more plausible than the normative interpretation. Having said that, there are still a number of difficulties with the descriptive interpretation, along with places where Ziemiński (at a minimum) should provide more information.

A. *Essentialism*

The descriptive interpretation of Ziemiński's requirement for an essentialist definition of religion merely says that philosophers of religion are indeed attempting to offer essentialist definitions of religion, but such attempts are failures. Another way to understand this is that philosophers are attempting (but failing) to offer necessary and sufficient conditions for what it would take for some phenomena to qualify as religious. Hence, this is one area where philosophy of religion leads to scepticism. However, it is simply false that philosophers of religion spend very much time attempting to define religion. At least within contemporary (post WWII) analytic philosophy of religion, I observe little time spent by philosophers defining religion. While it is true that philosophers often offer very precise definitions, particularly with respect to terms being employed in arguments, this is altogether a different matter. In sum, philosophers of religion are not concerned with offering essentialist definitions of religion. It's also unclear how the lack of essentialist definition would lead to scepticism about religion even if it were the case. It's thus not an appropriate feature to focus on when offering a description of philosophy of religion. If Ziemiński believes I'm mistaken about this, then he could support his claim by appealing to case studies from prominent contemporary philosophers of religion.

B. *The Meaning of Philosophy of Religion*

With respect to the meaning of philosophy of religion, if Ziemiński is merely offering a description of the discipline when he says philosophers of religion use the tools of conceptual analysis to assess the consistency, truthfulness, and rationality of specific religious claims, then he is certainly correct. Many contemporary philosophers of religion undertake their inquiry into religion almost exclusively using conceptual analysis. This, then, is the most accurate part of Ziemiński's article. Still, even if this interpretation is correct there are at least two ways he could have strengthen his claim. First, these claims sometimes read as if Ziemiński is offering a possible defense of the value of philosophy of religion. If this is so, and conceptual analysis is part of that value, then Ziemiński should say something about why conceptual analysis is valuable when applied to religion. Second, Ziemiński could again strengthen his account by appealing to case studies in the philosophy of religion (such examples abound in the contemporary literature). Finally, I do not see a clear connection between conceptual analysis about religion and scepticism about religion. Though whether one believes conceptual analysis about religion leads to scepticism will be closely tied to the epistemic standards the inquirer in question adopts.

C. *Epistemic Standards*

As mentioned earlier, the most difficult part of Ziemiński's article to interpret regards the epistemic standards he has in view. Again, to say that philosophy of religion ought to adopt something like confirmation as an epistemic standard is unrealistic. However, if Ziemiński is pointing to this

standard as a description of what occurs in philosophy of religion, then it seems wholly inaccurate. Prominent philosophers of religion such as Plantinga, Swinburne, Oppy, and Rowe (among many others) do not appear to be employing confirmation as an epistemic standard.

Zieminski seems to gloss quickly over both the arguments for theism and arguments for atheism. This does a disservice to the centuries of hard work philosophers have dedicated to developing these arguments. It is true that confirmation about these arguments is impossible, at least in the way we can sometimes have confirmation in the hard sciences. But they never claim it's possible, and if this is a problem for philosophers of religion, then it's a problem for *all* philosophers in general.⁵

Epistemic standards is the part of Zieminski's project I'm most tempted to read as normative, since it is entirely implausible as a description of the current state of the discipline. Yet, I've already noted that confirmation is an unrealistic standard in the philosophy of religion. Zieminski could help clarify this issue by stating explicitly what he thinks constitutes a successful argument in philosophy. What does it take for a philosophical argument to succeed? He could then state whether any of the arguments in the philosophy of religion meet that standard. Slowing down to examine specific arguments as case studies would help the reader better understand his position. Likewise, it would help the reader avoid feeling as if he has waved his hand dismissively about the arguments in philosophy of religion when this is likely not his intention. In sum, while philosophers of religion do not use confirmation as an epistemic standard, it is unclear why they should adopt such a standard.

IV. Conclusion

There are good reasons to reject the normative interpretation of Zieminski's article. Why hold that an essentialist definition of religion is necessary for successful philosophical inquiry into religion? Also, philosophers of religion are already conducting conceptual analysis so it's uninformative as a requirement. Finally, to think that knowledge claims in the philosophy of religion require confirmation is to adopt an unrealistically high epistemic standard. The descriptive interpretation of Zieminski's interpretation is more plausible, though problems remain. For it is doubtful that philosophers of religion spend very much time attempting to define religion. It is true, however, that the methodology philosophers of religion often use is indeed conceptual analysis. In both cases it would be helpful if Zieminski offered some case studies to help support his claims. Finally, I see little evidence to think philosophers of religion have confirmation in mind as a relevant epistemic standard. Zieminski's (both implicit and explicit) claims about epistemic standards are the most difficult part of this project to decipher. Neither the normative nor descriptive interpretations about epistemic standards are very plausible. Clarification from Zieminski about these interpretive issues would go a long way towards explaining the merits of his project, and would thus be most

⁵ Alternatively, perhaps Zieminski believes there isn't 'decisive evidence' in philosophy such that the evidence in question points clearly to one unique rational response. Again, philosophers of religion rarely (if every) take themselves to be in positions of decisive evidence or arguments.

welcome. For according to Ziemiński does philosophy of religion in fact lead to scepticism, or ought it to?⁶

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