

What Should be the Attitude of Teachers of Philosophy Towards Religion?

Author(s): Josiah Royce

Source: *International Journal of Ethics*, Vol. 13, No. 3 (Apr., 1903), pp. 280-285

Published by: The University of Chicago Press

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/2376398>

Accessed: 09-09-2018 16:51 UTC

---

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact [support@jstor.org](mailto:support@jstor.org).

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at <https://about.jstor.org/terms>



JSTOR

*The University of Chicago Press* is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *International Journal of Ethics*

## WHAT SHOULD BE THE ATTITUDE OF TEACHERS OF PHILOSOPHY TOWARDS RELIGION?\*

The proper attitude of the teacher of philosophy towards Religion depends, I think, for its justification, as for its definition, upon two or three very simple principles.

The first principle is that Religion, in its higher sense, constitutes the most important business of the human being, and by Religion, in its higher sense, I mean the consciousness of practical relations to a real but at present unseen spiritual order, whose authority as furnishing the rule for our conduct is conceived as absolute, and whose worth and dignity we recognize as above every other worth and dignity known to us. This higher sense of the term Religion appears, in history, only since the attainment of somewhat advanced states of civilization, and since the rise of the more universal moral ideals. We are not concerned at present with the forms of religious faith. I expressly define the general term so that Buddhism and Christianity, the so-called Ethical Religions of some modern teachers, and the more positive creeds of tradition, equally fall within the scope of my definition. What I consider essential to the definition of any higher form of Religion is, that it is a kind of consciousness, whose object is an unseen and spiritual order, and whose content includes a view of our practical relations to that order, while this spiritual order itself is conceived as having, for us, a maximum of worth, of dignity, and of moral authority.

Now Religion, as thus defined, constitutes the most important business of man, just because man's present and worldly life, as experience shows it to us, is, even in the most fortunate cases, a comparatively petty affair, whose passing joys and sorrows can be viewed as of serious and permanent importance only in case this life means what it at present never empirically presents to us, namely a task and a destiny that have,

---

\*A paper read before the American Philosophical Association, at Washington, D. C.

from some higher point of view, an absolute value. The goal of our life, if our life has a goal, is never attained, or even made clear to us, by means of any of our present mortal experiences or successes. The worth of our life, if it has any absolute worth, is behind the veil of sense, and of our present fortunes. Religious wisdom, if such wisdom is attainable, therefore has to do with the discovery of that which makes our whole present life worth living. Hence it is that I assign, in agreement, as I doubt not with many of you, the highest worth to Religion amongst the interests of humanity.

But now, as my second principle, I have to add that, in human history, Religion in proportion to its importance, characteristically appears as amongst the worst managed, if not the very worst managed, of all of humanity's undertakings. I call this fact characteristic. I need not pause to explain it. Humanity's important business has generally been mismanaged in proportion to its significance. I remark merely that this holds true in the case of the highest of all humanity's interests. My proof is in the best known facts of history. The variety of contending faiths, the cruel mutual misunderstandings that the followers of opposing faiths have cherished towards one another, the religious wars, the multiplication of sects, the confusion of the essential with the trivial in religious life, the substitution of conventionality in religious practice for spirituality in religious experience, the enormous waste of energy over confused thinking about religious matters,—these are a few of the evidences of the truth of my principle. Religion has fared, in even comparatively recent history, far worse than the cause of human liberty, far worse than philanthropy, incomparably worse than the care of physical health. Nothing has man treated worse than his own and his brother's chances of spiritual salvation. Nowadays, to be sure, the religious situation is much improved. The religious wars have almost ceased. But many evils remain.

There follows from these two principles a third:—The task of improving the conduct of so great and so mismanaged a cause as that of religion is so complex and difficult an undertaking as to demand a division of labor, and a very great and

varied division of labor. Reformer and prophet, man of common sense and philosopher, the worker and the thinker, the devout soul and the critic,—all such are needed for the task. There is room, in the further evolution of the religious consciousness, for the greatest diversity of gifts to be applied to the service of the one spirit, and all this division of labor is required for the sake of humanity's loftiest interests.

Well, the teacher of philosophy, whose task is indeed a very humble one, has something that he ought to contribute to the cause of the gradual improvement of the religious consciousness of humanity. His personal efforts will be of slight avail. But the harvest is so plenteous, the laborers are so few, and yet so many kind of laborers are needed, that the teacher of philosophy is indeed called upon to do his share. Now there are two things, and two only, that the philosopher, as philosopher, can hope to contribute towards training humanity to do better its work of striving after a sound religious consciousness. These things are:—(1) Clearness of thought about religious issues; and (2) a judicial spirit in the comparison, in the historical estimate, and in the formation of religious opinions. I repeat, clearness of thought, and the judicial spirit, are the philosopher's peculiar tasks. He ought to strive after them, to express them in his teaching, and to do what he can to get his fellows to share them, and this is what he can contribute to the gradual improvement of the religious life.

The philosopher, as a religious inquirer, is extremely fallible. Now in this defect he is not alone amongst men. It is just that defect, as it exists amongst men, which has filled religious history with such misery. But it is the philosopher's precious privilege to make the consciousness of his own fallibility one of the principal topics and aims of his research. Other men estimate their fellows in terms of the convictions that these fellows chance to hold or to profess. The philosopher estimates his fellow students in terms of the care that they display in their methods of testing their convictions. He wishes to be tested himself by the same standard. Other men may cast out heretics. The philosopher knows of no heresies in doctrine, but only of defects in care regarding the investigation of doctrine,

and of failures in devotion to the considerate pursuit of truth. Other men cry, "Lo here and lo there; we have found the truth, believe us or perish." The philosopher asks: "How did you find out the way to discover your truth?" As to perishing,—the philosopher had rather assume, as an inquirer, the risk of perishing with one clear insight in his possession, than obtain the reward of living forever in a heaven of confused impressions.

Now in these, his characteristic interests, the philosopher, like any other man, shows himself to be one-sided. There are in life many good ideals besides the ideal of clearness. That some men are prophets, and that some men born to lead sects or nations, and that God may also have chosen the weak, with their gracious instinctive devotion, frequently to confound the wise,—all this the philosopher may well recognize. He knows that his is not the only task. But he knows that it is his task. And all his guidance of young minds must emphasize and express this his own peculiar office.

What are the consequences that flow from all this as to what the proper attitude of the philosophical teacher shall be towards religion? I answer: First, the philosophical teacher, in appealing to elementary students, must begin by cultivating in them the judicial rather than the merely dogmatic attitude towards religious problems. He can best do this by means of a teaching of the history of thought. The historical method of approaching religious issues is the great antidote for the counteracting of the sectarian spirit, and the great encourager of the spirit of patience, calm, and earnestness in the facing of humanity's deepest problems. The proper study of the history of thought shows us the human spirit profiting by its very narrowness and by means even of its imperfections, in case it is only patient enough "to reach a hand through time to snatch the far off interest of its own errors." History teaches us to unite tolerance with seriousness, and criticism with reverence. To find out how long the world has had to wait to obtain its full returns from the treasures that ancient thought stored up for it, is to render ourselves more willing to tolerate even much that we fail as yet to justify in the spiritual efforts of to-day.

The philosopher should so teach the history of thought as to cultivate the spirit of piety towards all serious thinking. Just such piety is what I mean by the judicial spirit.

Secondly, in guiding his more advanced pupils, the teacher of philosophy should seek to help every one of them to become clearer in mind as to what his own personal religious interests and problems mean. The philosopher's attitude towards the earnest young inquirer, whether he be a doubter or a believer, can properly be expressed, in the form of an appeal to the individual thus: "It is not my office to propagate my faith; but to help you to understand the meaning of your faith, or of your doubt, as it has pleased God to show you the matters that concern His truth at the present point of your development. In the end, you must be saved, if at all, then in your own way, which indeed will then also be God's way, but which will doubtless be for that very reason your own individual way. It is my office to help you towards finding your own soul. I do not want to convert you, but to help you to the attainment of your own inner light. The wind bloweth where it listeth. I am to teach you only to distinguish for yourself, whence the wind comes to you, when it comes. I am to help you to grasp your own meaning. If you want authority, to tell you from without what you must believe, you must look elsewhere. If you want some one to help you to define the promptings of your own spirit, it is my duty to try to give such aid."

Thirdly, in dealing with his more advanced students, it is the office of the philosopher to help them to profit by one another's religious queries, doubts, strivings, and varieties of religious opinion and experience. In this aspect of his work the philosophical teacher is a mediator rather than an appellate judge. He expresses, indeed, his own convictions, but he contributes them only as one more product of human experience, and of the effort to attain truth, and not as a decisive dogma. He holds all questions open for serious discussion, just because the decision of all such questions is the privilege of the individual, and it is not the prerogative of the philosophical teacher to save other men from the responsibility of making their own choices.

Finally, as to the attitude that the philosophical teacher as-

sumes in presence of the general public, regarding religious problems, that attitude should be as frank as it is conciliatory, as judicially critical as it is reverently earnest, as free from dogmatic presumption as it is from indifference. Since he stands for clearness of thinking, he should shun no inquiry that he is duly called upon to undertake. He should never hide his opinions, however unconventional they may be, when he is rightfully asked, on a fitting occasion, to express them. On the other hand, it is not his business to feed the multitude when the multitude is not hungry. He is no propagandist. He is sent to those who desire wisdom, and not to those who hate light. Moreover, he seeks no occasion to occasion scandal to the little ones. He appeals to those to whom the spirit of truth has already spoken. For the rest, I myself am glad when, under the conditions as they exist to-day, the philosophical teacher's convictions are such that he sees his way to avoid all connection with any sect or form of the visible church. I say, I am glad of this result, when it occurs, because, first, I am persuaded that a personal relation to the visible church has to-day a value which concerns chiefly the man engaged in certain practical philanthropic tasks. These tasks are indeed of the utmost social importance, but they form no part of the philosopher's peculiar and special social function,—a function that I have already characterized. I like to see the philosopher devoted to his own business. And secondly, as I hold, the philosopher, by holding aloof from the visible church, helps himself to maintain in himself and to display to his students, that judicial spirit which I have insisted upon as his especial possession. The mass of mankind cannot cultivate this judicial spirit except as a mere incident of their practical life. The philosopher has to make it his professional business, and I think therefore that he gains by an avoidance of relation to the visible church, just as a judge gains by declining to be a party man. To the invisible church the philosopher, if loyal to his task, inevitably belongs, whatever be his opinions. And it is to the invisible church of all the faithful his loyalty is due.

JOSIAH ROYCE.

HARVARD UNIVERSITY.