

Three Types of Critical Thinking About Religion: A Response to William Reinsmith

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In "Religious Life and Critical Thought: Do They Need Each Other?" (*Inquiry* Vol. XIV, No. 4), William Reinsmith attempts to show that religion and critical thinking are not mutually exclusive. He argues that activities such as meditation require "observation, presence or mindfulness, and healthy doubt," three components which should be taken together as a form of critical thinking. In this article, I intend to argue that such a claim, although true to some extent, is too limited and does a disservice to both religion and critical thinking.

It seems as if Reinsmith's goal is to challenge existing prejudices. He argues that a non-religious person's conversion or movement towards a more religious lifestyle is often regarded by scientists with either "silence or embarrassment." Conversely, he claims that religious believers regard the non-religious as having an "overly skeptical bias that closes them off from having a religious experience." He seems to suggest, however, that both groups are wrong in their picture of the other and that common ground can be found if it can be shown that critical thinking is present at even the most mystical levels of religious belief. Reinsmith concludes that meditation, which has often been viewed as being non-critical in nature, is itself critical and that scientists and religious-believers should reexamine their relationship.

Reinsmith offers two competing operating definitions of religion. The first, "a particular individual's set of beliefs regarding some kind of ultimate principle or transcendental reality (more often than not received through denominational affiliation)," takes a back seat to the second (according to Reinsmith) "more profound" definition: "the set of inner experiences or encounters which define one's connection or involvement with the transcendent." He argues that the first is concerned simply with allegiance and is both extrinsic and conventional, whereas the second involves "a commitment of one's total being, often resulting in a transformation of consciousness with profound effects on one's entire life."

This extrinsic/intrinsic dichotomy is a false one. A set of beliefs regarding some kind of ultimate principle, and an affiliation with a community which shares those beliefs, has, at its core, an acknowledgment of religious commitment which often (but not always) involves the individual's total being. The commitment to eat a certain diet or educate children in a certain way is an outgrowth of a consciousness without which certain rituals and actions would be meaningless. Furthermore, denominational affiliation, which appears to delegitimize religious belief for Reinsmith, supplies precisely what his second definition cannot account for: an individual's attachment to *other people's* religious commitments and experience. Sacred books, stories and rituals supply a history of *shared* religious experiences which help define, not only one particular religious experience which may have far reaching implications, but also a tradition of experiences, interpretations and commitments which often make the most mundane activity (such as lighting a candle) a profoundly religious experience.

The second definition offered by Reinsmith — the one which he clearly prefers — paints religion as the decision of an individual which is the outgrowth of a particular event (or set of specific events) in the life of that individual. It focuses purely on raw religious experience and implies a form of radical choice. Although individual decisions and experiences can play large roles in religious orientation, it is only one factor in many. His preferred definition neither accounts for, nor accepts as legitimate, the influence that the community has over that individual. What culture and religion our family, friends and fellow citizens are plays an extremely important role in helping to decide which religions are deemed legitimate options or if an individual has the option to *choose* a religion at all. If a religious experience was so foreign that it did not offer any connection to those truths which are considered to be defensible, the revelation would be dismissed or ignored.

In addressing the problem of critical thinking and religion by focusing on meditation and mysticism, and by dismissing without comment general criticisms of organized religion, Reinsmith is supporting rather than dissolving prejudices against religious belief. By identifying religion solely as personal transcendental experiences, he is contributing to an extremely oversimplified understanding of what can constitute the religious framework. Religious belief is not simply a personal experience which results from a particular transformation. Additionally, religion is not an irrational commitment to a set of beliefs divorced from context, tradition, or a larger framework. More often than not, religions are complex systems which either permit or disallow the radical change which might result from the individual's transformation as described by Reinsmith.

Certainly, Reinsmith's definitions of religion only set the stage for his more important discussion regarding the role of critical thinking in meditation. His account, however, is doomed from the start. By making the distinction between "religious experience" and "practice and belief," he is severing the

raw category of experience from the very tools which allow the individual to evaluate it critically. A successful account of religious critical thought must account for both the objects which are to be evaluated critically and the system which permits the evaluation to be "critical" (as opposed to arbitrary) in the first place.¹ In what follows, I will suggest that the intimate relationship between critical thinking and religion can be identified as existing on three different levels which I will call: Critical Thinking Within Religions, Critical Thinking Between Religions, and Critical Thinking Concerning Religions. The purpose of describing such a system is to challenge the prejudices which I believe Reinsmith fails to conquer. In offering this three-tier structure, I am attempting to illustrate how complex and important the relationship between critical thinking and religious thought is and to show that we can use religion as a tool to improve our critical thinking skills as opposed to treating it as a force counter to them.

In the account that follows, I use the term "religion" rather loosely. At times it is meant to refer to a specific religious tradition whereas at other times it may denote a particular individual's personal beliefs independent of how consistent those beliefs are or how they may relate to any institutionalized conception of what those beliefs should be. By preserving a certain sense of ambiguity I hope to highlight the flexibility of the three categories and to permit different interpretations which are compatible with as many differing conceptions of religion as possible.

Critical Thinking Within Religions

I have stated above that religions need to be understood as consisting of a complex system or framework. That more often than not, religions offer its members an identifiable tradition of rituals and beliefs, as well as the opportunity to *share* the religious experience of others. It is in regard to disputes about how this is to be understood, how stories and rituals are to be interpreted, and how new events are to be included within the religious framework that the category of Critical Thinking Within Religions concerns itself with.

It is not the case, as is often thought, that a religion produces a single sacred text which unbendingly directs its followers. A follower does not act in a specific way or adhere to a certain belief simply because, for example, "the Bible says so." Even the strictest of fundamentalists refer to other sources (texts or teachers) in order to determine what the meaning of any one particular selection from of the Bible might be. Religion is, more often than not, an outgrowth of, not only a sacred text, but also a long-lasting conversation and debate regarding the meaning and interpretation of that text.

For example, the Torah, the foundational text in Judaism, is, in the most strict interpretation, the first five books of the Old Testament: Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy. However, the Torah has evolved and is now considered to be much more. The term *Torah* is derivative

from the Hebrew noun "to guide" or "to teach" and has come to stand for "guidance," "teaching" or even "doctrine."²

Obviously the teaching did not cease with Moses or the books ascribed to him. The prophets carried it on, and so did the poets and sages who composed Psalms, Proverbs, and Job... [The Torah is also constituted by] the writings of the classical rabbinic age.... Commentators on the Bible and rabbinic literature, the moralists and philosophers of all times down to our own — they have unfolded the Teaching still further...

Torah in sum is all the vastness and variety of the Jewish Tradition.³

To understand the Torah as such is to understand that there exists differing opinions in Judaism as to what the teachings mean. There is disagreement, not only between different strands of Judaism (i.e. Hasidic, Reform, Conservative) but between the commentators from within these strands. To think critically in the Jewish tradition is to take into account the texts and commentaries on the texts, and to evaluate various interpretations using tools provided by the tradition. It is to take into account the differing opinions of the previous commentators and to add to them. It is to investigate how the Torah is to be understood in the modern world, to reexamine Jewish teachings and, while still respecting the tradition which has developed, to ask which doctrines can be adjusted for modern times and which cannot.

Such an approach to religion is not limited to Judaism, of course. Miriam Levering, for example, describes an "anti-authoritarian" element in Buddhism:

The tradition relates, in the *Mahāparinibbāna Sutta*, that when the Buddha was asked on his deathbed who should be his successor as supreme teacher, he told his disciples to take the *Dharma* (teaching) as their refuge and their lamp. The tradition also relates shortly after the Buddha's death five hundred realized disciples (*arhats*) met to recite the Buddha's teachings in order to agree on a reliable and authoritative body of teachings...

After the teachings of the Buddha were handed down... teachings were authenticated by the fact that one could demonstrate that the teachings were credible, that they had been heard by a specific hearer... The emphasis on the importance of the Buddha's words as teaching, and of clarifications and extensions of them by later disciples, we might call the kataphatic or informative reception of the word as authoritative teaching.⁴

Once again, one sees additions to a source text by a community of experts and, in Levering's own words, "an emphasis on... *clarifications and extensions...* by later disciples [italics mine]." Religious traditions are not catalysts for blind devotion. Although there may be room for blind faith and acceptance, critical thinking is required for any interpretive or other religious scholarly activity. Critical Thinking Within Religions is therefore to be understood as the examination and evaluation of a tradition, as well as the decision

making process within that tradition, using the tools, perspective and framework provided by that tradition. It is to evaluate, for example, Judaism and claims within Judaism from a Jewish perspective, thereby inherently acknowledging the worth (but not necessarily the truth) of the Jewish thinkers who contributed to that thought. The method of Critical Thinking Within Religions is very similar to the way one thinks critically in American constitutional law. One makes legal decisions based upon previous court cases and legal opinions which seek to interpret the meaning and the consequences of the Constitution of the United States.

Critical Thinking Between Religions

Critical Thinking Between Religions is a type of critical thinking which may be unique to pluralistic societies. It is the process by which one compares and makes judgments regarding the truths and claims of different religions.

It is both comparative in the scholarly sense—one may use norms which are outside a particular tradition to evaluate certain claims and rituals—and competitive in a social and political sense — one may be forced to choose which religion, sect or congregation to show allegiance to. Critical Thinking Between Religions is the category which includes the social-secular dialogue.

Elsewhere, I have described one example of a system in which religions compete within a liberal society for followers.⁵ In short, according to this system, religions vie for members by having a continuing and ever increasing presence in society. Religions are portrayed as adjusting their doctrines and activities so as to be appealing to members of that society. The more fanatical they are, this perspective holds, the less appealing they will be and the more appealing they are, the more members they acquire. According to this viewpoint, the more members a religion has, the healthier, more better off and more powerful within a society it is; power and membership are the ultimate goals. To a certain extent this picture of competing religions is accurate but to a certain extent it is also a caricature. On the one hand, it is a caricature because it makes every religion's primary concern a quest for members and power and not a commitment to religious truth. It suggests that religions can change at will and seemingly ignores the importance of the source texts and the beliefs which stem from them. Ultimately, this perspective equates religious conviction with fanaticism.

On the other hand, religions do evolve in just this way. If a society holds certain truths which prevent its members from becoming (or remaining) members, the leadership may reexamine the religion's teachings to make it more compatible with those whom they court. Judaism, for example, has made a place for egalitarian services. In many synagogues where it was once forbidden, men and women pray together in the same group. In some of these synagogues, women read from the Torah and become Rabbis, both of which

were, at one time, unheard of. It may be argued that such changes have come about because the modern viewpoint has permitted interpreters to see truths that they were previously unable to see, but it might also be argued that such changes result from recruitment necessity; a religion that continues to lose members will wither away and die.

The acceptance, rejection and justification of such changes are categorized as Critical Thinking Within Religion: one must evaluate the motives for, as well as the appropriateness of, these changes using the tools of the tradition in order to determine if the religion is capable of incorporating specific doctrinal changes and still be considered authentic under the (possibly revised) standards of that tradition. However, ultimate acceptance or rejection of a religion by an individual or community may be based upon truths which are not primarily the result of religious education and is therefore an example of Critical Thinking Between Religions. For example, someone educated in a religion which rejects the ordination of women or homosexuals may ultimately reject allegiance to that religion because their culture has taught them that denying the participation of individuals based on gender and sexual orientation is unjust and religions should always pursue, maintain and encourage justice.

Critical Thinking Between Religions may also involve the selection of which practices to adopt and which to reject. Perhaps a member of a religion chooses not to eat a prescribed diet, or perhaps another chooses not to observe certain holidays. Certain considerations for evaluating which rules are to be adhered to and which are to be rejected may also stem from outside the particular religious tradition.

At this point, it is important to note that for some people whose religious convictions are very strong, the category Critical Thinking Between Traditions is unacceptable. For many believers, religious teaching covers all aspects of life and for a follower to consider non-religious sources is for that follower to deny the truth that the religion provides answers for every aspect of life. For others, however, Critical Thinking Between Religions is to be characterized as the process of examining, evaluating and comparing one's own beliefs with whatever religious options one is understood to have, as well as the ability to choose to renew or reject allegiances to religions based upon what one believes to be either the truth or an adequate substitute thereof.

Critical Thinking Concerning Religions

Critical Thinking Concerning Religions is concerned with what may be termed metaphysical truth. Whereas Critical Thinking Between Religions has a strong social and political element, and Critical Thinking Within Religions has a strong pedagogical or historical element, Critical Thinking Concerning Religions focuses on the immediacy of the religious experience and the authenticity of the relationship between investigator and the religion being

investigated. It is that category within which one analyzes the authenticity of things which might not be explainable in anything but a religious context but, nevertheless, are not interpretation or ritual. It is that category which, I believe, Reinsmith must have had in mind when he addressed the problem of critical thinking and meditation.

A problem which develops in discussing the relationship between mysticism and critical thinking, given the understanding of religion as a framework or structure, is that the nature of mystical experiences are such that they are non-contextual. If one were to experience a vision or revelation, one would have no concrete way of critically verifying whether this was a genuine divine experience or something which only appeared to be; the experience is distinct from the non-mystical world. Alasdair MacIntyre, in an essay titled "Visions" writes:

Let us consider, for instance, visions of the Blessed Virgin Mary such as that which William James cites in the case of M. Alphonse Ratisbonne...How did he know it was the Virgin? Presumably only because she appeared in a Roman Catholic church and she looked like religious paintings he had seen?... No one has authentic evidence as to what she looked like. So to identify her from religious paintings is to have no warrant that she who appeared to M. Ratisbonne is she who lived in Galilee as the mother of Jesus... Is this the Blessed Virgin? Does she speak Aramaic? Appearances of the Blessed Virgin would be remarkably impressive if she did, but, to the best of my knowledge, in the classic apparitions of modern Mariolatry the messages delivered are always in the tongue of the recipient. Does the Blessed Virgin remember Galilee? What would be the appropriate criteria for testing her memory?⁶

I am not in a position to offer a litmus test for verifying the authenticity of visions. What I suggest, however, is that the beginning of the answer must be found in the traditions which give rise to the images that the vision represent.⁷ How did previous visions appear to the prophets? Is the information imparted during the vision understandable given the history of the religion it purports to represent?⁸ Such criteria, however, are themselves dependent on the authenticity of the claim that prophets did, in fact, exist; that there is a divine presence accurately portrayed within the religious tradition in the first place.

Much of this evidence for the divine roots of religion rests in the origin of the religious texts. Many religions claim that their text are handed down from God. More orthodox Jews believe "the whole Torah to be God-revealed, therefore unimpeachably true and good throughout."⁹ Islam teaches us that "Mohammed was alone in meditation when an angelic-being commanded him to 'recite' in the name of God. When Mohammed failed to respond, the angel seized him by the throat and shook him as he repeated the command."¹⁰ The Buddhist tradition tells us that before the prince Siddhartha was transformed into the Buddha he was "assailed by Mara, the Evil One, who, with his three

daughters, sought by means of various stratagems to deflect the Buddha-to-be from his purpose."¹¹

How is one to treat these stories? Are they simply folk-tales which we in the modern world can no longer believe? Or, is it that our modern scientific view is, as Reinsmith's religious believer claims, simply too skeptical to be able to accept a true religious experience?

To choose either of those options is to answer the question before the investigation begins. One must understand what it means in a tradition for a text to be sacred before one can accept or reject the concept of sacredness. How has an entire tradition interpreted these stories? Are they literal in the most obvious sense or are they literal in a more subtle sense? Barbara A. Holdrege, in "Bride of Israel: The Ontological Status of Scripture in the Rabbinic and Kabbalistic Traditions" offers a detail account of what it means for the Torah to be of divine origin. By examining the traditional account of Torah as bride, she defends the conception that one can take the image of the Torah as a living entity literally:

The Jewish conception of Torah as a living aspect of God challenges us to move beyond a textual definition of scripture as 'sacred writings' or 'holy writ' to a broader definition that can take account for the ontological dimension of scripture as a living, immediate reality in people's lives.... The Torah only reveals herself to those who love her. If one approaches the Torah as one does any ordinary book, without proper reverence and respect, then divine wisdom will remain hidden like the damsel in the palace and will not show her face. On the other hand, if one loves the Torah with all his heart and with all his soul and ever watches at her door, she will gradually reveal herself more and more until finally she beckons him to come into her innermost chambers where the eternal light of wisdom ever shines.¹¹

Critical Thinking Concerning Religion is characterized by the investigation and evaluation of certain religious truths given the understanding of what these religious truths mean within the religion while simultaneously giving acknowledgment to how these truths are to be interpreted in their most immediate sense independent of the religious framework. It is to challenge and evaluate fundamental assumptions by doubting things which might otherwise be taken as true and to accept the possibility of truth where truth has generally not been accepted. Critical Thinking Concerning Religions respects the phenomenological insights which may come from revelation or mystical experiences but also recognizes that the starting point for evaluating these insights may already be found within a religious tradition.

It is now necessary to make some remarks regarding the nature of the relationship between the three categories of critical thinking. First, they are non-hierarchical. One is not necessarily "above," more abstract, or more profound than the others. They are each appropriate given a certain context and often, which is appropriate in which context is not entirely clear. Second,

the three types of critical thinking may overlap. To compare religions truly one must understand them from within and to understand truly the development of the religion one must be aware of certain non-religious influences and the interaction of different religions. To fail to acknowledge this is to fall into the mistake of separating the intrinsic and extrinsic in the way that Reinsmith does when he attempts to define religion. Visions, for example, are no more or less intrinsic than learned proverbs. Both may be regarded as sacred truths and both may be the focal point of the relationship between a follower and the divine. Furthermore, the understanding of what the proverb or vision might mean is built upon a foundation which may itself be learned. The distinction between extrinsic and intrinsic disappears when one realizes the interconnectiveness of religious experience and religious education.

Critical thinking about religions uses all of the tools traditionally associated with critically thinking; objectivity, self-correction and consistency are only three of them. Within each category listed above, however, what constitutes reasonable evidence may change. Whereas religious scriptures may hold more weight when one thinks critically within a religion, "scientific" truths may hold more weight when one thinks critically between religions. What is often viewed as closed-mindedness or superstition may simply be the use of evidence in an inappropriate context. Furthermore, the skills which one develops in thinking critically within one category are transferable to the others. Again, premises, standards of relevance and criteria for evidence may differ from category to category, but the skill of engaging in inquiry and argumentation does not.

I have attempted to describe three different categories of critical thinking in order to show that the relationship between critical thinking and religion is neither simplistic nor unsophisticated. The traditional view which Reinsmith seeks to challenge, that the religious life requires blind faith, needs to be defeated. Unfortunately, solutions such as Reinsmith's do not do the relationship justice since they focus only on the most non-systematic aspects of religion; religion is constituted by much more.

It is indicative of the nature of the distinction between religious and non-religious life that categories which are used to highlight their relationship become fuzzy. All three categories described above contain elements of each other, and just as someone might argue that there is no distinction between the religious and the non-religious life, someone might argue that the categories which I have identified for the sake of clarity are really one unified category which can not be separated.

The essential lesson which I hope to impart is that at the root of the relationship between critical thinking and religion is a sense of respect, both for the complexity of religion and for the complexity of critical thinking. It is my claim that however one chooses to identify the essential elements of critical thinking, critical thinking is essential to all religious pursuits. However

one chooses to see religion, it is more than just the institutional and empty demand for passive and blind faith. I am indebted to William Reinsmith for helping me see that.

Endnotes

- ¹ This is not meant to imply that critical and arbitrary are the only two types of thought. It is only meant to highlight that critical thinking requires a framework which places a non-arbitrary structure upon the thinker. This is also true of other types of thought such as creative or caring (which may themselves include or be included in critical thought); they all require a framework or structure.
- ² Milton Steinberg, *Basic Judaism*. (Harcourt, Brace & World, Inc: New York, 1947), 19-21.
- ³ *Ibid.*, 12.
- ⁴ Miriam Levering, "Scripture and Its Reception: A Buddhist Case." *Rethinking Scripture: Essays from a Comparative Perspective*. Edited by Miriam Levering (State University of New York Press: Albany, 1989), 60.
- ⁵ "Religion and Justice in Adam Smith." *Kontroversen in der Philosophie*, No. 9. (Spring 1995) dbv-Verlag für die Technische Universität Graz: Graz, Austria.
- ⁶ Alasdair MacIntyre, "Visions." *New Essays in Philosophical Theology*. Edited by Antony Flew and Alasdair MacIntyre, (William Clowes and Sons, Limited: London, 1961), 258-260.
- ⁷ I do not mean to ignore or discount faith or belief. However, faith and belief are both concepts derived from a tradition and must be understood given the context in which they have evolved.
- ⁸ These concerns put aside questions of insanity and other psychological concerns. The question at hand is: if one has a reason to believe that the vision could be authentic, how does one determine if it is so?
- ⁹ Milton Steinberg, *Basic Judaism*. (Harcourt, Brace & World, Inc: New York, 1947), 19-21.
- ¹⁰ Geoffrey Parrinder (Editor), *World Religions: From Ancient History to the Present*. (The Hamlin Publishing Group Limited: England, 1971), 466.
- ¹¹ Barbara A. Holdrege, "The Bride of Israel: The Ontological Status of Scripture in the Rabbinic and Kabbalistic Traditions." *Rethinking Scripture: Essays from a Comparative Perspective*. (State University of New York Press: Albany, 1989), 236-239. I would recommend this article as a clear example of what it means to work within a tradition to shed light upon a conception which does not seem to make sense from outside of the tradition.