
Is there still a realist challenge in postmodern theology?

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Abstract

In this article Jerome A Stone's 'neo-naturalistic philosophy of religion' is critically assessed. Stone develops a minimalist model of the divine by means of retrieving experiences of transcendence in a plural secular society. The article aims at arguing that such a 'transactional realistic' concept of God is not only a-contextual, but also too generic. Although this is regarded as a postfoundationalist move by radical empiricism, it turns out to be not consonant with postmodernism's celebration of true pluralism.

The fact that in contemporary religious epistemology theologians and philosophers of religion have increasingly come to depend on the concept of religious experience, is today accepted and even embraced by many scholars who normally would not call themselves empiricists. Of course religion has always been an experiential matter and never just a set of credal statements or a collection of rites and rituals. Wayne Proudfoot has recently and persuasively argued that this turn to religious experience since the Enlightenment has been motivated in a large measure by a very specific wish to free religious doctrine and practice from dependence on metaphysical beliefs and ecclesiastical institutions (Proudfoot 1985:xiii).

Although religious experience seemed and still to a large extent seems to be fairly pervasive, the concept of religious experience, however, is as vague as it is elusive. In a striking image Nancy Frankenberry sees the concept of religious experience as both slippery and overworked at the same time, and as entering our discussions like a ghostly shadow: haunting the premises, but still unreal and elusive (Frankenberry 1987:189).

One of the most far reaching implications of this has been that both philosophers of religion and philosophical theologians — instead of evaluating the empirical basis of

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religious beliefs and of theological theories and doctrines in experience — have focused increasingly on a study of the conditions or warrants for the justifiability of holding basic religious beliefs. In theology this inevitably led to the foundationalisms of both natural theology and a brand of naive realist theologies that still finds justification in self-authenticating and supernaturalist concepts of revelation.

1. EMPIRICISM AS A BASIS FOR A PUBLIC ECOTHEOLOGY

An exciting attempt to move beyond these well-known dilemmas is found in Jerome Stone's recent book, *A minimalist vision of transcendence: A naturalist philosophy of religion* (1992). What Stone wants to do in this book is precisely to clear a space for the renewed interest in the role of religious experience. In doing this he not only wants to reveal the weaknesses of foundationalism and fideism in religious epistemology, but especially wants to show how the problems of faith, theism and realism look different when approached from the standpoint of naturalism, and how an empiricism generously conceived can form the basis of a public ecotheology.

For the philosophical theologian this kind of focus on the role of religious experience opens up rather difficult but also exciting methodological and epistemological challenges. The question how our beliefs are related to concrete experiences, is central to this form of radical empiricist naturalism. In the end, however, the focus of this challenge will be the crucial epistemological question: how do epistemic values like interpreted experience, personal commitment and experienced tradition really shape the rationality of religious and theological reflection?

In his focus on religious experience, Stone is intensely aware of the pervasive presence of ambiguity in our daily existence: an ambiguity not only in what happens to us, but also in the way we respond. Stone is therefore skeptical of theological and metaphysical answers to the problems confronting us in religious experience, and in the end opts for a minimalism that — to put it in Langdon Gilkey's apt words — learns from both the theologians, whom he admires, and the wary naturalists whose critical agnosticism he shares (Gilkey, in Stone 1992:ix). What is quite remarkable in this book is his accord with those who articulate a presence of transcendence in our everyday experience. This explains at least some of his appreciation for and limited agreement with some of the most important theological traditions of our century. But he consistently remains a strict minimalist: any theological or metaphysical explanation for the presence of this transcendence in our experience remains forbidden.

Stone calls his view a neo-naturalistic philosophy of religion, combining a vision of this-wordly transcendence with an attitude of openness in inquiry and action. Crucial to this view is his minimalist model of the divine, and Stone locates himself

between believers and nonbelievers: not as confident as the humanists in their anti-theism, but also not able to make the affirmations of most theologians. He also explicitly joins hands with the recent revival of radical empiricism in religious thought as a viable third option to foundationalism and antifoundationalism. When lamenting the lack of the experience of transcendence in our Western culture, Stone eschews all traditional God-talk and focuses instead on the divine aspects of contemporary experience (Stone 1992:1ff). This project is therefore about retrieving experiences of transcendence in secular life and about developing a theory of this-worldly transcendence, a theory that might uncover transcendent resources of renewal and judgement that might be available to us within secular life itself.

For his theory of this-worldly transcendence Stone develops a minimalist model of the divine, a tentative conceptualization of what might be affirmed of God when we cannot make a full ontological affirmation of an ultimate reality anymore. In this he is amazingly — and typically — honest: he acknowledges that the ontological reticence underlying his naturalism is a metaphysical position and needs whatever justification a metaphysical position can get (p7). Stone's faith in naturalism as an adequate explanation for religious experience will eventually have to be challenged precisely at this level of discussion.

Stone's intended third alternative beyond theism and secular humanism is especially fascinating since he very consciously wants to contribute to the current discussion on realism in philosophy of religion and contemporary philosophy of science. He therefore very explicitly raises the question of what sort of reality might correspond to our thoughts about God (Stone 1992:10). His minimalist answer to this reads as follows: the transcendent is the collection of all situationally transcendent resources and continually changing ideals that we experience. Maximalist theologies, in their attempts use the concept of God to affirm some kind of unity in the real and ideal aspects of transcendent resources, affirm just too much. Stone thus rejects the extravagant conceptual claims of maximalist theisms, especially any claims of unity for the transcendent. His minimalist vision of transcendence therefore remains with an affirmation of the plurality of the presence of the transcendent in secular life.

Stone's model thus asserts transcendence without ultimacy. What is affirmed is that there are real creative processes transcendent in a significant sense to our ordinary experience, and that there are ideals which we may call transcendent. This model therefore is a long way from affirming an intelligent purposiveness to a transcendent creator, since purposiveness presupposes a unity of individuality, that is a personal God capable of entertaining such a purpose. Stone does call the three elements of his model, that is transcendence, the real and the ideal, elements that correspond to the

three most basic characteristics of religious experience: transcendence, blessing and challenge (Stone 1992:13). His minimalist vision is thus transformed into a philosophical reconception of the object of religious experience. Stone's situationally transcendent resources (for example: a moment of unexpected healing) furthermore not only is always relative to a personal and temporal point of view, but can only be explained in resolutely naturalistic terms. Within this minimalist context transcendent resources are not signs of the divine, but part of whatever there is of the divine that we can know. Thus moments of extremity and of despair, as moments of real transcendence, are no bearers of grace but are gracious themselves (Stone 1992:15).

Closely aligned with the real aspect of transcendence is its ideal aspect: defined minimally this is a set of continually challenging ideals insofar as they are worthy of pursuit. In an intriguing, and certainly at least epistemologically controversial move, Stone takes the pursuit of truth as a paradigm of the ideal aspect of the transcendent (Stone 1992: 16). The concept of 'truth' continues to function for him as a goal in relation to which our theories are but approximations. As such truth is an ideal never fully attained, but like a kind of a *focus imaginarius* functions as a continual demand that we push toward.

For Stone the divine (or God) is the collection of situationally transcendent resources and continually challenging ideals of the universe, that is the sum of the worthy and constructively challenging aspects of the world. Stone's model thus articulates a concept of this-worldly transcendence. The question, of course, remains whether this transcendent could in any sense be the same as God? In answering this Stone wants to move beyond a mere 'yes' or 'no': On the one hand he acknowledges that it is a long way from traditional and even revised beliefs about God; on the other hand this transcendent can function in a person's life much like the traditional God. Whether or not one then chooses to call the transcendent by the traditional name of God, is a matter of personal choice and context (Stone 1992:18). For Stone, however, a minimal requirement would be to stop short of affirming any ontological unity.

It has now become abundantly clear, I think, that Stone's approach is characterized by a functional justification for using minimalist religious language. In this his naturalism relies on a phenomenology of the transcendent, and the resulting focus is on a pluralistic understanding of the divine.

2. A CRITICAL ASSESSMENT

When we now move to a more critical assessment of Stone's proposal, the focus will be on one fairly simple question: how religious is the religious experience that follows this clear and well-argued-for minimalist vision of transcendence? I hope to make it

clear that I have no problems with Stone's carefully constructed theory of experience as such. What does, however, seem to be problematical is the way epistemic decisions are made in advance: decisions that in the end determine the boundaries between maximalist and minimalist forms of theism.

Stone's proposal has never been that the transcendent is God, but that the 'transcendent' and 'God', minimally understood, share the same reference to transcendent resources and challenges. The transcendent may in reality be more than what our experience shows: there may be unity, ultimacy and intelligent purposiveness. There are, however, not enough support for these affirmations for us to make them as publicly responsible assertions, nor to take them as the basis for personal faith. This brings to mind Langdon Gilkey's remark in the Foreword he wrote for this book, where he points to Stone's reticence on the extra-human grounds for confidence and religious faith, and wonders how he can stay as serenely confident and doggedly hopeful as he wishes to be (Gilkey, in Stone 1992:X). Stone's model is sophisticated, genuine and to a certain extent even moving. Ultimately, however, it is highly individualistic and one wonders if it could withstand the criticism that it is elitist, even escapist, and ultimately may function as one more example of the remarkable creativity of our Western scholarship. Stone's book, however, demands much more serious attention than this.

What I am therefore struggling with in trying to understand this minimalist vision of transcendence, is how such a generic concept of the divine, without at some point being emersed in the language of a living religious tradition, can avoid becoming not only a-contextual (even a-historical), but also becoming too remote, too empty, in a word, too generic. It is precisely at this point that I again raise the question: how religious is *religious* experience within the context of this radical empiricism? For a model of transcendence to be, religiously speaking, experientially adequate, it has to somehow relate to an ultimate commitment of faith, that is, if it wants to avoid the label of being intellectually highly esoteric. Of course Stone wants to avoid this: the key question for him is not whether a person uses language about God, but whether a person is open to transcendent resources and demands. But if Stone wants to avoid ultimacy, what would be the distinctive trait of this religious self-actualization that would go beyond and distinguish it from, say, psychological self-actualization?

When the term 'God' is adequately understood, so Stone argues (1992:20f.), it will be found to refer to innerworldly transcendent resources. It can, however, be convincingly argued that the belief in the inadequacy of natural explanations to account for all our experience, may be more invariant across cultures than the belief in any specific God (cf also Proudfoot 1985:77). Stone's minimalist vision thus seems to be grounded

in a prior commitment to and faith in a naturalist metaphysics, and not in whether the minimalist vision of transcendence is experientially adequate to the way in which religious people of various stripes live their lives.

Closely linked to this issue is the fact that Stone (1992:28ff) does not really show why maximalism fails, but only why highly restricted — and already problematical — arguments for maximalist positions on theism fails. He renounces the full ontological affirmation of the transcendent which normally is contained in such religious notions as Brahman or God. He does, however, acknowledge that the major traditions provide a clue to the notion of the transcendent which is useful. The reason for this minimalism is his faith in naturalism, but the position taken in on the broader spectrum between minimalism and maximalism remains vague, a line to a certain extent even arbitrarily drawn. Stone's faith in naturalism gives each of the themes of his empiricist philosophy a carefully constructed agnostic boundary, which is, however, never completely crossed precisely because of his accompanying — and intriguing — commitment to realism. Because of his generic minimalist vision of transcendence, however, Stone can also stop short of asking what the 'more', the religious aspect of reality his notions are referring to, in fact is.

Stone (1992:27) concedes that no rigorous proof for the adequacy of his or any other model can be given. An ontological position cannot be proved, but it can indeed be argued for. Helpful arguments for Stone would be arguments on clarity, empirical fit and especially pragmatic adequacy. I have no problems with clarity and pragmatic adequacy, but how a naturalistic minimalist vision can manage to empirically fit (or: be experientially adequate to) the way religious people live their everyday lives — normally in commitment to some extra-human grounds for their faith — remains unclear to me, except if it is meant all along for a selected intellectual few only. Stone's views on God is a stance of ontological modesty, but he also wants to argue that this view is indeed the most adequate. Stone (1992:27) realizes that his position of ontological restraint is in itself an ontological position. It remains highly questionable, however, whether this position can be argued for only on the basis of his radical empiricism. The reasons and the place for pinning down the boundaries of Stone's minimalism thus remains unclear. His model retains a notion of the transcendent: in fact, the model explicates and nurtures experiences of the transcendent without making too many assertions about it. This model, then, is 'for those who operate in the critical mode' (Stone 1992:33). But, then again, is this enough for living a day to day life of faith?

3. TRANSACTIONAL REALISM

A critical evaluation of Jerome Stone's work will benefit greatly if we now focus on an all-important concept in his philosophical naturalism, that is transactional realism. Stone wants to enter the present debate about realism in philosophy of religion and in philosophy of science by defining his radical empiricism as a transactional realism (cf p 130ff). This transactional realism is also an anticipatory realism, or a realism of hope that sees correspondence between idea and object not as a constitutive, but as a regulative principle.

This transactional realism implies a fallibilist epistemology and is an attempt to revise or correct theories, visions, ideas or images by further exploration of experience. Within this context Stone opts for an approximate concept of truth where pragmatic adequacy is our only guide. In this transactional realism tentative assertions are made about realities, assertions which we believe — not on compelling grounds, but with good reasons — are more adequate to these realities than other assertions. In Stone's own words: 'The realities which we dimly perceive and the theories which we develop concerning them, when subject to appropriate scrutiny, are worth the risk of living by, despite our propensity to error and fantasy' (Stone 1992:132). This form of realism, as a self-critical, culturally aware empiricism, is in fact Stone's post-foundationalist move beyond the certainty and despair of foundationalism, relativism and cultural provincialism (Stone 1992:135). It is deeply rooted in his radical empiricism, and also in the crucial importance he attaches to sensitive discernment, the historical rootedness of all empirical inquiry, and the transactional nature of experience.

Stone develops a theory of experience (and of religious experience) in which experience is seen as a transaction, a transaction between 'self' (as a combination of social choices and genetic legacies) and 'world' (as both construct and reality). As such experience is a complex interaction between language and lived feelings, between organism and environment. From this can be gleaned Stone's focus on interpreted experience as an epistemic value that shapes the rationality of (also) religious reflection. There are no points of 'pure' experience here that could be used as epistemological anchors or sure foundations to solve our quest for religious certainty. With this Stone moves remarkably close to the current views on critical realism in religious and theological reflection: we are indeed never out of touch with our world, that is, it is not language all the way down (Stone 1992:128). Also in our religion we are therefore not adrift on a linguistic sea, but experience is a relational transaction, and interpreted experience reveals that language is part of this transaction.

When Stone, however, finally discusses the historical rootedness of all inquiry (Stone 1992:142ff), the problems we raised earlier in this paper are back to haunt us: can a minimalist naturalistic view, which eschews theistic explanations for religious experience, indeed provide adequate explanations for what is experienced as the essen-

tially religious in religious experience? Stone is right: a theory of experience has to affirm — both in theory and in practice — that all experience and all inquiry is historically rooted. A generous empiricism like that of Stone will therefore recognize that present experience is, to a large degree, a reconstruction of past experience. Thus experience is a chain or series of interpretations, informed but also restricted in its range by the past.

This means — and Stone would agree — that also our experiences of the divine are always rooted in the past (Stone 1992:143). In his move beyond the foundationalist confines of cultural provincialism, Stone moves from theism to minimalism and radical empiricism. But what really warrants this move? The only apparent answer, again, seems to be a prior metaphysical commitment to naturalism. This of course is fine, but if so, what we have here is not just an argument for greater experiential adequacy, but what is revealed beyond this argument is a prior commitment to, or faith in naturalism.

This naturalism determines the minimalist vision of transcendence completely. Stone, of course, would be happy with that, but ironically it also sets limits to his transactional realism. This is nowhere more clear than when Stone points to the crucial referential aspect of religious language (Stone 1992:157ff). This referential function of what Stone calls the translucent domain of the language of devotion (Stone 1992:158), is indeed a key point in his religious naturalism. Stone's focus on the referential function of religious language sets him apart from expressivists and anti-realists in philosophy of religion and thus serves to justify his realist stance. The reference, however, is not to an ontological ultimate, but to the divine aspects of our experienced world.

In this way Stone's arguments claim reference along with experiential adequacy by exploring experience, and by discovering transcendence in experience. The crucial question, of course, is how does this model lead us — through experience and reference — to discover a *minimalist* transcendence in experience? And again the answer can only be: because the model itself is already a naturalist one, and is working like a grid to determine this minimalism. Of course, if it is true of even an interactionalist model like Stone's that all our experience is in the end preceded by a commitment to a specific paradigm, it raises serious problems for all of us that are trying to construct plausible models in religious epistemology. It also may point to the fact that there might be more epistemic values involved in the shaping of the rationality of religious reflection than we think.

Postmodern thought challenges those of us who are Christian theologians to account for the fact of Christianity. Jerome Stone's important book shows that it also challenges us to rediscover the explanatory role of religious experience in post-foundationalist theology. I agree with Stone that religious language can never be seen

as just a useful system of symbols that can be action guiding and meaningful for the believer without having to be referential or reality depicting in any stronger sense of the word.

Within Stone's minimalist model, however, the divine functions as a placemaker (Stone 1992:40), and not as the — for him — illegitimate move beyond the available evidence to an ontological ultimate. This transactional realism, as well as the accompanying notion of reference, may be the most intriguing notions of Stone's minimalist vision, but it is also the point where this model is at its most vulnerable. When in moments of extremity, moments of defeat or despair, joy or victory we reach a profound awareness of our own limits, what will the language and experience of our limitation refer to? For Stone the reference is to generic resources of minimalist transcendence, which is at the same time a (bold?) step outside any particular religion. Stone's initial embracing of pluralism might indeed have allowed for the ultimate and even passionate commitment to truth that many of the historic religions presuppose. But could his move to a generic minimalist vision of the divine really be consonant with postmodernism's celebration of true pluralism?

Stone is right when he argues that any plausible form of realism in religious epistemology should always be an empirical thesis since its credibility and acceptance as a belief system can only be determined on experiential grounds. In theology too, our rational inquiry and quest for intelligibility will always include a response to what we experience, and empirical fit, or experiential adequacy, thus becomes one of the most important epistemic values that shape the rationality of theological reflection. The high degree of personal involvement in religious and theological theorizing not only reveals the relational character of our being in the world, but epistemologically implies the mediated and interpretative character of all religious experience.

What is revealed here is the epistemic and explanatory role of an ultimate religious commitment, which certainly is no irrational retreat to commitment, but, on the contrary, reveals the committed nature of all rational thought, and thus the fiduciary rootedness of all rationality. Stone is right: in a sense one's concept of experience will indeed entail one's concept of meaning, which in turn will determine one's concept of religious cognition. With this the challenge to postfoundationalist theology becomes even more profound and can be stated as follows: could it be that a minimalist vision of transcendence in the end may still be empowered to point to some form of ontological unity, and maybe even to a personal God? This notion of a personal God may serve to make sense of (and thus may be experientially more adequate to) great swathes of experience which without this notion would simply baffle us (cf Polkinghorne 1991:98). It would also be at least theologically consonant with the sacramental destiny

that Stone's ecotheology wants to claim for our precious planet. Elizabeth A Johnson points to this in her recent groundbreaking study on divine presence and transcendence: at the root of all religious imagery lies an experience of the mystery of God, potentially given to us in all experience where there is no exclusive zone, no special realm, which alone may be called religious. In this way the historical world becomes a sacrament of divine presence and activity, even if only as a fragile possibility (cf Johnson 1993:124).

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