The Question of Theological Truth in a Multireligious World

Reflections at the Interface of Continental Philosophy and Interreligious Studies

Frederiek Depoortere and Magdalen Lambkin

Introduction

In the closing essay of this book, we wish to return to some of the research questions that we raised in our Editors’ Introduction. We will proceed in five steps, drawing on insights from various essays in this volume along the way. First, we will argue that truth-talk is an essential part of Christianity and other religions and will introduce the distinction between truths and the Truth. In a second step, we will seek to bring forward the debate between pluralism and particularism in the theology of religions before, in our third section, reconsidering the pluralist option, taking into account the particularist critique and offering a so-called “soft pluralism.” In the fourth section, we will explore the issue of how truth functions in the process of interreligious dialogue and examine how the paradigm of translation can be helpful in the reflection on interreligious encounter. Finally, we will turn to the topic of hermeneutics, describing the importance of hermeneutics for interreligious dialogue but also showing that Western philosophical hermeneutics offers a rich and deep understanding of dialogue and concluding by sketching the contours of a hermeneutical concept of truth.

Truth, Christian Theology, and the Religions

“What is truth?” This was the most fundamental question raised in our Editors’ Introduction. But, as Depoortere’s introductory essay showed, this may very well be a mistaken question—at least if we follow contemporary analytic philosophers like Richard Rorty and Donald Davidson in their acceptance of the indefinability of truth: either truth is so trivial that we
should not care about it (Rorty) or so fundamental that we cannot reduce it to things that are even more basic (Davidson). Moreover, what Rorty and Davidson also have in common (despite their different appreciations of the importance of truth) is a rejection of any reification of truth. In the “Introduction” to his Consequences of Pragmatism, Rorty is emphatic in stressing “that ‘there is no such thing’ as Truth” (Rorty 1982: xiv). We only have sentences that are true, Rorty contends, and he dismisses as Platonism every attempt to move from the use of the word “true” to Truth (with capital T) as possessing a certain nature or essence. Davidson agrees. He argues that we should break “the spell of the Socratic idea that we must keep asking for the essence of an idea [like truth]” (Davidson 1996: 275) and explains that “Truth isn’t an object, and so it can’t be true; truth is a concept, and is intelligibly attributed to things like sentences, utterances, beliefs and propositions, entities which have a propositional content” (Davidson 1999: 105).

This focus on truth as a predicate of entities like sentences, beliefs, or propositions is shared by analytic philosophy in general. Sometimes this focus takes the form of an explicit exclusion of other meanings or uses of the word “true.” This is the case for Gottlob Frege who has been regarded as one of the founders of analytic philosophy (see Depoortere, p. 32). Although Frege recognises that “true” can be used in the sense of “genuine” or “veracious” and adds that some people speak about “truth in art,” he immediately puts these uses of the word aside as being unimportant (he is only interested in “that kind of truth ... whose recognition is the goal of science”) (Frege 1967: 18). The same is the case for another author cited by Depoortere, Pascal Engel, who begins a chapter on the classical theories of truth in his book on truth (Engel 2002) by offering a short sketch of the common sense, everyday use of the word “true.” As he notes, people not only predicate “true” to thoughts and other mental entities but “also to concrete things, such as pictures, artefacts, pieces of currency, or even living animals,” in which cases “true” means as much “as ‘authentic’, ‘real’, ‘faithful’, ‘exact’ or ‘conforming to’ a model or a type.” He also adds that “true” can even be used as a character trait. For instance, this is the case when we speak about “a true friend” and mean that the person under consideration is loyal