

# REFLECTIONS ON SOME BASIC PROBLEMS OF PHILOSOPHY OF RELIGION

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## Din Felsefesinin Bazı Temel Problemleri Üzerine Düşünceler

**Abstract:** When philosophy of religion tries to be scientific, full rational, and universal, it aims to reach a point where it would annihilate itself. When religions reminds philosophy of religion that the reality surrounding us requires different mode of thinking, they remind it also that it will remain a mere philosophical endeavor forever, and not be able to transform itself to full rational, scientific, and universal knowledge.

**Key Words:** philosophy of religion, epistemology, phenomenology, communicative space.



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**Özet:** Bu makalenin temel iddiası şudur: din felsefesi, bilimsel, tümüyle rasyonel ve evrensel olmaya çalıştıkça, kendi sonunu getiren bir noktaya erişmeye çalışmış olacaktır. Dinler, din felsefesine bizi çevreleyen gerçekliğin farklı bir düşünme tarzını gerektirdiğini hatırlattıkça, ona sadece bir felsefi çaba olarak kalacağını ve salt rasyonel, bilimsel ve evrensel bilgi haline gelemeceğini de hatırlatmış olmaktadır.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** din felsefesi, epistemoloji, fenomenoloji, iletişim mekanı.



## Two Dimensions of Philosophy of Religion

Philosophy, bounded by culture and history, and guided by constantly renewed, transformed, and criticized questions finds itself in different occurrences and happenings. Even if it appears to be primarily a revelation or disclosure of human reason/ intelligence, it is always more than a mental activity. It is something occurring and happening in different times and spaces. It is more historical event than self-dialogue of human intelligence via questions and answers. It is an occurring, happening, and event basically because philosophical thinking cannot grasp itself unless it is applied within concrete historical and cultural situation. Application is the essential and constitutive part of philosophical thought. This is another way of saying that philosophical thought receives the 'foundational meaning' of its guiding questions through its temporal relation to concrete historical situations.

Upon this foundational meaning, so-called 'hermeneutical meaning' in Heideggerian sense, philosophical thought finds itself as a mirroring/reflecting activity which attempts to reveal what is hidden in this foundational meaning. From this perspective, philosophical thought is essentially an interpretation of foundational meaning. It is an interpretation in the sense of finding itself as a part of a given historical meaning. Philosophical thought belongs to what makes it possible to exist. Since philosophical thought cannot transcend what makes it possible to exist, it finds itself as a primordial question. It cannot go behind the question

'what is philosophy?' since it is not able to disclose its being, occurrence, happening, and event in their full senses. Since what makes philosophical thought possible to exist is always hidden to philosophical thought, it is basically an interpretation and revelation of what is hidden behind it. Given that philosophical thought cannot be a zero point of human intelligence, it can be taken to be a form of encounter of human intelligence with the realm of beings.

Philosophical thought encounters religions in the course of its being applied to concrete historical situations. It finds religions as part of foundational meaning. In this sense, philosophical thought is an interpretation of religion(s). It attempts to bring forward what is hidden in there. Therefore, philosophical thought grasps itself as a projection of foundational meaning in the form of question. In other word, philosophical thought understands that what makes for it possible to ask question is already foundational meaning which it belongs to. It attempts to generalize and universalize its questions only upon its temporal relation to historical and cultural situations. Abstractness of its questions does not indicate its transcending cultural and historical situations; rather it indicates philosophical claim to validity and applicability of its questions in each instances of time and space. Thus philosophical thought takes the form of philosophy of religion on the basis of its claim to universality of its abstract questions.

At this level, philosophy of religion discloses itself from two dimensions: a) abstract, universalized, and b) concrete, historical, and cultural. In its abstract and universalized dimension, it attempts to be applied to every situation and religious understanding. In its concrete and historic-cultural dimension, it attempts to interpret what is hidden in religious meaning. In fact, these two dimensions cannot be separated ontologically from each other simply because they exist at one and the same time. Abstractness of the questions of philosophy of religion is essentially a horizon of meaning which philosophical thought constructs upon foundational meaning. It is merely a change of perspective both vertically and

horizontally; vertically in the sense of asking questions as rational as possible; horizontally in the sense of asking questions as intercultural as possible. In this final level, philosophy of religion tries to create an intercultural space for rational thought so that different cultural experiences of/reactions to religions can be shared within philosophical conceptions. In this intercultural space, different experiences of/ reactions to religions from atheism to theism enters into dialogue.

Nevertheless, since philosophical thought cannot represent what is present in religions, it finds itself within a paradoxical situation. On the one hand, it understands the meaning of its questions in terms of foundational meaning which it belongs to; on the other hand, it attempts to reflect or reveal this meaning within its own abstract and universalized conceptions. Given that most of religions invite human being to have a faith toward invisible God, they only provide human thought with indicators and signifiers. This is nothing else than untranslatability of religious faith into philosophical conceptions. For that reason, philosophy of religion cannot represent what is present in religious faith (Sacred texts). It cannot present what is signified or indicated in religious faith within itself.

From this perspective, it seems, what philosophy of religion represents is its own way of questioning the foundational meaning. It is, in this sense, self-representational.

### **Phenomenological Reception of Philosophy of Religion**

Is it possible to define philosophy of religion universally? To respond to this question, we need to reflect upon the concept of definition briefly. Definition is not merely a presentation of something, but also a way of receiving it. Thus, the possibility of defining philosophy of religion universally should rest on the possibility of universal reception of philosophy of religion. In other word, it should base itself on the possibility of making philosophy of religion as an object to be observed within universal space. Nevertheless, reduction of philosophy of religion to a mere object is nothing else than annihilation of its energeia (activity). Philo-

sophy of religion as an 'activity of looking at/seeing/thinking' cannot be fully objectified, and hence cannot be defined as 'knowledge'. Since philosophy can exist basically within the activity of philosophizing, philosophy of religion can be understood not from epistemological viewpoint, but rather from phenomenological perspective.

This means that all definitions of philosophy of religions can be evaluated as different perspectives of an intercultural phenomenon. Therefore, what can be done is to make a phenomenological analysis of different definitions so as to bring forward yet-hidden aspects of the same phenomenon (philosophy of religion). Ultimate goal of phenomenology is to prevent all attempts to reduce a phenomenon to a single viewpoint. Definition as a perspective of a phenomenon reveals our relation to this phenomenon. Definition as a claim to ultimate knowledge/ highest perspective of a phenomenon appears to be paradoxical since it attempts to see all fundamental dimensions of a phenomenon in a single moment and space. What claims to represent the fundamental dimensions of a phenomenon is not a definition of it, but rather a new phenomenon to be understood.

### **Ethical and Legal Dimensions of Philosophy of Religion**

When we take two (abstract, universalized, and concrete and historico-cultural) dimensions of philosophy of religion into consideration, we can notice it can deal with ethical and legal systems of world religions at two different levels. At the abstract and universalized level, philosophy of religion questions and analyzes intercultural dimensions of ethical and legal issues, while it attempts to interpret and discuss the basic ethical and legal stands of religions. In our viewpoint, since 'application' is essential and constitutive part of philosophy of religion, legal and ethical issues at two levels are not mere objects of analysis; but rather two modes of existence of philosophy of religion. In other word, philosophy of religion is an activity of philosophizing ethically and legally. Therefore, it cannot elevate itself above these two modes of existence when it tackles with legal and ethical issues at abstract-universalized and concrete histo-

ric-cultural levels. In fact, this situation allows philosophy of religion to re-consider its own ethical and legal existence regarding the ethical and legal stands of different religions. Hence there happens a dialogical medium between world religions and philosophy of religion since there cannot be any secure place for it to escape. Application as an essential and constitutive part of philosophy of religion reveals that this form of philosophy can exist only dialogically.

### **Philosophy of Religion at Two Different Communicative Spaces**

Since philosophy of religion has both cultural and intercultural levels to exist and think, its way of thinking occurs in different communicative spaces where it meets cultural and intercultural dimensions of religious, legal, and ethical problems. Any attempt to construct a single and common philosophy of religion can have a tendency to forget its historical and cultural dependence on foundational meanings. In contrast, any attempt to restrict philosophy of religion to a single existing religion can change its nature toward theology. The distinctive feature of philosophy of religion is to reveal itself at two different communicative spaces so that it enables people to share cultural and intercultural experiences of and reactions to religions in terms of philosophizing. Since each activity of philosophizing requires a free space to exist, there cannot be a single and common philosophy of religion. Constructing a single and common philosophy of religion is annihilating free space for philosophizing.

### **Struggling of Philosophy of Religion to Find Its Proper Language**

Philosophy of religion as a mode of reflection on religion(s), ethics, and legal issues, not to mention other possible topics, aims at finding a proper language to understand both the nature of its subject matters, and its relations to them. 'Finding a proper language' is a constant struggle and telos for philosophy of religion since language which it struggles for both makes philosophy of religion what it is, and reveals its ontological relations with its subject matters. Since this language is not something given prior to its struggle for understanding, it is something temporal and ten-

tative. Thus, philosophy of religion finds itself within a gulf in the sense of gaining a certainty about the language within which it finds itself to understand both itself and its subject matters.

How is it possible for philosophy of religion to have a clear, authentic and secure language both for itself and its subject matters? Are the conceptual schemas, semantics, semiotics, and logic which philosophy of religion invokes for its rational analysis able to create a clear and secure space for it so much so that it can form a reliable and trustable knowledge for itself and its subject matters?

It seems that pure rationality is not possible for philosophy of religion simply because it is ontologically dependent on 'ordinary language' where history, culture, religion, politics, etc. are active in constant formation of meaningful horizon. Reflective language of philosophy of religion is sourced from ordinary language, and by this reason, it cannot fully represent or reveal what is happening between these two levels of languages. This shows that philosophy of religion is not able to look at religion from outside in its full sense because there is no such space disconnected from space of ordinary language.

Therefore, we can merely talk about the new horizons which are formed by the questions proposed by philosophy of religion regarding what it aims to understand. In other word, there is no 'outside' for it, but solely 'new horizons' for what is to be understood.

At this point, it is able to differentiate itself from theology by forming different horizons than those of theology. Theology is an activity to reveal the signified, indicated, implicated by signifiers, indicators, and implications given by Sacred Ur-texts. It functions under the authority of Sacred Ur-texts, and thus aims at expanding the meaning horizon of those texts. It is essentially defensive in the sense of satisfying human mentality by finding proper rational answers to proposed questions. Thus it places itself not within self-legitimacy of philosophical questions, but rather answers which are assumingly authorized and approved by Sacred texts.

Philosophy of religion forms different horizons by placing itself within self-legitimacy of its own questions. Its ultimate goal, in this viewpoint, is to find a proper language for the subject matter which it questions. It idealizes this proper language with the notion 'truth' which implies the moment of complete satisfaction of human rationality. From this perspective, philosophy of religion is somehow a 'will to present reality' in the form of truth in front of human reason. It desires to be a language of reality. Its way of thinking is spatial in the sense that it posits itself in the category of subject against its object. Subject and object ontology has been taken by philosophy of religion to be the most rational and methodical space for gaining clear and certain knowledge of reality.

Since religions invite people to have a faith toward invisible God or Absolute, they propose a different mode of thinking, which can be called 'un-objectified awareness of metaphysical reality surrounding us'. They inform their believers that what can be objectified is not the metaphysical reality surrounding us, but rather our own actions. Said differently, they reveal that religious truth is not something to be known prior to our actions and deeds. The meaning of religious truth objectifies itself not in propositional language, but rather in the course of moral, legal, and religious attitudes, actions, and deeds. Thus, meaning of religious truth temporalizes itself by showing, indication, and implying something outside. It would be great logical fallacy to confuse constantly temporalizing activity with what is showed, indicated, implied outside. Religious language, as a language resisting against all kind of attempt to objectify it, differs it from the language of philosophy of religion which targets to be clear and distinct.

Viewed from this perspective, philosophy of religion appears to be a human endeavor to find a proper language or answers to the questions proposed by human rationality. Thus it helps very little to understand existing religions which have a very different mode of thinking and reality. When philosophy of religion tries to be scientific, full rational, and universal, it aims to reach a point where it would annihilate itself. When

religions reminds philosophy of religion that the reality surrounding us requires different mode of thinking, they remind it also that it will remain a mere philosophical endeavor forever, and not be able to transform itself to full rational, scientific, and universal knowledge.

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