

Lloyd Strickland (Lampeter, Wales) Leibniz's Universal Rational Religion¹

Introduction

In various texts Leibniz advances the view that true religion is founded on reason and is thus universal, that is, available to all human beings qua rational creatures. In one text, for example, he claims that “God already revealed true religion to men through the light of nature ... even before the Mosaic law was given,”² and in another that

we could very well establish the truth of religion, and end many of the controversies which divide men and cause so many problems for the human race, if we were to meditate with order and proceed as we ought.³

We could term the idea that Leibniz advances here his doctrine of “universal rational religion,” a religion derived from reason and hence accessible to all, Christians and non-Christians alike, by virtue of the universality of reason. Leibniz's preferred term for it was, of course, natural theology.

As a lifelong Christian, Leibniz's obviously did not consider his notion of a universal rational religion to be in any way incompatible with Christianity, in fact quite the opposite: if anything, Leibniz saw the two as complementary.⁴ Nevertheless, he acknowledged differences in terms of their respective contents, and these were such that it would not be unfair to describe Leibnizian natural theology as “Christianity-lite,” that is, as a pared-down version of Christianity. Consequently, what one would find in natural theology was the truth, but not the whole truth,⁵ as it lacked some of the core doctrines of Christianity (as determined by scripture and tradition).⁶ Notably absent from Leibniz's natural theology, for example, were the Christian mysteries of the Trinity, Incarnation, and Resurrection of the Dead. Throughout his career Leibniz held that reason is unable to demonstrate the truth of the Christian mysteries, only their possibility; in his favoured terminology the mysteries are *above reason* (in that reason cannot demonstrate their truth) but not *against reason* (in that it can show that they are not inherently contradictory).⁷ Needless to say, by virtue of being above reason the mysteries cannot form part of Leibniz's natural theology.⁸ Nevertheless, Leibniz held that natural theology captured the

¹ I would like to thank Daniel J. Cook for his helpful comments on an earlier draft of this paper.

² Grua II 585; quoted from P. Riley, *Leibniz's Universal Jurisprudence*, Cambridge, MA 1996, p. 110.

³ A I, 13, 553. Consider also his reference to the “true religion which natural reason itself teaches us,” A VI, 6, 462. Quoted from *New Essays concerning Human Understanding*, ed. and trans. by J. Bennett and P. Remnant, Cambridge 1996², 462 [hereafter: NE].

⁴ See e.g. A VI, 4, 2324.

⁵ Consider for example Leibniz's reference to “the important abstract truths of natural religion onto which revealed religion is as it were grafted” in A I, 14, 834. Cf. A I, 22 (vorausedition), 362.

⁶ Nevertheless, Leibniz held that it was possible for natural theology to enable one to attain a deep understanding (and hence genuine love) of God. And this, he frequently claimed, was a much worthier result than the mere mechanical adherence to authority and rituals sometimes found in Christians despite their access to revealed truths. See for example A I, 17, 37.

⁷ See for example GP VI 64. English translation in *Theodicy*, trans. by E. M. Huggard, Chicago 1990, p. 88 [hereafter: H].

⁸ It should be noted that Leibniz was not averse to the efforts of those who endeavoured to establish the mysteries by reason, such as his friend, Count Jörger, writing that if they succeeded “all revealed religion will become a completely pure natural theology. So much the better!” However Leibniz remained sceptical that anyone had

essence of Christianity, or at least enough of it to bring about a genuine love of God above all things,⁹ which Leibniz sometimes considered to be sufficient for salvation.¹⁰

I have two aims in this paper. The first is to map the terrain of Leibniz's universal rational religion, that is, identify some of the key theological truths and doctrines that Leibniz believed could be reached via reason, and as such would be accessible to non-Christians. As we shall see, while Leibniz held that there were a number of theological truths and doctrines that were potentially available to all, he also acknowledged that non-Christians had enjoyed very limited success in reaching them. Identifying Leibniz's explanation for this will be my second aim.

Natural theology

Traditionally, natural theology has been considered to be the investigation into the divine based on reason and experience rather than revelation.¹¹ Ever since Hume and Paley we have come to construe natural theology even more narrowly, as what Kant termed physico-theology, that is, the attempt to uncover evidence of (divine) design in the features of the world, specifically in its order and beauty. While there are passages in Leibniz's corpus in which he seems to endorse such a practice,¹² it is not what he understands by natural theology. At times Leibniz seems to equate natural theology with metaphysics,¹³ which by its nature is practiced through rational rather than empirical means. Consequently, it is no surprise that when Leibniz defines natural theology he routinely does so in terms of reason rather than experience.¹⁴ His most revealing definition can be found in a lecture from 1714, in which he writes: "Natural theology is that which, like all the other sciences, originates from the seeds of truth embedded in the mind by God, their author."¹⁵ So characterized, Leibniz's understanding of "natural

managed to make any headway with the mysteries by the use of reason. See Klopp IX, 396. Quoted from *Leibniz and the Two Sophies: The Philosophical Correspondence*, ed. and trans. by L. Strickland, Toronto 2011, p. 413 [hereafter: LTS].

⁹ "A pagan philosopher can love God above all things, since reason can teach him that God is an infinitely perfect and a supremely lovable being." A VI, 4, 2220.

¹⁰ See for example A I 13, 398. In some texts Leibniz suggests that a sincere love of God is not, by itself, sufficient for salvation, but that those who have it will be given whatever grace or other aids are required in order to be saved. See, for example, A I 13, 517; Dutens VI, 311-312; Klopp IX, 304/LTS 399; GP VI 157/H 177.

¹¹ A good example of this is the following definition, which takes natural theology to be "the attempt to provide rational justification for theism using only those sources of information accessible to all inquirers, namely, the data of empirical experience and the dictates of human reason. In other words, it is defense of theism without recourse to purported special revelation." J. F. Sennett and D. Groothuis, "Hume's legacy and natural theology" in James F. Sennett and Douglas Groothuis eds., *In Defense of Natural Theology: A Post-Humean Assessment*, Downers Grove, 2005, p. 10. Leibniz's sympathies lie closer to Alvin Plantinga's much more restrictive definition of natural theology as "The attempt to see how much can be known about God without revelation, relying upon reason alone." A. Plantinga, "Natural theology," in *A Companion to Metaphysics*, ed. by J. Kim and E. Sosa, Oxford 2009, p. 438

¹² E.g. "The existence of God is particularly confirmed through the most beautiful arrangement of things, and especially from the nature of the mind." A VI, 4, 2315. See also A VI, 6, 438/NE 438; A VI, 4, 2721.

¹³ E.g. his claim that "in fact, metaphysics is natural theology," A II, 1², 663. See also A II 2, 129. Elsewhere he describes natural theology as a "product" of metaphysics; see A VI, 6, 50/NE 50.

¹⁴ E.g. "natural theology ... is derived from the axioms of eternal Reason." A VI, 6, 415/NE 415.

¹⁵ P. Riley, "An unpublished lecture by Leibniz on the Greeks as founders of rational theology: its relation to his 'universal jurisprudence'", *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 14 (1976), p. 214. There is an English translation of this text available in G. W. Leibniz, *Political Writings*, ed. and trans. P. Riley, Cambridge 1988², 235-236. However I have modified this translation significantly. The Latin is "Theologia naturalis est, quae ex seminibus veritatis menti a Deo autore inditis enascitur ad caeterarum scientiarum instar."

theology” is far removed from that of most of its other proponents. Its inherently rational nature for Leibniz is confirmed by his reference to “the seeds of truth embedded in the mind by God,” which thus roots it squarely in his doctrine of innate ideas. In brief, innate ideas are those that are in every person’s mind from the outset, albeit virtually or potentially; they can be brought to consciousness by reflection on one’s own mind and its features.¹⁶ For example, Leibniz considers the idea of substance to be innate because each of us *is* a substance – a fact that each person can recognize through reflection on his own nature.¹⁷ Leibniz recognises a number of ideas as innate in this sense, for example “Being, Unity, Substance, Duration, Change, Action, Perception, Pleasure” and so on.¹⁸ But more important than any of these, at least from the perspective of natural theology, is the idea of God, which according to Leibniz is also innate.¹⁹ But what does it mean to say that idea of God is innate? In one of the appendices to the *Theodicy* Leibniz explains that “the idea of God is in the idea of ourselves through the suppression of the limits of our perfections.”²⁰ In other words, in the course of reflecting on our own natural limitations (e.g. the fact that we do not know everything and cannot do anything we want to), we can suppose these limitations removed to thus reveal the idea of God, i.e. the idea of an absolutely perfect being, one without limitations. (This is so because in Leibniz’s view the infinite, or absolute, is anterior to the finite, or the limited.²¹ So the idea of oneself as a being of limited perfection is in fact a complex idea made up of the idea of infinite or absolute perfection, and the idea of negation or limitation; to arrive at the idea of an absolutely perfect being one need only remove the idea of negation or limitation from the idea of oneself as a being with limited perfections.)

Through internal reflection the idea of God is thus available to all, even those who have not had the benefit of Christian revelation. As if to clinch the point, Leibniz repeatedly claims that the concept of God endorsed by Christians – that of the most perfect being or substance – is also to be found in various pre-Christian thinkers such as the Pythagoreans and the Platonists.²² He also goes to great lengths to defend the suggestion that the idea of God is to be found in ancient Chinese writings,²³ though he does acknowledge that some cultures have no notion of God at all.²⁴ Nevertheless, the idea is available to all by virtue of being innate, that is, available through reflection on ourselves.

Now as we have seen, Leibniz claims that natural theology *originates* in the “seeds of truth embedded in the mind by God”;²⁵ it does not end there, however. Leibnizian natural theology has two parts, or sides. The first we have considered already, namely the discovery

¹⁶ Hence ideas are innate in the sense that “we can draw them from our own depths and bring them within reach of our awareness.” A VI, 6, 438/NE 438. Cf. A VI, 6 52/NE 52.

¹⁷ “It is my opinion that reflection enables us to find the idea of substance within ourselves, who are substances.” A VI, 6, 105/NE 105.

¹⁸ A VI, 6, 51/NE 51. In another text Leibniz suggests that the idea of perfection is innate as well: “our mind is endowed with the concept of perfection.” Quoted from *Philosophical Papers and Letters*, ed. and trans. L. E. Loemker, Dordrecht 1969², 283 [hereafter: L].

¹⁹ E.g. A VI, 6, 74/NE 74, A VI, 6, 434f/NE 434f.

²⁰ GP VI 403/H 406. Translation modified.

²¹ A VI, 6, 157ff/NE 157ff.

²² A VI, 4, 2306-2307.

²³ See for example part I of his “Discourse on the Natural Theology of the Chinese” in Dutens IV, 169- 81. English translation in *Writings on China*, trans. and ed. by D. J. Cook and H. Rosemont Jr., Chicago 1994, 75-97.

²⁴ A VI, 6 103/NE 103.

²⁵ The claim is repeated elsewhere, e.g. A VI, 4, 2247: “the seeds of important truths are in the soul of the humblest pagan; one need only gather them and cultivate them carefully.” See also Dutens II, 223/L 593.

within ourselves of the idea of God, as well as other ideas central to theology, such as that of soul.²⁶ The second aspect of natural theology might more accurately be termed *rational theology*, as it involves the derivation of various theological truths and doctrines through a very formal process of (largely deductive) proofs and conceptual analysis. In what follows I will briefly run through some of the fruits of the analytic/deductive side of Leibniz's universal rational religion.

One claim that Leibniz makes often is that God's existence can be known "by the natural light," that is, by the powers of reason alone. Over the course of his career Leibniz identified a number of ways in which reason can disclose God's existence. A commonly revisited one begins with the notion of God as an absolutely perfect being (a notion which of course is innate), and then moves to a recognition that, as existence is a perfection, God (qua absolutely perfect being) must exist.²⁷ Variations involve the claim that God's essence necessarily involves existence, or that as "being from itself" God necessarily must exist.²⁸ Since the time of Kant such arguments have of course been known as forms of the so-called "ontological argument."

In addition to teaching us of God's existence, Leibniz holds that natural theology also enables us to grasp many things about God's nature, e.g. that he is one, and good, and wise: "we have no need of revealed faith to know that there is such a sole Principle of all things, entirely good and wise. Reason teaches us this by infallible proofs."²⁹ Claims like these are familiar ones, and are to be found throughout Leibniz's corpus, though some texts treat them in greater depth than others. One of lengthier texts dealing with God's nature is "Rationale of the Catholic Faith," from 1685.³⁰ In this piece, Leibniz starts with the notion of God as the most perfect substance and then proceeds to draw out a series of consequences of this, such as that God exists, that he is eternal, unique, incorporeal, a mind, and omniscient, omnipotent, good and just. All of these properties/attributes are discoverable by unpacking the definition of God as the most perfect substance. The text ends with the further demonstrations that God's foreknowledge is compatible with human free will, that God is not the cause of sin, and that our misery cannot be imputed to him. All of this takes place in about 7 pages of printed text! To put this in perspective, when Christian Wolff treated the same topics (as well as others that Leibniz identified as part of natural theology), his painstakingly detailed discussion spanned almost two thousand pages over two volumes.³¹ Leibniz could only dream of such a systematic treatment. Instead he often made do with making condensed statements like this one:

It is evident by the natural light that there exists some most perfect substance, which we call God, and evident in the same way that he is unique, necessary, i.e. eternal... It also follows that God is an omnipotent and omniscient mind, and that all things are arranged by him in the best way, such that it cannot be better.³²

The claim that one can deduce from God's nature that this must be the best possible world is one encountered often in Leibniz's youthful and "middle period" writings, e.g.:

²⁶ See LTS 262-263.

²⁷ See for example A VI, 4, 2315.

²⁸ See for example A VI 3, 575-579 ; A II, 1², 588-591.

²⁹ GP VI 75/H 98.

³⁰ I refer to the second of the two drafts, namely A VI, 4, 2316-2323. The first draft is at A VI, 4, 2306-2316.

³¹ See Wolff's *Theologia naturalis scientifica pertractata*, 2 vols., Frankfurt 1736-1737.

³² A VI, 4, 2347.

Given the most perfect being, namely God..., that the most perfect operation is that of the most perfect being, and that the world is the work of God, then the world is the most perfect, and hence no other series of things can be imagined which is more perfect than this one.³³

In later writings, Leibniz tended to draw back from the claim that reason could *demonstrate* that this world is the best one possible, arguing that one could not *deduce* from God's perfect nature that he would choose the best, as his choice was a free one.³⁴ Nevertheless Leibniz did not seem to think that reason's wings were clipped too much by this, as he continued to maintain, amongst other things, that "God wills the best through his own nature,"³⁵ "as his perfection requires of him,"³⁶ and that God's will "is indefectible and always tends towards the best."³⁷ And indeed, Leibniz consistently treated his doctrine that this is the best of all possible worlds as something that reason can disclose, and so as part of natural theology.

In the *Theodicy* Leibniz identifies another question that falls within the purview of natural theology, namely that of how God could permit the good to suffer, or indeed permit the existence of evil at all.³⁸ One can in fact see the *Theodicy* as a long, rambling attempt to answer such questions and so to justify God in the face of the world's evil. *In nuce*, Leibniz's argument is that from God's immense wisdom, power and goodness we can infer that the evils there are in this world had to be permitted because God would have eradicated them if he could have done. We can know, then, *that* such evils form part of the best scheme (or are bound up with greater goods), since God permitted them. The question of *how* specific evils form part of the best scheme (or are bound up with greater goods) lies outside the domain of natural theology, however, there being no way anyone can analyse or deduce his way to the correct answer.³⁹

Let us now switch our attention away from the universe as a whole and turn it to the individuals within it, or the individual rational beings anyway. According to Leibniz, just as it follows from God's nature that he has acted most perfectly with regard to the world as a whole, it also follows that he acts perfectly with regard to the individuals within it. And hence, being perfectly good and wise (and hence perfectly just), it follows that God will ensure perfect justice is maintained. What this means is that every good deed will be rewarded and every sin punished, whether this happen in this life or not.⁴⁰ Indeed, Leibniz even suggests that temporal post-mortem punishment (the cornerstone of the Catholic doctrine of purgatory) can be demonstrated rationally.⁴¹

Of course natural theology cannot establish the peculiarly Christian doctrines of the beatific vision, or Hell, these belonging squarely to the domain of revealed theology, but Leibniz holds that reason can at least disclose the soul's immortality. (And this is also part of Leibnizian natural theology which, he states, "treats of immaterial substances, and particularly of God and

³³ A VI, 4, 1362. Quoted from *Shorter Leibniz Texts*, ed. and trans. by L. Strickland, London 2006, 194 [hereafter: SLT].

³⁴ For further details, see L. Strickland, *Leibniz Reinterpreted*, London 2006, 7ff.

³⁵ A VI, 4, 1447.

³⁶ Grua II, 485/SLT 102, cf. Grua II, 580/SLT 168.

³⁷ GP VI 386/H 387.

³⁸ "There remains, then, this question of natural theology, how a sole Principle, all-good, all-wise and all-powerful, has been able to admit evil, and especially to permit sin, and how it could resolve to make the wicked often happy and the good unhappy?" GP VI 75/H 98.

³⁹ See Grua I, 66/SLT 207.

⁴⁰ A I 10, 11/LTS 124.

⁴¹ See L. Strickland, "Leibniz's philosophy of purgatory," *American Catholic Philosophical Quarterly* 84 (2010), pp. 538ff.

the soul.”)⁴² Leibniz’s rational proof of the immortality of the soul starts by establishing the soul’s immateriality. In various writings he argues that the soul cannot be material because material things have parts, whereas the soul does not; it is a unity, i.e. something that is one.⁴³ Since the soul is not material, it must be immaterial. And in Leibniz’s view, the natural immortality of souls follows from their immateriality, for as souls are without parts (qua unity) they cannot be destroyed by dissolution.⁴⁴ Although these arguments are undoubtedly those favoured by Leibniz, he was not dismissive of other efforts to demonstrate by reason the immateriality and immortality of the soul, and often singled out for praise Plato’s efforts in the *Phaedo*.⁴⁵

To summarise our brief excursion through Leibniz’s universal rational religion, Leibniz holds that by virtue of natural theology one can have the idea of God, as well as establish the existence of God, the nature of God, his perfect action in relation to the world and to us, his administering of reward to the virtuous and punishment to the wicked, and the fact that our souls are immaterial and immortal

The Limits of Reason in the domain of Theology

Given the richness and scope of Leibniz’s natural theology one might expect him to hold that revelation was unnecessary, as all the important theological truths and doctrines could be attained by anyone simply by using the faculty of reason. It is certainly possible to see evidence of this kind of thinking in Leibniz’s work, but it is rarely given the kind of stress we might expect given his portrayal as an arch-rationalist. Part of the reason for this is undoubtedly due to his acknowledgment that although the well of natural theology runs deep, few have drunk deeply from it. As we have seen, Leibniz makes much of those who have successfully happened upon “correct” theological doctrines by a judicious use of reason.⁴⁶ But he does not fail to acknowledge counter-examples, for example those pagans who have arrived at an erroneous notion of God as being the whole world or the soul of the world.⁴⁷ As he notes, some pagans have even taken God to be the sun and the moon, which could only happen by virtue of a spectacular failure to grasp the fact that God is incorporeal.⁴⁸ Other commonly-cited examples of faulty pagan natural theology are Pythagoras’ doctrine of transmigration and the denial of the immateriality and (hence) natural immortality of the soul by the ancient Atomists. But even Christian thinkers do not have an unblemished track record in the field of natural theology; recall Leibniz’s famous (and tactless) remark to the Princess of Wales that natural religion is very much in decline in England because many there “will have human souls to be material; others

⁴² A II 2, 129.

⁴³ See A I, 18, 113-114/LTS 198-199.

⁴⁴ Ibid. Sometimes the argument begins with the soul identified as a substance: “our soul is a certain substance, and no substance can utterly perish except by the miracle of annihilation, and as the soul has no parts, it will not even be possible for it to be dissolved into several substances. Therefore the soul is naturally immortal.” A VI, 4, 2451.

⁴⁵ See for example A II, 1², 777.

⁴⁶ He even praises rival religions such as Islam for adhering to “the great dogmas of natural theology.” GP VI 27/H 51.

⁴⁷ Although Leibniz concedes that some pagan thinkers (like the Platonists, the Stoics, the Chinese “and other Orientals”) held different conceptions of God, e.g. conceiving him as the soul of the world, or even as the world, they nevertheless still held that God possessed knowledge/intelligence. See Klopp IX, 307-308.

⁴⁸ See A VI, 4, 2316.

make God himself a corporeal being.”⁴⁹ Even the pagan thinker most admired by Leibniz, namely Plato, fell short of achieving all that Leibniz thought possible in natural theology.

Given the acknowledged lack of human achievement in the field of natural theology, it is not surprising to find Leibniz stating very explicitly, and very often, that in practice revelation was necessary. But the puzzle is: *why* has there been such a lack of success in natural theology when every single human has the one tool required (*viz.* reason) for its successful practice? Leibniz offers a number of explanations, though as we shall see these are all in turn explained by a doctrine peculiar to Christianity.

In a text from the mid-1680s Leibniz writes:

There was a need for revelation not only in order that we might acquire knowledge of those things which reason cannot teach, but also in order that men who are insufficiently influenced by arguments alone might be moved by religion.⁵⁰

(By “things which reason cannot teach” Leibniz is undoubtedly thinking of the Christian mysteries – such as the Trinity and the Incarnation – which reason is incapable of divulging.⁵¹)

For our purposes, the important claim here is that some men are insufficiently moved by arguments. As it turns out, Leibniz thinks this problem is widespread. As he states in a letter to Electress Sophie, “We must acknowledge that revelation was necessary: reason on its own, without authority, will never make an impression on the common run of men.”⁵² Reason’s inability to reach, touch and inspire men is a common theme in Leibniz’s theological writings, and is behind his frequent exhortations to present theological doctrines in more “edifying” mediums such as music and poetry.⁵³ The problem, according to his diagnosis, is that purely rational demonstrations are difficult for us because they do not involve the senses or the imagination.⁵⁴

As it happens, this is not the only problem. For Leibniz informs us that

Even if there were neither public revelation nor scripture, men, following the internal natural lights (that is, reason), to which the assistance of the light of the Holy Spirit would not be lacking if needed, would not fail to attain true beatitude. But as men misuse their reason, the public revelation of the Messiah has been made necessary.⁵⁵

Leibniz does not say how men misuse reason, though on the basis of other texts it is not unreasonable to suppose that, whatever such misuse involves, it is ultimately due to the corruptions of men:

Experience has shown that the corruption of men is so great that reason alone cannot be enough for them, and so there was a need for particular grace and divine revelation.⁵⁶

The religion of reason is eternal, and God engraved it into our hearts, our corruptions obscured it, and the goal of Jesus Christ was to restore its luster, to bring men back to the true knowledge of God and the soul, and to make them practice the virtue which constitutes true happiness.⁵⁷

⁴⁹ GP VII 352/L 675.

⁵⁰ A VI, 4, 2351.

⁵¹ See also A VI, 4, 2348.

⁵² Klopp IX, 301/LTS, 396.

⁵³ A IV, 6, 359; Dutens V, 293-294; Dutens VI, 306-307.

⁵⁴ See A VI, 4, 2348.

⁵⁵ A I, 16, 163; see also Grua II, 585.

⁵⁶ A VI, 4, 2351.

If we suppose, as is reasonable, that the “corruption” referred to here is that of original sin, then Leibniz appears to be saying that the fall of Adam and Eve has introduced disorders into our constitution, which deleteriously affects our ability to reason.⁵⁸ And this does indeed seem to be his position, for he asserts that on account of original sin, men’s “understanding is obscured and their senses have more influence,”⁵⁹ as a result of which, our reasoning “is mixed with prejudices and passions.”⁶⁰ Original sin thus explains the difficulty experienced by men in constructing and following rational demonstrations, as well as their liability to “misuse” reason (by failing to use it without prejudice and emotion). There is, then, an ultimate irony at the heart of Leibniz’s doctrine of natural theology, in that the reason for mankind’s general failure in the practice of natural theology is to be found in a key doctrine of *revealed* theology.

⁵⁷ Klopp IX, 300-301/LTS 396.

⁵⁸ It should be stressed that Leibniz does not suggest that our reason itself is corrupted. In fact he specifically denies this when he remarks in the *Theodicy* that “this portion of reason which we possess is a gift of God, and consists in the natural light that has remained with us in the midst of corruption.” GP VI 84/H 107.

⁵⁹ A VI, 4, 2359/SLT 203.

⁶⁰ GP VI 84-85/H 107. Although we cannot entirely escape these corrupting effects of original sin, Leibniz goes on to say that they can be temporarily overcome if “one ... proceed in order, admit no thesis without proof, and admit no proof unless it be in proper form, according to the commonest rules of logic.”