

“A Critical Rationalist Approach to Religion”

Abstract

In an interview, conducted by Rabbi Edward Zerlin in 1969, concerning Popper's views on God, the Austrian philosopher stated, among other things, that: "Some forms of atheism are arrogant and ignorant and should be rejected, but agnosticism--to admit that we don't know and to search--is all right." Focusing on this rich interview, as well as making use of other aspects of Popper's thought and philosophy, I shall argue that while Popper's own view concerning religious faith may appear to be agnostic, it is possible to develop a model based on the main themes of critical rationalism which could stand in good stead for individuals in their religious quests. In particular, I shall argue that Popper's views on religion, and critical rationalist theses in general, provide the best theoretical approach for reform-minded Muslims who wish to produce viable syntheses of modernity and tradition acceptable to both conservative and progressive Muslims. I shall apply the proposed model to the understanding of the Quran and critically compare it with traditional methods of interpreting the Quran to demonstrate its superiority. I shall use this approach to shed light also on the practice of *fiqh*, which is, by far, the dominant discipline in religious seminaries and wields a great deal of influence with regard to the orthodox, conservative, and extremist readings of the *shari'a* law. I shall argue that *fiqh* is, contrary to the popular conception, not a knowledge-oriented activity but a branch of technology and (soft) engineering. I shall explore the wider implications of this point with regard to a sound understanding of religion and faith in an age of change and uncertainty.

Keywords: Popper, Agnosticism, Critical rationalism, Faith, Change, Orthodox, conservative and extremist readings of Islam, Technology.

Professor Ali Paya

Epistemology, Ethics, Applied Philosophy

University of Westminster