

Reason and Religious Belief

Christopher L. Holland

February 27, 2025

1 Religious Beliefs Are Non-Cognitive

- Religious beliefs are not genuine assertions
- This position is typically associated with the failed project of Logical Positivism
- *Verification Principle*: a statement is a genuine factual assertion if, and only if, some empirically observable states of affairs could show it to be either true or false.
 - “The criterion which we use to test genuineness of apparent statements of fact is the criterion of verifiability. We say that a sentence is factually significant to any given person, if, and only if, he knows how to verify the proposition which it purports to express—that is, if he knows what observations would lead him, under certain conditions, to accept the proposition as being true, or reject it as being false.” — A.J. Ayer
- *Falsification Principle*: a statement is a genuine factual assertion if, and only if, some empirically observable states of affairs could show it to be false.
 - “Suppose then that we are in doubt as to what someone who gives vent to an utterance is asserting, or suppose that, more radically, we are sceptical as to whether he is really asserting anything at all, one way of trying to understand (or perhaps it will be to expose) his utterance is to attempt to find what he would regard as counting against, or as being incompatible with, its truth. For if the utterance is indeed an assertion, it will necessarily be equivalent to a denial of the negation of that assertion.” — Antony Flew
- But . . .
 - Is the verification principle empirically verifiable?
 - Is the falsification principle empirically falsifiable?
 - PROBLEM: Both criteria are self-referentially incoherent.

2 Religious Beliefs Are Cognitive

- Religious beliefs are genuine assertions/propositions
- Religious beliefs are either true or false

3 Religious Beliefs Are Evidence-Sensitive

Natural Theology Some Religious Beliefs May Be Established by Reason

- We can offer arguments and evidence for the truth of some religious beliefs that do not rely on a religious authority or text.
- For example, one might argue for the existence of God using . . .
 - The Cosmological Argument
 - The Teleological Argument

- The Moral Argument
- Include what Aquinas called “The Preambles of Faith”: things like the existence of God and various divine attributes

Faith Seeking Understanding Some Religious Beliefs Are Neither Established Nor Refuted by Reason

- For other religious beliefs, we may have no evidence (outside of the teaching of a particular religion), but we can still argue that they are compatible/consistent with reason.
- For example, one might . . .
 - Argue for the coherence of the Trinity or the Incarnation
 - Offer a defense or theodicy against the problem of evil and suffering
- Include what Aquinas called the “Articles of Faith”: things like the doctrine of the Incarnation or the Resurrection.

4 Religious Beliefs Are Evidence-Insensitive

Fideism Religious beliefs are not subject to rational evaluation.

References

- Moreland, J. P., and William Lane Craig. 2017. *Philosophical Foundations for a Christian Worldview*. 2nd Edition. Downers Grove, Illinois: IVP Academic.
- Peterson, Michael L., William Hasker, Bruce Reichenbach, and David Basinger. 2012. *Reason & Religious Belief: An Introduction to the Philosophy of Religion*. 5th ed. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Swinburne, Richard. 2005. *Faith and Reason*. 2nd ed. Oxford : New York: Clarendon Press.