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# On Three Ways to Justify Religious Beliefs

## Abstract

This paper compares the ways in which revealed theology, natural theology and philosophical theology justify religious belief. Revealed theology does so with an appeal to revelation and natural theology with an appeal to reason and perception. It is argued that both are inadequate. Philosophical theology analyses the meaning rather than proving the truth of religious belief. In doing so it does show how truth claims are entailed by a religious tradition and how the whole heritage of a tradition should be coherent, credible, and intelligible as well as relevant and adequate to the demands of life.

## 1 Natural Theology and Revealed Theology

How should religious believers set about to justify their religious beliefs? Many theologians claim that this can only be done by an appeal to revelation. Since we can only know God to the extent that he reveals himself to us, we can only justify our beliefs about him in the light of this revelation. Let us call this view on the justification of beliefs ‘revealed theology.’

The trouble with revealed theology is that it seems to entail a form of fideism in which Christian theology is withdrawn into an intellectual ghetto. On this view theologians and believers base their religious truth claims on grounds not accessible to everybody, but only to believers who have privileged access to divine revelation. Believers alone can therefore determine the truth of religious belief. Sometimes this protected area is extended to include not only the truth but also the meaning of religious claims. Thus for example W.H. Austin argues that ‘the affirmation-negation paradox is of fundamental importance in theology, giving expression to the principle that the religious ultimate is beyond all human concepts, so that what is affirmed of it must also be denied.’<sup>1</sup> Since God in this way transcends our human concepts, religious beliefs also transcend the rules of general logic and have a special paradoxical logic of their own which only believers are able to apply. Believers alone can determine what religious claims mean and what they entail.<sup>2</sup> Believers then not only have privileged access to the truth but also to the meaning of religious claims. By making the criteria for truth and meaning purely internal to faith, this view seems to immunise theology and religious belief from all external criticism. This protection is obtained at a price, however, since it entails that all alternative religious views can claim the same protection. None of them can be criticised from outside, nor can they criticise each other. The result

1. William H. Austin, *Waves, Particles and Paradoxes* (Houston, TX 1967), 49.

2. On the serious difficulties involved in this view on religious language, see Ch. 2 of Anders Jeffner, *Theology and Integration: Four Essays in Philosophical Theology* (Uppsala 1987), and Ch. 2 of Vincent Brümmer, *Speaking of a Personal God* (Cambridge 1992).

is an extreme form of religious relativism that I do not suppose the defenders of revealed theology set out to achieve in the first place!

In order to avoid these fideistic implications, theologians have to apply common standards of meaning and rationality in order to justify the claims they defend. In justifying their beliefs, they must appeal to some basic intellectual meeting-point common to everybody, both believers and non-believers. How are we to set about finding this common intellectual meeting point in terms of which the truth claims of Christianity are to be justified? One of the most significant attempts at finding such a common ground for religious belief is that proposed by the traditional rival of revealed theology, namely 'natural theology.'

While revealed theology tries to derive the truth claims of religion from a revelation only accessible to believers, natural theology tries to justify religious truth claims by deriving them from universal grounds that are in principle accessible to everybody. In this way natural theology tries to *prove* the truth claims of religion by basing them on grounds which are acceptable to both believers and unbelievers. As we will argue in this paper, this project of natural theology also faces grave difficulties. On the one hand it tends to reduce Christian doctrine to the lowest common denominator shared by all forms of theism, while on the other hand it necessarily fails in the end to provide the required universally acceptable grounds to justify believing even this reduced form of theism. In the final analysis the reasons believers have for accepting Christian doctrine must in some way involve an appeal to revelation. That being the case, how can theology avoid being relegated to an intellectual ghetto? Is it possible to develop a form of theology which avoids retreating into an intellectual ghetto and yet can account for the fact that Christian faith (and *mutatis mutandis* all other faiths) is in some way or other derived from revelation?

## **2 Natural Theology and Philosophical Theology**

A possible candidate that might be considered here is the kind of 'philosophical theology' defended by Norman Kretzmann. Kretzmann defines philosophical theology by distinguishing it from natural theology:

I'm using the term 'philosophical theology' in a sense that seems at least on its way to becoming standard, a sense in which it is to be distinguished from natural theology, the other sort of theology that has been practised by philosophers. Natural theology may be broad or strict in its criteria for admissible premises, but its specific characteristic is its refusal to admit as premises any doctrinal propositions that are not also accessible to observation and reason. Supporters of natural theology would explain that it imposes those strictures in order to be able to claim that it can offer proof. Philosophical theology shares the methods of natural theology broadly conceived – i.e. analysis and argumentation of all the sorts acceptable in philosophy and the sciences – but it lifts natural theology's restriction on premises. In particular, philosophical theology accepts as premises doctrinal propositions that are not also initially accessible to observation and reason. From a philosophical point of view, it takes up such premises as assumptions. Argumentation based on such premises may be (and historically have been) as rigorous as any, but the

status of its premises of course precludes its satisfying the peculiarly stringent criteria of Aristotelian demonstration. A philosophical theologian engaged in such reasoning tests the coherence of doctrinal propositions, develops their implications, attempts explanations of them, discovers their connections with other doctrinal propositions, and so on, with no pretence at offering proofs of the sort putatively available in natural theology.<sup>3</sup>

According to Kretzmann's definition, natural theology is an enterprise claiming to achieve knowledge of God that can be justified on generally accessible grounds, i.e. 'premises accessible to observation and reason.' As I suggested above, there are two serious objections to this enterprise. First of all, knowledge claims about God are impossible without an appeal to revelation, and since revelation is only accessible to those who experience it with the 'eyes of faith' it cannot provide any universally acceptable proof. We will return to this point in more detail in section 4 below. Secondly, in its search for universally acceptable knowledge of God, 'natural theology' tries to defend knowledge claims that are not distinctive for any specific religion but are accessible to all who are endowed with 'observation and reason.' But then, as Kretzmann point out, all central doctrines of any specific religion are beyond the reach of natural theology. Thus 'all the distinctively Christian doctrines are . . . initially inaccessible to observation and reason. And so, because the strictures of natural theology preclude it's considering the doctrines which are the very differentiae of Christianity, the philosophy that is natural theology is at best adjacent to Christianity, not in it.'<sup>4</sup> In appealing exclusively to universally acceptable grounds, natural theology fails to achieve the knowledge of God distinctive for the Christian tradition. In this way natural theology falls outside the bounds of classical Christian theology.

In this connection Christoph Schwöbel has shown persuasively that the kind of natural theology referred to here arose in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries in response to the religious wars and to the renewal of an atheistic critique of Christian faith after the Reformation. Faced with the socially disastrous effects of warring confessional factions in European society, this response tried to produce a common rational theistic concept of God transcending the confessional pluralism of the Christian tradition. This common concept of God could then serve as the basis for unity in European society. The result was 'a *de-contextualization* of the Christian concept of God which is abstracted from its conceptual setting in the doctrinal scheme of Christian theology and from its context in the practice of Christian faith.'<sup>5</sup>

In this respect Kretzmann's philosophical theology is different: 'Philosophical theology, the ongoing project of supporting, elucidating, extending, and connecting propositions of Christian doctrine by the standard philosophical means of analysis and argument, is now and always has been the active philosophy in Christianity. . . During the Middle Ages, the golden age of philosophical theology,

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3. Norman Kretzmann, 'Reason in Mystery,' in: Godfrey Vesey (ed.), *The Philosophy in Christianity* (Cambridge 1989), 15–16.

4. Kretzmann, 'Reason in Mystery,' 16.

5. Christoph Schwöbel, 'After Post-Theism,' in: Svend Andersen (ed.), *Traditional Theism and its Modern Alternatives* (Aarhus 1994), 161–196. The quotation is from 179.

the vast majority of Christian philosophers contributed to this enterprise.<sup>6</sup> Contrary to natural theology, therefore, philosophical theology does indeed deal with the central doctrines of the Christian tradition. However, philosophical theology treats these doctrinal propositions as ‘assumptions’ of which it tries to analyse the meaning and not to prove the truth. Unlike natural theology, it seeks not proof but understanding as in the classical theological enterprise of *fides quaerens intellectum*. Its primary aim is not to prove the truth of Christian doctrine but rather to illuminate its meaning by analysing its implications and presuppositions and to propose coherent ways in which it could be conceptualised: ‘Supporting, elucidating, extending, and connecting propositions of Christian doctrine.’

Whether or not the individual philosophical theologian accepts these assumptions as his or her own, is in the end a personal matter. In order to accept the truth of these assumptions with integrity, believers have to recognise this truth through ‘experience of disclosure or discovery which are not the result of human epistemic activity.’<sup>7</sup> At this level all faith is truly personal. In the words of Wilfred Cantwell Smith: ‘My faith is an act that *I* make, myself, naked before God.’<sup>8</sup> Of course this does not exclude the possibility that others might share my personal faith by recognising it as similar to their own. In fact all believers desire that their own personal faith might correspond to that of others in the community of believers, for only then will they be able to identify with the community without sacrificing their own personal integrity in order to do so. Nevertheless, whether somebody can subscribe to the truth of doctrinal assumptions, will finally depend on whether he or she can personally accept these with integrity. We should note, however, that this kind of person-relativity<sup>9</sup> does not only apply to religious beliefs. In a way it is a general feature of all the beliefs which people hold to be true. In this regard Augustine was right in pointing out that, however much a pupil can learn from his teacher, there is one thing he must always discover for himself, i.e. that what his teacher tells him is true, because no one can discern this truth for him in his stead. ‘If my hearer sees these things himself with his inward eye, he comes to know what I say, not as a result of my words but as a result of his own contemplation. Even when I speak what is true, it is not I who teach him. He is taught not by my words but by the things themselves which inwardly God has made manifest to him.’<sup>10</sup>

The closing words in this quotation suggest that it is here that the concept of revelation comes in. Although all truth claims depend at the end of the day on the personal recognition of those who accept them, religious believers tend, in the light of their faith, to ascribe this recognition to illumination by the Spirit of God. In the words of John Calvin, the Spirit ‘with a wondrous and special energy, forms the ear to hear and the mind to understand.’<sup>11</sup> In this sense Christian theology

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6. Kretzmann, ‘Reason in Mystery,’ 16.

7. Schwöbel, ‘After Post-Theism,’ 184.

8. Wilfred Cantwell Smith, *The Meaning and End of Religion* (London 1978), 191.

9. On person relativity, see George I. Mavrodes, *Belief in God* (New York 1970), Ch. 2.

10. Augustine, *De Magistro*, 12.40, in: *Augustine: Earlier Writings* (Philadelphia 1953), 96–97. See also Etienne Gilson, *The Christian Philosophy of Saint Augustine* (London 1961), 70.

11. John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 2.2.20.

rests in the end on faith in the revelation of God.

Recognising the *truth* of doctrinal assumptions therefore involves an appeal to revelation. However, analysing their *meaning* does not. Whether or not philosophical theologians recognise the truth of the doctrinal assumptions they analyse, does not directly affect the kind of conceptual questions about presuppositions and implications they address nor the kind of philosophical analyses they employ to deal with them. Of course the personal faith of the philosophical theologian could motivate him or her to ask certain specific questions rather than others and also to analyse Christian doctrine rather than the doctrines of some other religion or view of life. However, such commitments do not affect the methods with which these conceptual issues about the meaning of Christian doctrine are addressed. The basic intellectual meeting point common to believers and non-believers cannot therefore consist in a common rational basis for recognising the truth of Christian doctrines as is assumed in natural theology. It can however be found in the methods by which philosophical theologians analyse the meaning of these doctrines.

### 3 Meaning and Truth

Unlike natural theology, philosophical theology thus seeks to analyse the *meaning* of (Christian) doctrine rather than to prove its *truth*. Nevertheless philosophical theologians are very much interested in the question of truth because there is a close connection between meaning and truth. If the meaning of a doctrinal proposition is its use, then it is part of the meaning of the proposition that it either expresses or entails truth claims. Analysing the meaning of a religious doctrine therefore includes analysing and evaluating the truth claims expressed or entailed by it.

At this point it is important to note the contextual nature of meaning.<sup>12</sup> If the meaning of an utterance is given in its use, then this is always its use within a specific context of human life and thought. Thus the meaning of a religious doctrine or proposition cannot be abstracted from the religious language game which is the context of its employment within human life and thought. Such abstraction leads to the ‘de-contextualisation’ against which we have heard Christoph Schwöbel warn us above. This also applies to the truth claims expressed or entailed by such religious doctrines within this context. Thus the justification of religious beliefs is primarily an attempt to demonstrate their legitimacy *within* the context of the language game of religion. But then our understanding of this language game will determine the nature of the justification we seek to provide.

The role of religious belief in human life and thought is sometimes thought of in purely epistemic terms. Like science, religion then has what H.J. Adriaanse calls an ‘informative result-orientation’<sup>13</sup> since it is aimed at providing us with knowledge about the world, human existence and God. Religious beliefs about

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12. For a more extended discussion of the contextual nature of meaning, see Vincent Brümmer, ‘Wittgenstein and the Irrationality of Rational Theology,’ in: James M. Byrne (ed.), *The Christian Understanding of God Today* (Dublin 1993), and Vincent Brümmer, ‘How Rational is Rational Theology? A Reply to Mikael Stenmark,’ *Religious Studies* 35 (1999).

13. H.J. Adriaanse, *Vom Christentum aus* (Kampen 1995), 175.

these matters are taken to be factual hypotheses of a sort that theology is required to test in order to demonstrate their theoretical legitimacy. The key issue to be resolved is then whether these hypotheses have to be tested in the light of 'revelation' (as is held in revealed theology) or in the light of observation and reason (as is held in natural theology). This view seriously reduces the role of religious belief in human life and thought. I agree with Mikael Stenmark's comment that 'since the relevant aim of religion is then taken to be merely epistemic, the 'theist' whose beliefs are examined, in fact turns out to be a purely epistemic being (a being whose sole concern is believing as many truths and as few falsehoods as possible). But the problem is that actual religious believers – whether Christian or not – are not purely epistemic beings, and it would be irrational for them to be so! . . . Actual religious believers are the kind of creatures who live in a world that has dangerous surprises from which their well-being must be secured. . . The job religion does is (among other things) to help them find a way of getting through the barriers of suffering and death, guilt and meaninglessness.'<sup>14</sup>

Actual religious believers are people who try to make sense of their lives and of their experience of the world by understanding these in terms of the faith which has been handed down to them in the religious tradition with which they can identify with integrity. Thus Christians understand their lives as meaningful because these are lived in fellowship with God. We are significant beings because God loves us. Our experience of the world is also meaningful because of the many ways in which God is involved in the things we experience. Thus many events are experienced as acts in which God realises his purposes and for which he is to be thanked whereas others are experienced as contrary to God's will and therefore to be opposed. Thus life and the world are meaningful because of the way these are related to God. Believers understand this complex relationship between God, themselves and the world in terms of the fund of conceptual models and metaphors which has been handed down to them in their own religious tradition. This understanding determines the meaning and significance of life and the world, as well as the way of life appropriate in relation to God and the world.

The way in which believers understand their lives and experience in the light of their faith, entails a variety of truth claims about the world, human existence and God. It is important to distinguish here between three kinds of truth claims involved in such religious understanding: empirical claims, claims regarding religious experience and metaphysical claims concerning the existence and attributes of God.

Empirical truth claims are claims which in principle can be (or could have been) verified empirically by anyone. Although empirical claims are not strictly speaking religious claims, religious beliefs often entail such empirical claims. Understanding events in our own lives and experience or in history in terms of our faith presupposes that these events really occurred. Thus Archbishop Usher's religious claim that God created the universe 6000 years ago entails the empirical claim that the universe is 6000 years old. The religious claim that God led the

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14. Mikael Stenmark, 'The End of the Theism-Atheism Debate? A Response to Vincent Brümmer,' *Religious Studies* 34 (1998), 278.

people of Israel out of Egyptian bondage to a Promised Land entails the empirical claim that the Israelites migrated from Egypt to Palestine. The religious claim that Jesus triumphed over death by rising from the grave entails the empirical claim that a dead person was in some way resuscitated. The acceptability of such empirical claims does not depend on religious faith but on empirical tests. If any of these should prove to be mistaken, believers will have to reinterpret their religious beliefs in such a way that they no longer entail such mistaken empirical claims. If such reinterpretation should prove to be impossible, the religious claims in question will lose their credibility. Thus Usher's claim about the age of the universe has been effectively falsified by the findings of geology and palaeontology and most believers today have come to interpret their belief in divine creation in ways that are consistent with scientific findings about the age of the universe. Because of the empirical unlikelihood of the resuscitation of a dead person, many believers tend to also reinterpret the meaning of the resurrection of Jesus in ways that are empirically more plausible. Since the biblical record of the resurrection is by no means clear regarding the precise factual details of the resurrection event (the resurrected Jesus was in many ways a very different kind of being from the Jesus who was crucified), such a reinterpretation is not without some plausibility. However, a resurrection in some form or other, although unlikely, is not logically impossible. Thus Ninian Smart suggest that we 'imagine Hume being present at someone's rising from the dead. What does he say to himself? "Impossible, gentlemen, impossible. This is contrary to all my previous experience of mortality, and to the testimony of countless human beings. It would be a lesser miracle that my eyes deceive me than that this resurrection should have occurred." Well, perhaps of course his eyes do deceive him. Let him test them. Let him investigate minutely the resurrected body. Can he still doubt?'<sup>15</sup> If a sceptic like Hume is confronted with a situation like this, he might be moved to accept the empirical claim about the resurrection. However, this does not mean that he also has to accept the religious claim about a miraculous divine action. He could also look on the event as an extraordinary and inexplicable anomaly and leave it at that. Here too the empirical claim neither presupposes nor entails any religious belief. It follows that religious truth claims cannot simply be derived from empirical experience as natural theology supposes. This will only be possible if such empirical experience has first been understood in terms of faith. But then the 'proofs' provided by natural theology are circular since the experience on which they are based presuppose the faith which it tries to prove.

Unlike empirical claims, claims about religious experience do presuppose religious belief. Religious believers understand their lives and their experience of the world in terms of the conceptual models and metaphors derived from the religious tradition in which they stand.<sup>16</sup> As we pointed out above, believers experience their own lives as meaningful because in many ways these are for them lived in fellowship with God, and the world as meaningful because of the many ways in which they believe God to be involved in what happens in the world.

15. Ninian Smart, *Philosophers and Religious Truth* (London 1964), 34.

16. For a detailed discussion of this use of religious models and metaphors, see Ch. 1 of Vincent Brümmer, *The Model of Love* (Cambridge 1993).

Some events are experiences as gracious acts of God whereas others are contrary to God's will and to be opposed by us. It is clear that believers can only thus experience the world in terms of the providential agency of God in the light of their own anterior beliefs about the will of God. In fact it is only with the 'eyes of faith' that they can experience events as expressions of divine grace in their lives and in the world, rather than as mere inexplicable but fortunate anomalies or coincidences. Religious experience is therefore religiously interpreted experience and as such it is not open to empirical verification. For this reason religious experience cannot provide the universally shared grounds which natural theology requires for its attempt to prove the truth of religious beliefs. As we have argued above such 'proofs' will always be circular.<sup>17</sup> This does not mean that such religious interpretations are immune to criticism. Such criticism is however internal to the religious beliefs in terms of which the interpretation takes place. Within the religious tradition it remains a point of discussion whether the interpretation is valid or not. Thus for example it always remains an open question whether it is consistent with the faith to understand an event as one in which God realises his purposes.

Metaphysical claims about the existence and nature of God are obviously not open to empirical verification since God is not an empirically observable object. Since God 'lives in an unapproachable light,' no one has ever seen or can ever see him (I Timothy 6:16, John 1:18). Neither can such claims be derived from empirical experience as natural theology supposes. For the same reason such claims about God are also not claims about religious experience in the above sense. In the light of faith we could experience the world as an expression of the grace of God or as the context within which we are called to do God's will, but not as an experience of God as such. In this respect too he 'lives in an unapproachable light.' Nevertheless such claims about God can be derived from religious experience of our lives and the world, in the sense that they are the constitutive presuppositions of such experience and of the way of life entailed by it.<sup>18</sup> I logically cannot claim to live my life in fellowship with God without presupposing that God really exists and is the kind of being with whom such fellowship is possible. Also I logically cannot experience the world as an expression of God's grace and as the context in which I am called to do God's will, without presupposing that God exists<sup>19</sup> and is in some way active as an agent in the world<sup>20</sup>. Although such claims

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17. On this view on religious experience and the circularity of attempts to prove the truth of religious beliefs by deriving them from religious experience, see Vincent Brümmer, 'Science, Religion and the Agency of God,' in: André Cloots & Santiago Sia (eds.), *Framing a Vision of the World* (Leuven 1999).

18. For a more extended discussion of this view on the role of constitutive presuppositions, see Vincent Brümmer, 'Wittgenstein and the Irrationality of Rational Theology' and Vincent Brümmer, 'How Rational is Rational Theology?'

19. On the meaning of the concept of 'existence' applied to God, see Vincent Brümmer, 'Does God Really Exist?,' in: T. Koistinen & T. Lehtonen (eds.), *Philosophical Studies in Religion, Metaphysics and Ethics* (Helsinki 1997).

20. I have discussed the conceptual issues involved in such claims about divine agency in detail elsewhere. See Vincent Brümmer, *Speaking of a Personal God*, Ch. 5, and Vincent Brümmer, 'Science, Religion and the Agency of God.'



about the existence and agency of God are not empirical claims open to empirical verification or falsification, this does not mean that they are immune to criticism. Such criticism is however internal to the religious understanding and way of life which is constituted by these claims. Within a religious tradition it always remains a point of discussion whether our beliefs about God are indeed such as are constitutive for the way of life and understanding which is given in the faith.

Distinguishing and critically evaluating these various kinds of truth claims within a religious tradition, is clearly part of the philosophical theologian's 'ongoing project of supporting, elucidating, extending and connecting propositions of Christian doctrine by the standard philosophical means of analysis and argument.' However, such critical evaluation and rational justification always takes place within the context of the tradition of faith in terms of which believers make sense of their lives and experience. The critical question is always whether *this* religious understanding of experience or *that* metaphysical claim about the existence and nature of God is coherent with the tradition of faith. These truth claims cannot be de-contextualised and evaluated as though they were simple empirical claims.

At this point we might have the uncomfortable feeling that in the end this kind of philosophical theology fails to avoid the fideistic implications of revealed theology. After all, if the truth claims of religion can only be critically evaluated and justified *within* the context of a tradition of faith, does this not withdraw theology into the intellectual ghetto of revealed theology? Can this suspicion of fideism be removed?

#### **4 Philosophical Theology and Fideism**

Although the truth claims of religion can only be justified within the context of a tradition of faith, this would only entail a form of fideism if the tradition of faith as such were somehow immunised from criticism, doubt and rejection. That would only be the case if a tradition of faith were an immutable and indubitable system of ideas, and if furthermore it were somehow isolated from and thus unaffected by all other aspects of human life and thought in a way that would immunise it from outside influences. This would however be a serious misunderstanding of the nature of religious traditions.

All language games, including the language game of religion, are subject to historical and cultural change. Changes in the factual circumstances of our lives and in the problems and demands with which life confronts us, give rise to changes in our culture and thus also in the forms of thought which we find adequate, the language games in which these forms of thought find expression and in the concomitant beliefs which we hold to be true. The more we become aware of the cultural difference between different times and places, the more we realise the untenability of the platonic view that human thought is essentially timeless and immutable. Because of changes in the demands of life, our forms of thought can never remain adequate for all time. In this sense we can understand Wittgenstein's claim that the multiplicity of language games 'is not something fixed, given once for all; but new types of language, new language games, as we may say, come into

existence, and others become obsolete and forgotten.<sup>21</sup> Elsewhere Wittgenstein illustrates this point as follows: 'Earlier physicists are said to have found suddenly that they had too little mathematical understanding to cope with physics; and in almost the same way young people today can be said to be in a situation where ordinary common sense no longer suffices to meet the strange demands life makes. Everything has become so intricate that mastering it would require an exceptional intellect. Because skill at playing the game is no longer enough; the question that keeps coming up is: can this game be played at all now and what would be the right game to play?'<sup>22</sup> In this sense Wittgenstein clearly admits that language games and the forms of life in which they are embedded, are not immutable nor are they isolated from other aspects of our life and thought. For this reason language games are not immune from criticism. They can be contested in the light of the changing demands of life.

Clearly this also applies to the language game of religion which is always embedded in an ongoing religious tradition. Such a tradition is not an immutable and isolated system of religious ideas. It is rather an historical process of transmission with a *Wirkungsgeschichte* and as such characterised by pluralism and change. Wilfred Cantwell Smith shows how this process has a 'cumulative character.'<sup>23</sup> In a process of socialisation religious believers receive from the past a religious heritage in the form of rites and practises, beliefs and norms, ideas and ideals, group pressures and family influences, vocabulary, metaphors and conceptual models, social institutions, etc. This heritage includes the totality of conceptual forms in which their predecessors expressed in thought and action the faith that they in turn had received from their predecessors and in terms of which they interpreted their own lives and experience meaningfully. The heritage which they handed down to their successors was however not identical with what they had received. Changes in the circumstances and demands of life require changes and shifts in the way they understand their faith. Other aspects of the heritage of faith become relevant and necessary for believers to make sense of their lives and experience, and to do this adequately, they may also come to interpret these aspects of the heritage in ways which differ from their predecessors. By appropriating the heritage of faith and by expressing it again in their own time and circumstances, believers reconceptualise the heritage by adding their own conceptual form to it. In this way a religious tradition is a cumulative process of interaction between the heritage from the past and the personal faith of believers who make the heritage their own. Obviously, the heritage of faith does not include the faith of later generations. This is added to the heritage of faith in the cumulative process of the tradition. The personal faith of believers is conditioned by the heritage but not completely determined by it. The personal faith of every believer adds his or her own authentic reconceptualisation to the heritage.

It is clear that every tradition of faith, if it is to remain alive, must have the capacity for reconceptualising its heritage in ways that are logically coherent, rele-

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21. *Philosophical Investigations*, I.23.

22. Wittgenstein, *Culture and Value* (Oxford 1980), 27. In the *Philosophical Investigations* I.23 Wittgenstein also compares changes in language games to changes in mathematics.

23. Wilfred Cantwell Smith, *The Meaning and End of Religion*, Ch. 6.

vant and adequate to the changing circumstances and demands of life, intelligible to the community of believers, and credible in the light of the current state of knowledge.<sup>24</sup> If for some reason it should lose this capacity for renewal, it will become obsolete and forgotten. In the words of Erich Fried, those who want the world to stay as it is, do not want it to stay.<sup>25</sup> In this way the ancient fertility cults in the Mediterranean basin, were so strongly embedded in an agrarian way of life, that they could not survive the rise of trade, industry and the urbanisation of society. They proved quite inadequate as means of making sense of these changed circumstances in the lives of people.<sup>26</sup> On the other hand, those world religions that have remained relevant throughout the ages in spite of great changes in the culture and circumstances in the lives of their adherents, could only remain so to the extent that they had the capacity for change and reconceptualisation.

This has profound implications for the way in which philosophical theology tries to analyse the heritage of faith. Changes in the demands of life bring about changes in the aspects of the heritage which are relevant and necessary in order to make sense of life and cope meaningfully with our experience of the world. At different times and in different cultural situations, philosophical theology should therefore develop different conceptual models in order to highlight those aspects of the faith which are relevant to the cultural and historical situation and to filter out those aspects which are not relevant to the current demands of life. Sallie McFague provides a good example to illustrate this point: 'In an era when evil powers were understood to be palpable principalities in contest with God for control of human beings and the cosmos, the metaphor of Christ as the victorious king and lord, crushing the evil spirits and thereby freeing the world from their control, was indeed a powerful one. In our situation, however, to envision evil as separate from human beings rather than as the outcome of human decisions and actions, and to see the solution of evil as totally a divine responsibility, would be not only irrelevant to our time and its needs but harmful to them, for that would run counter to one of the central insights of the new sensibility: the need for human responsibility in a nuclear age. In other words, in order to do theology, one must in each epoch do it differently. To refuse this task is to settle for a theology appropriate to some other time than one's own.'<sup>27</sup>

It is now clear that the philosophical theologian's 'ongoing project of supporting, elucidating, extending and connecting propositions of Christian doctrine by the standard philosophical means of analysis and argument' cannot be merely descriptive, but must be both critical and innovative as well. It should not merely describe the conceptual grammar of Christian doctrine, but should also develop innovative proposals that are coherent, credible, intelligible, relevant and adequate to enable believers to cope with integrity with the changing demands of

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24. On the need for such reconceptualisation, see Vincent Brümmer, 'The Identity of the Christian Tradition,' in: Marcel Sarot & Gijsbert van den Brink (eds.), *Identity and Change in the Christian Tradition* (Frankfurt a/M 1999).

25. Quoted by Walter Goddijn in: *NRC-Handelsblad* of August 1st 1994.

26. For this example see H.M. Kuitert, *Wat heet geloven?* (Baarn 1977), 144–145.

27. Sallie McFague, *Models of God* (London 1987), 29–30.

life.<sup>28</sup> In this way philosophical theology has an essential task to fulfil in service of the community of believers.

The fact that philosophical theology serves the community of believers in this way does not entail a retreat into an intellectual ghetto, however. Coherence, credibility, intelligibility, relevance and adequacy are after all *external* criteria that apply to every religion and also to secular views of life that function for many as alternatives for religious belief.<sup>29</sup> They provide a basic intellectual meeting-point common to believers and non-believers in the light of which the philosophical theologian seeks to justify the religious heritage and the beliefs entailed by it. It is clear that religious believers cannot ignore the criticism from outsiders that their faith fails to fulfil these requirements. Nor can they ignore the challenge from outsiders to show that their heritage can be conceptualised in ways that do. In this sense philosophical theologians cannot rest content with merely analysing and describing the beliefs entailed within the context of a religious heritage. They are also bound to demonstrate that this heritage and the beliefs it entails are theoretically justified since they fulfil the common criteria of rationality. Furthermore this justification should not only be directed at fellow believers, but also at outsiders who do not share the same heritage of faith. Of course such a justification does not amount to a knock down proof which would force the outsiders to accept to the heritage of faith. Although coherence, credibility, intelligibility, relevance and adequacy are necessary conditions for accepting the heritage of faith, they are not sufficient. At the end of the day the decision to ascribe to the heritage of faith is not merely intellectual but also existential. As we have argued above, everyone must personally come to recognise that he or she can appropriate the heritage of faith with integrity. No amount of intellectual argument can *force* this recognition on anybody.<sup>30</sup>

Although the general limits of rationality also apply to this dialogue with outsiders, this dialogue is nevertheless an essential part of the project of philosophical theology. We have argued, however, that this dialogue should not be construed as one about the truth of de-contextualised religious propositions as is the case in natural theology. On the contrary, it is primarily a dialogue about the theoretical legitimacy of a view of life as such and only in a derived sense about the truth of its constitutive presuppositions. Thus the theoretical legitimacy of truth claims about the existence of God can only be meaningfully discussed within the context of the religious view of life with which one can identify with integrity. Atheists who reject the claim that theistic faith is coherent, credible, intelligible, relevant or adequate for coping with the demands of life, feel no need for the presupposition

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28. Elsewhere I have defended the innovative task of philosophical theology and the criteria that are relevant for it in more detail than is possible here. See 'The Identity of the Christian Tradition,' Ch. 1 and the epilogue of *Speaking of a Personal God*, Ch. 1 of *The Model of Love* and 'Philosophy, Theology and the Reading of Texts,' *Religious Studies* 27 (1991), 451–462.

29. On the intersubjectivity of these criteria, see Vincent Brümmer, 'The Intersubjectivity of Criteria in Theology,' in: Marco M. Olivetti (ed.), *Intersubjectivité et théologie philosophique* (Padua 2001).

30. On the limits of rational argument in this regard, see Vincent Brümmer, *Theology and Philosophical Inquiry*, London 1981, 136–143, and Vincent Brümmer, *Speaking of a Personal God*, 20–27.

## On Three Ways to Justify Religious Beliefs

that God exists which is constitutive for this faith. It is up to them, therefore, to reflect on the form of life they could authentically adopt, and on the presuppositions constitutive of it. Christian theists, however, hold that the Christian faith can be coherently, credibly and intelligibly conceptualised in a form that is relevant and adequate for making sense of the demands with which life confronts them. If for this reason they can authentically make this form of life their own, then it is for them absurd to deny the truth of its constitutive presupposition, namely that the God in whose sight they live and move and have their being, exists in reality.