

Robert Audi: Rationality and religious commitment
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In *Rationality and Religious Commitment*, Audi argues that religious commitment can be rational. Audi is concerned with religious commitment in a robust sense, which includes not just one's beliefs, but also the behavioral, moral, dispositional, and aesthetic dimensions involved in the religious life. He argues that a non-dogmatic religious commitment suffused with appropriate humility, particularly in the interpersonal and political sphere, can be rational. But such a commitment need not be a watered-down or circumscribed commitment: on the contrary, the deeper the commitment reaches into all the dimensions of her life, the more integrated and rich is the life of the rational religious person.

It is natural to start with the exact notion of rationality at issue. Audi distinguishes four separate normative ideals that can apply to beliefs: beliefs can be rational; beliefs can be reasonable; beliefs can be justified; and beliefs can amount to knowledge. Audi stresses that these first three notions apply to conduct as well as belief, e.g., practical as well as theoretical rationality. His view of rationality is a well-groundedness view: the rationality of particular beliefs and conduct depends on their having good grounding in experience, direct or indirect, where indirect experience includes (among other things) logical and inferential reasoning. Whether an individual is overall ("globally") rational will depend in part on whether her individual beliefs, desires, and actions are rational. Audi is also at times concerned with the stronger normative notion of reasonableness, which he takes to mean (in the global sense) governed by reason or (in the sense of individual beliefs and desires) exhibiting support by reasons, not merely consonant with reason as rationality requires.

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Audi also devotes considerable space to what religious commitment consists in. Audi distinguishes between seven different locutions involving “faith” in English, and isolates four which are not reducible to others: propositional faith (faith *that*), attitudinal faith (faith *in*), creedal faith (*a* faith), and global faith (*person of* faith). He also distinguishes between two kinds of propositional faith, *doxastic* and *fiducial* faith, which differ in that the former is accompanied by belief whereas the latter is not. As a general rule, belief bears a stronger relationship to how the agent represents the world than does fiducial faith, since belief is truth-valued and fiducial faith is compatible with more doubt about its object. However, faith (both fiducial and doxastic) bears a stronger relationship to the agent’s non-truth-valued mental states than belief does, since faith tends to require a positive valuation of its object and tends to eliminate negative emotions such as fear. Thus, fiducial faith is an important cognitive category that won’t be evaluable solely in terms of its relationship to the truth. Audi also explores the behavioral and emotional dimensions of religious commitment, and distinguishes three axes along which a religious commitment can vary: its strength, its depth, and its breadth. In general, the stronger or deeper or broader the commitment is, the higher the bar it has to meet to count as rational. But a religion itself may recommend that one’s commitment to it not outrun the grounds one has, so even if rationality doesn’t recommend the deepest possible commitment, there need be no conflict between one’s duties as specified by one’s religion and one’s duties as a rational agent.

Audi considers the positive support for religious commitment. On the theoretical side, he argues that for many people, testimony and religious experience can rationally ground religious commitments. He also claims that it is rational for some people to think that the arguments from natural theology provide some support for God’s existence, though such support isn’t required in order for religious commitment to be rational. Furthermore, one might have adequate reason to believe that religious commitment would be cognitively rational if nurtured, even if one doesn’t currently have rational grounds for religious commitment: one might have inductive or testimonial evidence that one would rationally believe if one engaged the arguments or opened oneself to religious experience. In the normal case, Audi argues, religious experience and collateral support from arguments or testimony rationally ground the intellectual component of religious commitment.

On the practical side, Audi argues that religious conduct coheres with what we ought to do from the point of view of moral philosophy considered solely as a secular enterprise, although some religious conduct may be supererogatory from this point of view. In the course of this discussion, several key claims emerge. The first is that there are many ways—both religious and secular—of discovering and apprehending our moral obligations. In harmony with this claim, Audi advocates for a theory of divine commandability rather than divine commandedness (though he leaves open other possibilities), since the former allows that our obligations can be known on non-theological grounds. The final claim is that classical theism is consistent with most normative ethical positions held by contemporary philosophers: classical theism generally provides a lot of latitude in this domain. This chapter exemplifies a recurring conclusion in this book: that religious sources of knowledge and secular sources are mutually enhancing.

After discussing morality, Audi turns to the rationality of the other practical aspects of religious commitment. He discusses the ways in which a robust religious commitment pervades all the dimensions of one's life: attitudinal, emotional, aesthetic, political, and scientific. He makes vivid the ways in which a religious commitment pervades an integrated life, rather than being an isolated component. Again, he argues that religious commitment enhances, rather than conflicts with, the goods that one can experience secularly. It is crucial, though, that one not take one's religious commitment to trump the commitments of others in the political and interpersonal arena: it ought not overstep what can be publicly agreed upon.

Audi takes himself to have shown two things. First, there are positive reasons to hold religious beliefs and have religious faith, which, if undefeated, would make religious commitment theoretically rational. Second, the other relevant cognitive and practical attitudes that accompany religious commitment are practically rational. The remainder of the book is devoted to considering the theoretical reasons against religious commitment: if the positive reasons to hold doxastic or fiducial faith are outweighed, then religious commitment will not be rational.

Audi considers two types of challenges: those internal to theism and those external to it. The internal challenges are the familiar ones: whether the divine attributes are consistent; whether disagreement and pluralism undermine theism; and the problem of evil. Audi concludes that these challenges don't preclude rational fiducial faith and may also allow rational doxastic faith. His defense against the problem of evil rests on the value of human freedom, and he argues that the existence of the amount and type of evil we experience is compatible with God's existence on both compatibilist and incompatibilist views of free will. Notably, Audi argues for a "theocentric" rather than a "cosmocentric" approach to the problem of evil: he avers that we ought to ask whether some particular combination of good and evil in a world is overall good in terms of its inherent value, experienced by God, rather than in terms of its value for particular inhabitants.

The external challenges to theism come from the plausibility of a naturalistic program, which strives to achieve a physicalistic ontology and to respect the epistemological sovereignty of the scientific method. One challenge is that theism presupposes theses in the philosophy of mind that the naturalist alleges be false: the existence of mental causation and supernatural causation, and the possibility of personal identity without embodiment. Audi argues that to the extent that theism does require these claims, there is nothing in the results of science or philosophy to refute theism. The second significant challenge is that insofar as naturalism can account for natural phenomena (including apparent religious experiences) without invoking a supernatural entity, it is a more economical worldview. Audi points out that simplicity is only one of many criteria that a theory ought to possess, and argues that the religious worldview scores higher on other criteria, such as its ability to explain the origins of the universe and its more plausible explanation for religious experiences. The final challenge alleges that the scientific method, given its reliance on causal sufficiency, presupposes naturalism. Audi invokes the possibility of causal overdetermination to argue that naturalism is not presupposed; moreover, this overdetermination does not render theism inert, since the kind of ultimate explanations theism is in the business of providing are characteristically forsworn in science. Audi concludes "there need

be no conflict between a theistic world view and a deeply scientific habit of mind” (p. 286).

This is a very rich book, and surveys a large terrain with impressive nuance. Audi makes a strong case that religious commitment is rational (and may even be fully supported by reasons) for many people who have deeply considered the issue. It is thus an excellent contribution to the literature. Audi’s arguments about the compatibility of theism with various philosophical positions could each occupy a substantial discussion: although some might wish to press objections farther than Audi can given his constraints of space, Audi’s discussion is a good anchoring point for anyone interested in these issues. Since there are too many specific arguments to fruitfully focus on these, I instead want to put forward three large-scale concerns that I think merit further treatment.

The first concerns an aspect of Audi’s methodology. He stresses that there are two dimensions of evaluation, theoretical and practical rationality, each of which applies to some aspects of a religious commitment. Despite this, he is concerned with providing a single evaluation of the rationality of religious commitment, and he allows that shortfalls in one dimension could be made up for by greater success in another. Note, though, that the two dimensions could in principle be orthogonal. I suspect that many of us can think of religious commitments that would motivate us to become better people with richer lives if we held them—thus scoring high on the dimension of practical rationality as Audi sees it—but which we find utterly impossible to hold intellectually. Conversely, we can call to mind ways of living that include commitments which are intellectually unassailable but are impoverished emotionally and ethically. Aside from a general philosophical worry about whether there is an adequate overall criterion that encompasses both dimensions, lumping together the two dimensions invites a worry about whether some overall commitments get off too easily: if a particular commitment counts as rational primarily because it is unassailable on practical grounds, but is merely acceptable on theoretical grounds, the need to review the theoretical grounds might be concealed by its overall rationality. (Or vice versa.) One would need to argue that these two dimensions are either mutually supporting, or inseparable in actual psychology, or ought to be tied together in our evaluation for some other reason.

My second worry concerns Audi’s conclusion to the effect that respect for the scientific method doesn’t undermine theism. Audi argues that nothing within the methodology or findings of science conflicts with theism. But I wonder whether the scientifically-minded philosopher might object not to his particular arguments but rather to the project’s focus on rationality rather than on the stronger notion of justification. For some, the scientific method is an injunction against believing things that are not positively believed to be justified, even if one has some evidence for them and lacks defeating evidence, and even if they fit into an overall coherent picture of the world. Audi would presumably say that many of our ordinary practices don’t presume such a high standard: for example, we think believing on the basis of testimony is a laudable practice, but, as Audi argues, we are generally not rationally required by testimony to believe. However, the naturalist has several potential replies. He might argue that we do in fact have justification for many beliefs based on testimony, and that we are rationally required to hold these beliefs. Or he might argue that these beliefs are subject to a lower standard because we can’t get by without them, whereas we

presumably could avoid holding religious beliefs. Further argument is required, but it seems worth exploring whether the scientific mindset marries more naturally with one of the standards Audi doesn't focus on.

The final worry has to do with the extent to which the life of the religious person ends up substantially different from the life of the non-religious person. Audi stresses that theism is compatible with a range of views in normative ethics, in philosophy of mind, and in the free will debate. He also stresses that both morality and scientific discovery are epistemically independent from theism. Finally, he accepts that events might be overdetermined by supernatural and natural causes. The result is that many of the intellectual commitments of a religious person need not be substantially different from those of her non-religious counterpart. Religious commitment, of course, is not inert: it might explain why an agent accepts the views she accepts, and it makes a big difference to what we might term her "cognitive outlook"—which things she has faith in, what she desires and hopes for, the range of cognitive experiences she is open to—as well as to her actions. But one might worry about a picture on which theistic commitments are so harmonious with non-theistic commitments. Allow me to illustrate using the example of moral obligations.

Let us use the term "secular obligations" for those obligations that can be deduced from agreed-upon facts, and "religious obligations" for those obligations that come with one's religious commitment. As mentioned, Audi argues that in general there will be no conflict between one's religious obligations and one's secular obligations; on the contrary, one's religious obligations will support one's secular obligations, in providing additional motivation to do what one (secularly) ought. Furthermore, insofar as these obligations differ, the religious obligations will seem supererogatory from the point of view of secular morality.

One might begin by wondering whether it is in fact true that secular obligations and religious obligations don't conflict, even for a religious person who is appropriately circumspect about the strength of her religious commitment not outrunning its grounds and appropriately humble about not imposing her viewpoint on others in the political sphere. One might be religiously obligated to perform an act that impinges upon not just one's own well-being, but that of one's loved ones: to live in a poor community and work towards its betterment even if one's children receive a worse education, or to refuse a job that requires working on the Sabbath even if it would allow one to provide a better life for one's family. Of course, there are many views about what a particular religion requires, and many views about what secular morality requires. But the point is that insofar as religious obligations trade off against genuine goods, and these goods seem more important or the obligations less substantiated without the religious outlook, there will be genuine tension. Furthermore, even if it is true that one can simultaneously satisfy religious obligations and secular obligations, one might object that to *require* acts that are merely supererogatory on secular morality is itself bad if the relevant religious claims turn out to be false. For example, Christianity plausibly demands that a Christian forgive even those who do her great injustice, but one might think this demand ought not be made unless a background claim of Christianity—that all are sinners in need of forgiveness—is in fact true.

If there is no conflict between secular and religious morality, one might think this fact is itself a puzzle, and that a defender of religious commitment as rational ought to

have an explanation for it. Such an explanation could cut either way. On the one hand, one might argue that ‘secular’ morality closely resembles religious morality because we are in fact made in the image of God and this is reflected in our sensibilities, which in turn affects which moral theories we find plausible. On the other hand, one might argue that ‘religious’ morality closely resembles secular morality because we simply lack the evidence that a more radical religious morality would require, and so a rational religious commitment can’t really outrun a secular one: rational religion turns out to be secularism in a different light. Relatedly, one might worry that religious people won’t be satisfied with the final version of what rational religious commitment entails.

This set of worries extends to other domains in which Audi finds no conflict: it is possible that less is left open by secular philosophy than Audi supposes (particularly if we were to move to stronger normative notions), and if religious and secular intellectual commitments are harmonious, this fact cries out for an explanation. Again, these worries aren’t definitive, especially since Audi does an excellent job describing religious commitment in a way that makes it seem not just overlaid upon a secular life, but it is worth exploring further.

Audi walks a narrow path: he wants to avoid having one’s religious commitment be positively in conflict with secular philosophical and scientific conclusions, but also wants to avoid a picture on which having a deep religious commitment is practically no different from lacking one. It is therefore unsurprising that I want to press him on both sides. Regardless of how he would respond to the exact challenges I have raised, however, this book is well worth reading. One of the particular strengths of this book is the discussion of what religious commitment consists in: Audi doesn’t focus solely on the intellectual dimension of religious commitment, but gives ample consideration to other elements, in particular non-doxastic faith, hope and optimism in one’s outlook, and aesthetic and personal experience. Audi thus captures the richness of actual religious life in a way that is admirable for a philosopher simultaneously focusing on the nitty-gritty of which commitments hold up to intellectual scrutiny. I should add that there are some beautiful passages in this book, especially towards the end as Audi is reflecting on the rewards of a religious life. Thus, form follows function: just as Audi argues that our assessment of religion ought not to ignore the aesthetic dimension of the religious experience, so too does Audi not ignore the aesthetic experience of the reader.