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How rational is rational theology? A reply to Mikael Stenmark

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Abstract. In this response to Stenmark's critique of my views on rational theology, I concentrate on his distinction between the epistemic and the practical goals of religion and between descriptive and normative rational theology. With regard to the first distinction, I grant that truth claims play an essential role in religious belief and that it is indeed the task of philosophy of religion to decide on the meaning and rationality of such claims. I argue, however, that since such claims are internally related to the practical context of religious belief, their meaning and rationality cannot be determined apart from this context as is done in the kind of rational theology which Stenmark calls 'scientific'. With regard to the second distinction, I reject Stenmark's view that philosophy of religion has a descriptive task with reference to religion, and hence also his claim that I have put forward a false description of 'the religious language game'.

I am most grateful to Mikael Stenmark for his detailed critical analysis[1] of my views on rational theology, and for the opportunity to reply which the editor has so kindly granted me. This enables me to clear up a number of serious misunderstandings about my position and to discuss further some of the interesting issues raised by Stenmark. To keep my response within reasonable limits, I will concentrate on two points in Stenmark's paper: his distinction between descriptive and normative rational theology and his distinction between the epistemic and practical goals of religion. Let me start with the latter.

I
TRUTH AND PRACTICE IN RELIGION

In the fifth section of his paper Stenmark distinguishes the epistemic or 'truth-promoting' function of religion from its practical function in helping believers to 'find a way of getting through the barriers of suffering and death, guilt and meaninglessness. It makes sense of these experiences, diagnoses them, and helps the believers find a way through these existential constraints' (278). The debate between theists and atheists should deal with the adequacy or inadequacy of religious belief with regard to both these functions, since 'what is at stake in religious matters is not only whether some beliefs are true

[1] See *Religious Studies*, **34** (1998), 216–280.

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… but *how we actually should live our lives*. It … is also a matter of choosing or denying a way of living' (278). In other words, religious belief does not merely involve epistemic truth claims. It also involves practical claims about, on the one hand, the adequacy of the way in which believers understand or make sense of their lives and experience of the world and, on the other hand, the way of life in accordance with this understanding. Both these claims about religious belief need to be evaluated.

Much contemporary rational theology is inadequate, according to Stenmark, since it concentrates one-sidedly on evaluating the epistemic claims of religion while ignoring its practical claims. 'The relevant aim of religious belief is then taken to be merely epistemic, [and] 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)' (278). This, Stenmark admits, is hardly adequate as an account of the nature of religious belief. In the first two sections of his paper, Stenmark accuses me of falling into the opposite one-sidedness. According to him I reject 'the truth-question as such in the theism-atheism debate' (263) and think 'that we should no longer be concerned with the question of the truth of the belief that God exists and instead focus entirely on the coherence and adequacy of the religious form of life' (267). He suggests that I do not share the claim of philosophers of religion like Plantinga and Alston 'that it is rational to believe that it is *true* that God exists and also appropriate to ask whether it is in fact true' (263), nor the claim of someone like John Hick that 'truth very much matters' in religion (267). I must confess that I am rather surprised at this interpretation of my views. In fact, in the two papers of mine referred to by Stenmark,[2] I go to some lengths to argue for a critical realist interpretation of religious belief in which religious truth claims are not only important but also essential for the intelligibility of religious belief.[3]

My difficulty with Stenmark's distinction between the epistemic and the practical functions of religious belief is not that I reject the epistemic function as unimportant or irrelevant, but that I question the way in which he understands the relation between these two functions. He seems to interpret them as two quite distinct functions which could be evaluated separately from each other. According to him, the debate about the rationality of

[2] 'Has the theism–atheism debate a future?', *Theology*, **97** (1994), and 'Wittgenstein and the irrationality of rational theology' in James M. Byrne (ed.) *The Christian Understanding of God Today* (Dublin: The Columba Press, 1993). The former is a paper presented at a theological colloquium in March 1992 on the occasion of the 400th anniversary of the founding of Trinity College, Dublin. The rather provocative title was given to me by the organizers of the colloquium. This paper was submitted to *Theology* before it was decided to publish the colloquium proceedings. The latter paper is an extended version of the former and was produced for publication in the proceedings.

[3] See also ch. I of my *The Model of Love* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), and my paper on 'Does God really exist?' in Timo Koistinen & Tommi Lehtonen (eds.) *Philosophical Studies in Religion, Metaphysics and Ethics: Essays in Honour of Heikki Kirjavainen* (Helsinki: Luther-Agricola-Society, 1997).

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religious belief should not *only* deal with the one, but should *also* discuss the other. Stenmark bases his claim that I am one-sided in this regard, on my statement that the theism-atheism debate 'is only meaningful if it is construed not as a debate about the likely truth of a proposition, but as a dialogue about the coherence and adequacy of the form of life which we could adopt with integrity'. Unfortunately this rather selective quotation (263) omits the sentence which follows: 'The question about the existence of God can only arise within the context of this debate'. In other words, I do not question the necessity of discussing the rationality of the claim that God exists; I only deny that this discussion can be divorced from that about the rationality of the religious form of life and understanding within which the claim is made and from which context it derives both its meaning and its truth. Using Stenmark's terminology, we could say that the discussion about the epistemic function of religion is internally related to that about the practical function, since the latter provides the context within which the former should take place. These two issues are internally related in two ways: both the meaning and the truth of the claim that God exists is derived from the practical context of life and experience within which it is made. The rationality of the claim that God exists is therefore dependent both semantically and epistemically on the rationality of the theistic form of life. This needs some further elaboration.

Let me start with the semantic issue.[4] The epistemic debate about the existence of God is often confusing because it bypasses the prior semantic issue about the meaning of the claim. What is meant by 'really exists' and in what sense is this term being asserted or denied of God? Are the theist and the atheist in fact asserting and denying the same proposition? Thus, for example, 'Flew's challenge'[5] – what is the difference between a God whose existence is neither verifiable nor falsifiable empirically and no God at all? – implicitly assumes that this difference should be stated in terms of possible empirical observations. A debate in these terms assumes an empiricist ontology like that defended by John Stuart Mill in which something's 'existence is to us only another word for our conviction that we should perceive it on a certain supposition, namely, if we were in the needful circumstances of time and place, and endowed with the needful perfection of organs'.[6] Although this ontology is adequate to account for the epistemic claims made in the context of scientific inquiry, it is hardly adequate for the epistemic claims made within the context of the theistic understanding of life and the world. There can be no *empirical* difference between a God whose existence and agency are not objects of empirical observation and no God at all. On the

[4] Elsewhere I have discussed this issue much more extensively than is possible here. See my paper 'Does God really exist?'.

[5] Antony Flew 'Theology and falsification' in A. Flew and A. MacIntyre (eds.) *New Essays in Philosophical Theology* (London: S.C.M. Press, 1955), 96ff.

[6] J. S. Mill *A System of Logic* (London: Longmans, Green & Co, 1886), 395–396.

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basis of this empiricist ontology an atheist would be perfectly justified in rejecting the claim that God exists as an empty claim! But is this the claim made within the context of the theistic understanding of experience? In this context, I suggest, we need a broader ontology in which reality is not merely understood as the potential object of perception (*esse est percipi*) but as our context of action, not merely as the limits to what we can observe, but rather as the limits to what we can do. In these terms we can explain how in the context of faith there is a difference 'between the existence of a God who is beyond perception and no God at all', but that this is obviously not a difference in what we could observe 'if we were in the needful circumstances of time and place, and endowed with the needful perfection of organs'. It is rather a difference in what we can *do* and not in what we can *observe* empirically. It is a difference in our possibilities of action and not in our possibilities of empirical perception.[7] It is the difference between being able to live my life in fellowship with God and not being able to do so because he does not exist in reality. It is also a difference between being able to understand my experience of the world in terms of the agency of God and not being able to do so because there is no God in terms of whose agency my experience of the world can be said to make sense. In this way the *meaning* of the theistic claim that God exists derives from the practical context of life and experience in which it is made. It is therefore internally related to this context, and cannot be stated in terms of the narrower empiricist ontology applicable within the very different context of scientific inquiry.

So much for the *meaning* of the theistic claim about the existence of God. But what about its *truth*? On what grounds could theists make this claim? It is clear that if God's existence and agency are not objects of empirical observation, the theistic claim cannot be made on empirical grounds. It can only be made on the grounds of religious experience. But then religious experience is merely empirical experience interpreted in the light of faith.[8] It is only with the eyes of faith that we can see God's actions in the world. In this sense John Calvin claims that with regard to 'the knowledge of God, the knowledge of his paternal favour, which constitutes our salvation … the most ingenious are blinder than moles' (*Institutes* 2.2.18). Such 'intelligence of eternal things' can only be achieved 'when the Spirit, with a wondrous and special energy, forms the ear to hear and the mind to understand' (*Institutes* 2.2.20). It is only when by faith our ears are formed to hear and our minds to understand, that we can see an event as an act of God and not merely as a happy coincidence or an inexplicable anomaly. It is along these

[7] For an extended defence of this ontological distinction and its application to religious belief, see my paper on 'Does God really exist?' and chs. 17–19 of my *Theology and Philosophical Inquiry* (London: Macmillan, 1981).

[8] For a more extended defence of this view on religious experience than is possible here, see my paper on 'Science, religion and the agency of God' in André Cloots and Santiago Sia (eds.) *Framing a Vision of the World: Essays in Philosophy, Religion and Science* (Leuven: Leuven University Press, 1999).

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lines that I would want respond to Stenmark's request for a justification of my claim that all attempts by what he calls 'scientific natural theology/ atheology' to 'show that it is likely or unlikely that God exists by arguing from phenomena such as the existence of the universe, its conformity to order, or the existence of evil are circular' (266). Claims about the existence (or non-existence) of God can only be derived from our experience of such phenomena if these phenomena have first been interpreted in terms of the faith (or in terms of the rejection of the faith).[9] But then not only the meaning but also the truth of the claim that God exists is internally related to the context of theistic faith. Accepting the truth presupposes that we accept the theistic context of understanding and rejecting the truth presupposes that we reject this context.

In my two papers discussed by Stenmark, I argue that *within the context of the theistic form of life and understanding*, the claim that God exists is not only rational but also necessary. This is so because the existence of God is what Wittgenstein would call a 'tacit presupposition' which is constitutive for the theistic form of life and understanding. I logically cannot claim to live my life in fellowship with God without at the same time presupposing the existence of the God in whose fellowship I live, nor can I logically understand my experience of the world in terms of the agency of God without at the same time presupposing that there is a God in terms of whose agency my experience can be said to make sense. In this way Christians have traditionally claimed that for them the existence of God is not contingent but necessary. Thus J. N. Findlay is correct in pointing out that for believers partaking in the theistic form of life and understanding, God's 'non-existence must be wholly unthinkable in any circumstances. There must, in short, be no conceivable alternative to an existence properly called "divine": God must be wholly inescapable … whether in thought or reality'.[10] In this way such truth claims *in the context of religion* differ from truth claims in the context of science. The latter remain empirical hypotheses which are methodically subjected to doubt and conjecture regarding their probability or relative likelihood.[11]

This does not mean that religious doubt is impossible. However, such doubt concerns the coherence and adequacy of the theistic form of life and understanding as such and not merely the truth of its constitutive presuppositions apart from it. Doubt about such propositions is not based on contrary empirical evidence as in the case of empirical hypotheses in science,

[9] On interpreting our experience of evil, see ch. 6 of my *Speaking of a Personal God* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992).

[10] J. N. Findlay 'Can God's existence be disproved?' in A. Flew and A. MacIntyre (eds.) *New Essays in Philosophical Theology*, 52.

[11] Elsewhere I have discussed in detail the difference between the context of religion and that of science and tried to show why talk about the existence and agency of God makes sense within the former but not within the latter. See my paper on 'Science, religion and the agency of God'.

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but is internally related to doubt about the adequacy of the form of life and understanding as such in helping believers to 'find a way of getting through the barriers of suffering and death, guilt and meaninglessness' (Stenmark, 278). A character in one of Sartre's plays expresses this doubt as follows: 'I supplicated, I demanded a sign, I sent messages to Heaven. No reply. Heaven ignored my very name. Each minute I wondered what I could be in the eyes of God. Now I know the answer: nothing. God does not see me, God does not hear me, God does no know me. ... I am going to tell you a colossal joke: God does not exist'.[12] Here doubt about the existence of God (the 'colossal joke') is internally related to doubt about the adequacy of theistic faith as such in making sense of life and experience ('God does not see me, God does not hear me, God does not know me'). Thus theistic believers could sometimes be faced with changes in their lives and experience of the world which are so strange and disconcerting that they can find no coherent and credible way to conceptualize their faith which would be both relevant and adequate to make sense of these changes. If in these circumstances they come to doubt the practical tenability of their faith as such, they could also fail to see the need for accepting its constitutive presupposition about the reality of God.

In this sense I would argue that the theism–atheism debate should primarily deal with the coherence and adequacy of the theistic form of life and understanding as such and only in a secondary or derived sense with the truth of its constitutive presupposition about the existence of God. Atheists who reject the claim that theistic faith is coherent and credible or that it is relevant and adequate for coping with the demands of life, feel no need for the presupposition that God exists which is constitutive for this faith. For them it is 'a colossal joke'. It is up to them, however, to reflect on the form of life and understanding they could authentically adopt, and on the presuppositions which are constitutive of it. Christian theists, however, hold that the Christian faith can be coherently and credibly conceptualized in a form which is both 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 and understanding their own, then it is for them absurd to deny its constitutive presupposition, namely that the God in whose sight they live and move and have their being, exists in reality.

It seems to me that this contextual approach to the theism–atheism debate is quite compatible with the project which Stenmark calls 'religious epistemology', i.e. 'the attempt to understand and explain how belief formation and regulation is conducted *within religion* and to assess whether these belief formations and regulations are acceptable and successful ways of carrying out one's cognitive affairs *in this realm of human life*' (264, italics mine). Furthermore, it seems to me that this 'attempt to understand and explain'

[12] Jean-Paul Sartre *The Devil and the Good Lord* (New York: Knopf, 1960), act 3 scene 10.

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is perfectly in line with the Anselmian project of *fides quaerens intellectum*, faith seeking understanding.[13] If Stenmark wants to call this a form of 'rational theology', then it is one with which I am perfectly happy. Something quite different, however, is what John Clayton calls the 'enlightenment project',[14] which seeks not only to 'understand and explain' how and in what sense belief in the existence of God is required within the context of the theistic form of life and understanding, but also to 'prove' the truth or the relative likelihood of this belief in a foundationalist way by trying to derive it from grounds which are external to the context of faith and shared by all, whether or not they subscribe to the context of faith. This is what Stenmark calls 'scientific natural theology/atheology', i.e. 'the attempt to show by using broadly scientific methods of inference that it is likely or unlikely that God exists on the basis of information shared alike by all human beings whether they believe in God or not' (262). This is the kind of rational theology which I would call irrational since it tries to determine the truth or falsehood of the proposition that God exists apart from the context from which it derives its meaning and truth. Here Wittgenstein is correct in rejecting Father O'Hara's attempt to make religious belief into 'a question of science': 'I would definitely call O'Hara unreasonable. I would say, if this is religious belief, then it is all superstition'.[15]

II

DESCRIPTIVE AND NORMATIVE RATIONAL THEOLOGY

Although I can to a large extent go along with the kind of 'rational theology' or 'religious epistemology' which Stenmark defends, I have some difficulty with his suggestion that such 'rational theology has both a descriptive and a normative task. The *descriptive* … is to explicate the epistemological norms of actual religious practices. The *normative* is to evaluate critically these norms and the cognitive behaviour of people in religious matters, and, if necessary, suggest ways of improving them' (264). In terms of this distinction, Stenmark describes me as indulging in what he calls 'a language-game analysis of religious faith' which is 'primarily a descriptive notion' (270). In this analysis, according to him, I misdescribe the 'grammar of faith' by failing to acknowledge 'the pluralism of theistic language games within the theistic form of life' and therefore failing to see 'that there is not one but many grammars of faith' (271).

For two reasons I am rather surprised at this interpretation of my views. First of all, in the papers of mine which Stenmark discusses as well as in

[13] See the epilogue to my *Speaking of a Personal God*.

[14] John Clayton 'Thomas Jefferson and the study of religion', Inaugural Lecture, University of Lancaster (Lancaster: Lancaster University, 1992).

[15] Wittgenstein *Lectures and Conversations on Aesthetics, Psychology and Religious Belief*, Cyril Barrett (ed.) (Oxford: Blackwell, 1966), 59. See also 57.

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various other writings[16] I have gone to great lengths to emphasize the synchronic and diachronic plurality of human conceptual forms in general and of those in the context of religion in particular. The ways in which people understand the nature of their language games in general and of the language game of religion in particular, varies greatly and is subject to continual change during the course of 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.' [17] 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?[18]

Secondly, in these same writings I have argued at length that in this context the task of philosophy in general and of philosophy of religion (or philosophical theology) in particular, is not to *describe* our various (religious) forms of thought, but to develop *innovative proposals* for keeping our conceptual forms coherent and credible as well as relevant and adequate for the changing demands of life.[19] In fact, I would be inclined to say that the task of describing the variety and changes in our ways of thinking belongs to the historian and the social scientist and not to the philosopher. It is therefore a serious misunderstanding of my position to claim that I have been indulging in false (or true) descriptions of 'the religious language game', since I have not been putting forward any descriptions at all! As a philosopher should, I am only putting forward reasoned proposals for coherent and adequate ways of understanding our religious forms of thought. Such proposals are not falsified by pointing out that there are philosophers (and religious believers) who understand these things differently. Here D. Z. Phillips is correct in pointing out that:

> ... when the word 'we' is used in such reminders as 'What we mean by ...' a community of usage is invoked, but *not* necessarily a community to which *everyone* belongs ... It follows that the reminders 'When we say ...' and 'What we mean ...' are not contradicted or falsified if an individual or group of individuals responds by

[16] See especially 'The identity of the Christian tradition', Valedictory Lecture at the University of Utrecht (Utrecht: Utrecht University, 1997); ch. 1 and the epilogue of *Speaking of a Personal God*; ch. 1 of *The Model of Love*; ch. 3 of *Theology and Philosophical Inquiry*.

[17] *Philosophical Investigations* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1958), I.23.

[18] *Wittgenstein, Culture and Value* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1980), 27. In the *Philosophical Investigations* I.23 Wittgenstein also compares the changes in language-games to changes in mathematics.

[19] On these criteria of rationality, see my *The Identity of the Christian Tradition*. See also ch. 1 of my *The Model of Love* and ch. 1 of my *Speaking of a Personal God*.

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saying, 'Well, *I* don't' or 'That's not true of us'. All that follows is that the responses show that those who make them are outside the community of usage which has been invoked.[20]

I therefore disagree with Stenmark's claim that 'in philosophy of religion a discrepancy between a theory and living religious practices constitutes prima facie evidence against that theory' (274). In fact does not Stenmark himself admit that 'what is customary or normative among religious people is not necessarily right' (272)?

In this connection Stanley Cavell points out that Wittgenstein was well aware of the fact that his claims about 'what we say' were not necessarily shared by everybody. Hence his attempts to 'say what we say' should not be interpreted as generalizations from 'I say' to 'we say' but rather as invitations to others to see whether they could share his conceptual proposals. Such invitations are not a priori claims to conceptual community, but rather attempts to find the basis for such community, and 'the wish and search for community are the wish and search for reason'.[21] 'Rational theology' which is devoted to this search, is indeed a rational enterprise.

[20] D. Z. Phillips *Belief, Change and Forms of Life* (London: Macmillan, 1986), 17. See also Stanley Cavell *The Claim of Reason: Wittgenstein, Scepticism, Morality. and Tragedy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979), 18–20.

[21] Cavell *The Claim of Reason*, 19–20.

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