Michiel Pronk: "Verandering van geloofsvoorstelling: Analyse van legitimaties door Antony Flew, Cees Dekker en Raymond Bradley"

English Summary

Revision of beliefs is a common practice. An opinion that once was considered right, is now considered wrong. Especially when the former opinion was communicated to a broader public, an explicit revision might raise questions. People tend to explain their revision to justify their change. My area of interest in this study is in the revision of religious beliefs. Research questions in this dissertation are: (1) How do people justify their revision of religious beliefs? (2) How did this revision take place? (3) How can the revision be assessed intellectually? And more general: (4) What can we learn from the analysis of these revisions and their intellectual justification regarding the possibility of assessing intellectually the revisions of religious beliefs?

In Chapter 1, I develop definitions and a model to analyse the process of revision. The model also provides criteria to evaluate the process. Religious belief is taken to be a statement in a language game that deals with the general order of existence and claims to be true. The plausibility of the statement is supported by rituals, experiences and being part of a community. We focus on a revision of a religious belief and not a changing participation in a religion. In addition, the revision should be documented and justified. The revision can concern a change in ideas or a changing attitude towards certain ideas. The model used for the analysis is based on the work of Imre Lakatos. I use his view that a research program has a hard core that can only be tested thanks to auxiliary hypotheses. In addition, I use his notions of 'positive' and 'negative heuristics'. Drawing on Nicholas Wolterstorff, I add the term 'authentic religious commitment'. This means that there is always a form of commitment in a religion. I determine whether a revision better approximates truth based on three criteria: (1) the facts suit better to the new position; (2) there is progress as the new position can explain the old position but not otherwise or (3) on the basis of nomic principles, progress can be established.

In Chapter 2, 3 and 4, I consider three intellectuals who changed their religious beliefs. Antony Flew (1923-2010) is the subject of Chapter 2. He revised his ideas concerning the existence of God. He had been an atheist for a long time. At the end of his life, he became a deist. This change was much debated. Some people claim Flew's intellectual ability was reduced given his age. I consider that explanation not likely, given the consistent process. In justifying his revision two arguments play a key role: Flew claims he had more often changed his belief over the years and in his view new evidence appeared in recent years. Both arguments are questionable. The change is less than Flew suggests and the 'new' evidence is in many cases not as new as presented. David Conway made an important contribution to Flew's revision of belief with his book *The Rediscovery of Wisdom: From Here to Antiquity in Quest or 'Sophia'*. The book provided an opportunity to think differently of God than the view in theism. Flew has always been an opponent of theism.

An insight regarding his revision process is that people tell stories, a narrative about their revision. This narrative provides the intellectual justification of the process. Through this narrative the change is presented as a rational change. However, an outsider need not agree on the line of reasoning in the narrative and may have his own opinion whether the change can be justified intellectually. Prior to a revision a person considers the arguments in favour or against the old idea. During the revision, a person adjusts the weighing of the arguments resulting in a new position.

Hence, a revision is often not based on new arguments, but on a different assessment of existing arguments. It also shows that a religious belief is part of a network of religious beliefs.

Cees Dekker's revision of beliefs, a Dutch physicist, is discussed in chapter 3. At first, Cees Dekker was sympathetic to the idea of 'intelligent design', but later he accepted theistic evolution. This change was driven by external factors. Dekker explains his sympathy for intelligent design in his inaugural speech in 2000. Two years later a magazine 'Skepter' published an article about his view on intelligent design. In this magazine a discussion on this topic is started. The former Minister of Education, Culture and Science is important in this discussion. On her blog she refers enthusiastically to a conversation with Cees Dekker about intelligent design. This action caused a lot of criticism. In response to this discussion Dekker wrote with others several books about faith and science. In those books a change in attitude can be noted. However, Dekker does not provide an explicit justification of his change in beliefs.

In his case, 'authentic religious commitment' appears an important factor. A change in the way in which faith is lived, can result in a revision of religious beliefs. This case also shows that not offering an explicit justification might serve a purpose as well. Dekker does not give a clear justification for his revision. A possible explanation for the lack of justification is that his new position is similar to the position accepted by other scientists. Therefore, he does not need to justify his change to academics. However, religious people may expect a justification for his change in position. He does not give an explicit justification, but he argues in his books and other contributions that it is possible to accept science and be religious. The rational reconstruction raised the question in what sense the improvement approximates truth. A new position is based on a new weighing of pro and contra arguments and new arguments may appear in future. It is difficult to assess whether the new position more closely approximates truth.

Chapter 4 focuses on Raymond Bradley, an academic philosopher who as a child was convinced of the existence of God, but later became an atheist. He justifies his process of change as logical and compelling. He claims a rational process. However, Bradley admits that his revision of beliefs could have been different if he was not raised in an orthodox Christian family, but in a liberal one. In my opinion, his justification is not only based on intellectual arguments.

The final chapter, chapter 5, discusses the findings of the case studies. In addition, I look back at the definitions in chapter 1. Although we began with 'religious belief' as singular entities, we do not have single beliefs but rather groups or networks of beliefs. I did not focus on changes in participation, this change was certainly important in the change processes discussed. It is therefore impossible to separate faith participation and revision of belief. This implies that the change is not purely a cerebral process. It appears also very difficult to change. Complicating factors are the dynamics of the authentic commitment and the negative heuristic whereby people will try to maintain their position

Based on these findings, I ask myself whether I have shown the possibility of assessing intellectually the revisions of religious beliefs. In a certain way, I do, based on my criteria. Only, the question remains whether it is possible to assess whether the new position approximates truth more closely in comparison to the old position. This is a different and difficult question, for which a different kind of study would be necessary, if possible at all.