

BERNARD BOLZANO'S ANALYTIC PHILOSOPHY OF RELIGION

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1. Bernard Bolzano (1781-1848)

In this short paper, I want to give you an overview to the thought of the perhaps most original, yet still widely unknown Austrian philosopher: Bernard Bolzano (1781-1848).¹ Bolzano was a priest and professor of Religion at the university of Prague from 1805 until he was fired under still somewhat unclear circumstances in 1819/20. Bolzano was also a magnificent mathematician, every scholar today knows the theorem of Bolzano and Weierstrass. According to Michael Dummett in his book *Origins of Analytic Philosophy*,² Bernard Bolzano is the great-grandfather of analytic philosophy. His principal work is surely the huge *Wissenschaftslehre* (Theory of Science) of 1837, the first modern and comprehensive treatise of logic, epistemology and philosophy of science.³ It has the same title as Johann Gottlieb Fichte's book, but the characters of the two works are incomparable. In this book, Bolzano antedates modern development in semantics, logics, probability theory and other fields for decades or even 100 years; for example, 120 years

before Carnap he defined a logical concept of probability.⁴ It was Edmund Husserl who first re-discovered the immense value of Bolzano's writings, but the Bolzano renaissance is still not completed. An edition of all his works and manuscripts is in process, of about 120 planned volumes about 70 have already appeared.⁵

Was he also a pioneer in modern analytic philosophy of religion? There is surely no direct influence to current analytic philosophy of religion, and Bolzano founded no "school" in that field, but we find in his works some really excellent pieces of analytic philosophy of religion, and all that around 1810. I will just mention four of them:

Firstly, Bolzano was a pioneer of the "logic of religion", i.e. the clarification of the structure, meaning and justification of religious belief-systems. 130 years later, Joseph Bochenski in *The Logic of Religion*⁶ of 1965 published a similar approach.

Secondly, Bolzano formulated a

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logically sophisticated proof for God's existence. It follows the pattern of proof from the contingency of things to God as their cause, but it is in detail highly original and has no parallel in the literature, as far as I can see.

Thirdly, Bolzano brings a probabilistic analysis of our reasoning about the credibility of historical testimony. This was important for Christian theology, since the Christian religion is a revealed religion: It claims to go back to certain extraordinary historical events, and hence its rationality hangs on the historical credibility of the testimonial accounts of these events. Testimony is a huge topic also in current epistemology, but Bolzano presents an early and sophisticated probabilistic treatise on that – just a few years after Laplace.

Fourthly, in some of his sermons (“exhortations”) which he had to give each Sunday and holiday for his students, he presents detailed analyses of various speech-acts, e.g. of the exact difference between “lying” and “deceiving”. In these sermons, Bolzano anticipates Austin’s and Searle’s work on speech-act theory by more than 100 years.

The most important sources for Bolzano’s philosophy of religion are three: *Firstly*, the comprehensive, 6 volume *Lehrbuch der Religionswissenschaft* [Textbook on the Doctrine of

Religion] of 1834.⁷ It is based on his lecture notes and was published anonymously in Bavaria by his pupils due to the political censorship in Habsburg Austria. Despite its German title, it has nothing to do with religious studies, but it is a complete treatise of philosophy of religion and systematic theology. *Secondly*, a book on the immortality of the soul, and thirdly, his more than 500 sermons which are just being published in a first complete edition (as far as we have the texts, fortunately we have most of them). Fourthly, one should mention some books at the edge of theology, but I must skip them here for brevity. All in all, philosophy of religion is one of the central interests of Bolzano, and with respect to quantity, it is one of the biggest or even the biggest part of his work. Nevertheless, it is still underrated and scarcely known.⁸ The most parts of his philosophy are his anti-Kantianism, his postulate of a domain of “sentences in themselves” (something like Fregean propositions or Meinongian “Objektive”), and in mathematics the Bolzano-Weierstrass theorem, and a book on the paradoxes of infinity. As a fine introduction that includes also the philosophy of religion, I can recommend the free online article on Bolzano in the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy by Edgar Morscher, one

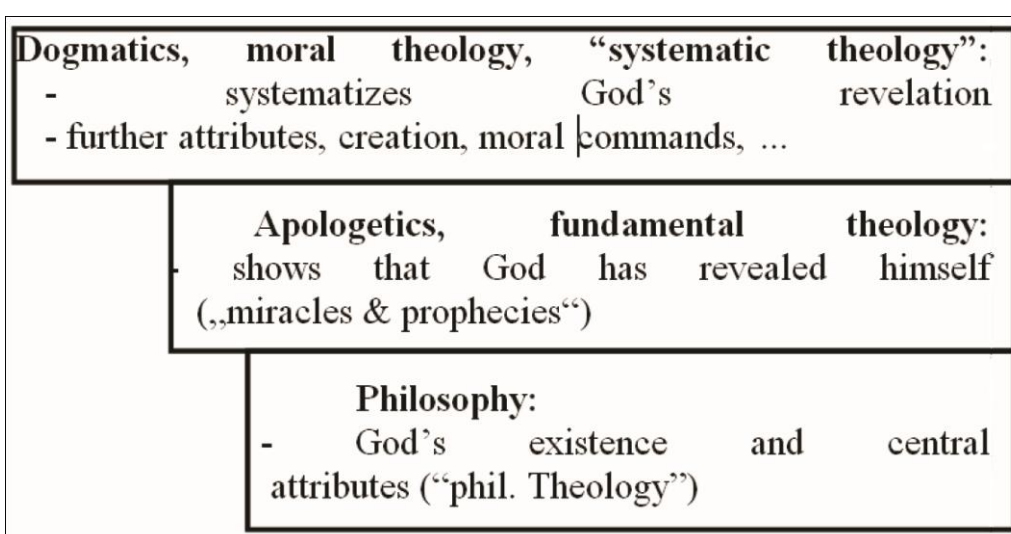
of the leading Bolzano scholars of our day. Parts of Bolzano's works are also translated in English, however the translations do not include many texts about religion. Bolzano is so far mostly seen as mathematician, logician and philosopher of science.

After explaining Bolzano's overall project in his textbook in section 2, I will pick out three interesting points in sections 3 to 5: His definition of religion, the question whether he was a total non-cognitivist in religion, and whether he argued for a sort of self-deception or self-persuasion in religious matters.

2. Bolzano's overall project in the Textbook

In order to understand Bolzano, one should recall the traditional stratified model which was in the background of (especially Catholic) theology for centuries till the 20th century. Theology works

like a cooperative in a 3-floor building. On the ground floor we find philosophical theology, which tries to demonstrate that God exists and to clarify a few of his properties, e.g. his bodilessness and his eternity (but not, for example, God's triune nature – this is a topic for theology). On the first floor, there is apologetics or fundamental theology: It tries to show that God indeed revealed himself in the remarkable happenings of the Old and New Testament (miracles and prophecies were a key argument). On the 2nd floor, dogmatic and moral theology try to systematize the content of God's revelation to us. Here now come in topics such as the trinity, God as creator, the two natures of Jesus Christ, Christian moral commands and much more. The size of the floors symbolizes the richness in content of the disciplines:



In order to understand Bolzano's working situation, one should recall that the philosophy and theology of enlightenment brought all floors of this building into critique: Notably, Immanuel Kant criticized the possibility of proofs for God's existence, and historico-critical Bible scholarship put in question not only the historicity of miracles and prophecies, but also the content of God's revelation: For example, it is historically somewhat unclear what Jesus and the apostles exactly taught and what is a mere literary add-on. In light of these criticisms, some enlightenment theologians even went so far as to say that Christian belief should better be interpreted in a non-cognitive, mere moral sense: The trinity, to take an example, is not a cognitive doctrine about facts concerning God, but rather a moral command in disguise: Lead your life like the three persons in God – love others, but maintain a distance and leave them their own identity, let the other one be the other one.

In his Textbook, Bolzano reacts on all three floors of the building: He tries to show that God exists, that the historical revelation as reported in the Bible deserves (on the whole) trust, and that a systematic core of religious propositions can rationally

be defended, at least if we separate the actual core of the doctrines from their metaphorical wrappings. All this looks much like traditional theology, but it is not exactly in the standard way, as we shall see below.

3. Bolzano's definition of religion

Religions are complex phenomena, consisting of a social group with structures, functionaries etc., rituals, holy places and times, moral commands, general attitudes towards life, etc. But they also contain a theory-like, cognitive core of factual beliefs which can be formulated in propositions. Polytheists differ from theists, for example, in their beliefs about whether there is one or many transcendent, God-like objects.

Bolzano would not doubt the other features of religion, but in his definition of religion he takes the notion of a religious proposition as fundamental. A religion in Bolzano's model is something like a sum of propositions. This was very uncommon in the theology of his times, and by that he anticipated the linguistic turn of analytic philosophy by almost 100 years. Let us first look at his distinction between objective and subjective religion. Whereas subjective religion is the sum of religious propositions accepted by some particular person, we can also look at such a sum in itself, apart

from the question whether someone believes that. This is then an objective religion.

The (subjective) religion of a person P = def the sum of the religious propositions accepted by P .

An (objective) religion = def a sum of religious propositions (Textbook, I, □.20).

Based on those definitions, Bolzano proposes some derivative definitions in the subsequent paragraphs. A “living religion” is an objective religion which is actually accepted by some people, a “dead religion” (like the religions of the old Greeks and Romans) is one for which this is not true any more; a “possible or imaginary religion” is an objective religion that someone puts together without anybody being there who actually accepts all these religious propositions. (We may add that attempts to reform religions sometimes started with such imaginary religions.) The “religion of a society” according to Bolzano is the sum of propositions which all (or almost all) members of a group or society accept. (We see that Bolzano had a clear eye for the sociological fact of religious deviance even within groups).

All these definitions so far rely on the definition of a religious proposition, an “R-proposition” for short. But what is an R-proposition according to Bolzano? In □.20, he states two

necessary conditions, an epistemic one and an ethical one:

a) The epistemic condition is that with respect to an R-proposition we have a natural inclination to accept or reject it without sufficient reason or evidence. In a somewhat counter-intuitive terminology, Bolzano calls such propositions “moral propositions”.

b) The ethical condition is that the acceptance or rejection of an R-proposition modifies our degree of virtue and happiness. Bolzano calls such propositions “important propositions”.

We may define that an R-proposition = def a proposition that fulfils conditions (a) and (b).

In Bolzano’s own words:

Textbook I, □.20: [...] hence, by religion, if I should take this word in its subjective sense, I understand the sum of all those beliefs of a man which are religious, or in other words, the religion of a man I call the sum of all those beliefs of a man which either have a beneficent or unfavorable influence on his virtue or on his happiness, and which are at the same time such that there is a particular temptation/inclination to commit oneself either for or against them without sufficient reason/evidence.

[...] From this subjective meaning of the word easily results its objective one. Because, if we conceive of a sum

of religious propositions with the purpose that these propositions could be the religion of a man, yet without presupposing that they really are believed and accepted by someone: then we think of the notion of religion in the objective meaning. [...] In both cases, however, we take the word in a meaning which is wider than the common one. Because, if I am not mistaken, in that latter meaning one understands by religion nothing else than the belief in God and the sum of all those moral beliefs of a man which refer to his relations and duties towards God. (Translation: W.L.)

R-propositions are hence propositions that: a) we have a natural tendency to accept or reject without reason or evidence; and that b) influence the degree of our virtue – or for short, and in Bolzano's strange terminology, "important moral propositions". As Bolzano obviously takes it, true religious propositions raise the degree of our virtue and happiness, whereas false ones lower it.

Let me add two observations. *Firstly*, as an interesting consequence of this definition, Bolzano himself notes that also the atheist believes some religious propositions (this is perhaps an interesting observation for the current discussions whether "New Atheism" (Dawkins etc.) has

religious features itself) . In general, R-propositions are not restricted to religious matters at all.

Secondly, it is nowhere excluded that R-propositions can be backed by reasons. Religion according to Bolzano is not something you must adopt as a blind option. Looking at his own project, we see that he himself provides reasons for R-propositions, for example by establishing a new argument for God's existence.

4. Bolzano – a religious fictionalist or non-cognitivist?

This latter point brings me to another question: Is it true – as the older Bolzano literature used to see it – that Bolzano is a religious fictionalist or non-cognitivist? Did he argue for a moral re-interpretation of the R-propositions in the style of enlightenment theology?

We saw that indeed all religious propositions have to be morally relevant according to Bolzano (this was his moral condition and the notion of an "important proposition"), and the epistemic condition said that we have a tendency to accept R-propositions without evidence or sufficient reasons. All that seems to point to a non-cognitivist, moral re-interpretation of religion, and so it was taken by some earlier Bolzano-interpreters like Eduard Winter (the

great pioneer of Bolzano research in the mid 20th century).

But as I noted before, the epistemic condition does not at all imply that there could not be sufficient evidence, reasons or arguments for R-propositions. The epistemic condition just says that we have a tendency to accept R-propositions even without them. Bolzano himself invests a lot of work to establish such arguments. His proof for God's existence is an example of such an argument, and we can see his whole project in the Textbook as an attempt to provide reasons for R-propositions. His interest in the ontology of God and of immortal souls in his book on immortality is another clear hint in that direction.

I think that Bolzano in fact believed in a theoretico-practical "double face" nature of R-propositions which is de facto very much in traditional lines. In medieval theology, one of the standard topics at the beginning of theology textbooks was *Utrum theologia sit scientia speculativa aut practica?*, that means "is theology more a theoretical or more a practical science?", and most medieval authors also tended to a double-face position: Theological doctrines have a factual, theoretical side, but believing in them has consequences for our life and should in the end lead us to salvation. In

sum, Bolzano held a pretty balanced position and should not simply be classified as a mainstream enlightenment theologian.

5. Self-deception/-persuasion to religion?

There are some passages in □.17 and 18 of Bolzano's which are especially controversial and seem to point towards a religious fictionalism. In his own words:

□.17. We sometimes wish to have certain beliefs. [...]

□.18. ... I also hold that the influence a man can exert by his will on the emergence of his beliefs is so far-reaching that (if we want) we can often even deceive, or (as one also says) persuade ourselves; i.e. that we deliberately behave in such a way that a belief which we initially considered wrong or at least uncertain will finally be held by us. This is because we humans can:

a) [...] Form the wish that we could really hold a certain belief; and since we have a predictable influence on our beliefs, we can also

b) Try to really produce this belief in ourselves; we can deliberately direct our attention to all true or only apparent reasons for it, we can deliberately withdraw our attention from all objections to it, we can keep company with men who adhere to his belief, we can read books in which it

is defended, etc. By all these means it can finally

c) Happen indeed that we adhere to this belief with a bigger or smaller degree of confidence.

Is this really a sort of fictionalism or pragmatism? I don't think so: If we look at the text, Bolzano does nowhere suggest: a) A flat epistemic voluntarism (that is, the simple decision to believe something, like turning a switch in your mind, which is indeed impossible) nor does he; b) recommend a belief against the evidence.

What Bolzano recommends here is something similar to what Blaise Pascal suggested as a rational strategy in his famous *Pascal's Wager* argument (*Pensées*. 233): For practical reasons you should act as if God existed and you were a religious person ("have masses said, take holy water,..."), and this will in the long run generate genuine faith in yourself. In terms of Ludwig Wittgenstein, Pascal recommends a sort of "*Abrichtung*" (training) to a certain "form of life" ("*Lebensform*"), which includes also a slow change in your thought.

Back to Bolzano: He seems to propose an epistemological variant of this strategy: We are invited to pre-select the "epistemic inputs" of various sorts, e.g. by selecting the literature and arguments we want to

deal with. It would for example be wise, according to Bolzano, to deal not too much with literature in the style of Nietzsche, Marx, Freud, Sartre, Dawkins, and other critics of religion if one is interested in becoming or remaining a religious person.

This of course raises a question: under which condition is it rational to enter such a self-education process in the fashion of Pascal and Bolzano, i.e. to train yourself towards a certain religion? Of course only under the condition that this religion is at the outset also attractive from a theoretical standpoint, i.e. there are good theoretical arguments that it is true.⁹ And here we are back to Bolzano's theoretical arguments – he is much more a rationalist than Pascal. And in that interpretation his self-persuasion to belief loses a lot of its dangerous appearance.

I am sorry that I have to skip some other "diamonds" in Bolzano's philosophy of religion, e.g. his probabilistic analysis of historical testimony or his wonderful ethical analysis of the slogan "if I don't involve myself in corruption, then someone else will, hence I can do it" which he develops in a sermon on the Gospel of Luke.¹⁰ But I hope that I succeeded in making you at least curious about an excellent philosopher, in whose works there are still a lot of

exciting things to discover. □

Unfortunately, the footnotes were cut away in the lay-outing process. Here they are:

1. On Bolzano's life and works, see also Edgar Morscher's excellent (and freely available) introduction: *Bernard Bolzano*, in: *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/bolzano/>. Book edition: *Bernard Bolzano's life and work*. St. Augustin: Academia 2008.
2. The remark on Bolzano is in an interview with Dummett: *Ursprünge der analytischen Philosophie*. Frankfurt: Suhrkamp 1988, 167. English edition: *Origins of Analytical Philosophy*, London: Duckworth 1993.
3. Sulzbach: Seidel 1837. There are two selected translations into English, one by Rolf George (*Theory of Science*. Oxford: Blackwell 1972) and one by Jan Berg and Burnham Terrell (*Theory of Science*. Dordrecht etc.: Reidel 1973).
4. For an overview see Jan Berg, The Importance of Being Bolzano, in: Edgar Morscher (ed.), *Bernard Bolzanos Leistungen in Logik, Mathematik und Physik*. St. Augustin: Academia 2003, 153-166.
5. *Bernard Bolzano Gesamtausgabe*. Stuttgart - Bad Cannstatt: Frommann-Holzboog 1969ff.
6. New York: New York University Press. German translation by Albert Menne: *Logik der Religion*. Köln: Bachem 1968.
7. Sulzbach: Seidel 1834. Some passages were translated into English in: *Bernard Bolzano, Selected Writings on Ethics and Politics*, translated by Paul Rusnock and Rolf George, Amsterdam - New York: Rodopi 2007.
8. See my edited German volume *Bernard Bolzanos Religionsphilosophie und Theologie*. St. Augustin: Academia 2002, and from the older literature Hermann Schrödter, *Philosophie und Religion. Die „Religionswissenschaft“ Bernard Bolzanos*. Meisenheim: Hain 1972 and Eberhard Herrmann, *Der religionsphilosophische Standpunkt Bernard Bolzanos unter Berücksichtigung seiner Semantik, Wissenschaftstheorie und Moralphilosophie*. Lund: Gleerup 1977.
9. See my *Einführung in die Religionsphilosophie*, 2nd edition, Darmstadt 2013, ch. 3.11.
10. This exhortation from summer 1811 is edited in the selected edition *Bernard Bolzano, 24 Erbauungsreden*. Edited by Kurt F. Strasser. Vienna etc.: Böhlau 2001, 103-118.