

# I ntroduction

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The field of philosophy of religion has blossomed in recent decades and is now flourishing internationally with creative, first-rate thinkers – many of whom are thought-leaders in other areas of philosophy as well – utilizing their philosophical expertise to tackle a host of religious topics. The range of those engaged in philosophy of religion is also rather broad and includes such diverse scholars as analytic and continental philosophers, feminists and ethicists, and Eastern and Western thinkers, among others. Given the breadth of the field, a number of topics could have been included in this book, and various approaches could have been taken as well. My goal in writing this book has been to construct a text which includes the major issues typically addressed in philosophy of religion textbooks and covered in philosophy of religion courses, but also to offer some atypical ones which are emerging in the field and quickly becoming notable topics of discussion. I have tried to write in a manner and style which is both accessible and interesting to undergraduate students in philosophy of religion, but which also has merit for graduate students and others interested in the field. I have sought to avoid unnecessary technical jargon as much as possible, and have defined and explained terms and ideas which would be unfamiliar to most undergraduates. Though the traditional “analytic/continental” dichotomy is not as sharply defined today as some would like to think, nevertheless the approach I take here generally follows the method and style of the analytic tradition in that I include positions, formal arguments for those positions, and objections or rebuttals to the arguments (and sometimes rebuttals to the rebuttals), sometimes without considering the history, context, or cultural milieu of the positions. This critical method was not always feasible or beneficial as some topics do not readily lend themselves to analytic style and argument forms.

There is certainly value in having an author of a work such as this one provide her or his own views, arguments, and conclusions on subjects as controversial as many of those discussed in philosophy of religion; however, that is not my intention in this

work. Rather, I am striving to be non-partisan, at least as non-partisan as I can be in a work covering such exciting and contentious topics as these. I have attempted to keep from presenting my own views and conclusions to the issues and instead have presented, as clearly and concisely as possible, the major positions, arguments for, and rebuttals to, the central topics in the field today. Of course, even the selection of topics and the arguments and rebuttals chosen will reflect my own leanings and biases to some extent, but my intent has been to be impartial and evenhanded.

## SCOPE AND STRUCTURE

Until recently, much of the philosophical work in religion in the West was primarily focused on the theistic traditions of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. As a result, the diversity of religious thought expressed by those in other traditions was, for the most part, ignored. With the escalating presence and awareness of non-theistic religions in the West, however, it has become increasingly more important to include them in philosophical dialogue. I have attempted to do so in this book. While I include many of the major traditional topics from theistic discussions, I have also endeavored to be multicultural in perspective and to include a number of major non-theistic themes as well.

Chapter 1 begins by exploring the meanings of the terms *religion* and *philosophy of religion* and the important question of what religious beliefs and practices are about. It also includes an extensive philosophy of religion timeline. Chapter 2 continues this exploration by examining the growing phenomenon of religious diversity. It focuses specifically on five major world religions: Hinduism, Buddhism, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. Each of these religions makes claims about fundamental issues, including the meaning of salvation/liberation and the nature of Ultimate Reality. These world religions, and the central historical philosophers within them, either imply or affirm that their fundamental claims are true. As a number of these claims conflict with one another, the next question explored is how one should philosophically approach such conflicts. This chapter also considers the task of evaluating religious systems, possible criteria for making such evaluations, and the importance of religious tolerance.

Philosophers of religion reflect on a variety of religious concepts, but probably none has been more dominant than the concept of God/Ultimate Reality. Therefore, it is important to examine the principal topics relevant to the nature and existence of the divine. Chapter 3 explores two unique ways of conceiving God/Ultimate Reality: (1) as an absolute state of being (as within certain schools of Hinduism and Buddhism), and (2) as a personal God (as within the three major theistic traditions). One of the major contemporary discussions relevant to the concept of God is whether the traditional attributes are logically consistent and coherent, so some time is spent on this issue as well.

Philosophers of religion are not only interested in exploring the concept of God, but also knowing whether such a concept is true – that is, whether God actually exists. Chapters 4, 5, and 6 explore three major types of arguments for God's existence: cosmological, teleological, and ontological. While each of these argument forms is quite old in nature, none of them is an antiquated relic; each one has undergone much discussion and development in recent decades. And just as there are philosophical arguments for God's existence, there are also philosophical challenges to belief in God. Chapter 7 hones in on one of them: problems of evil.

Religion is not typically a domain completely isolated from other aspects of society and culture. It includes (some would say "infects") virtually all facets of human life. One of these areas is science, and for centuries religion and science have had a knotty relationship; sometimes they are at odds, sometimes they are supportive of one another. Chapter 8 tackles several basic options for understanding how religion and science are related. Whatever the relationship, it seems evident that religion and science have unique roles in life and thought. It is also apparent that the practice of science has, on occasion at least, implications for religious faith, and that religious belief isn't always devoid of scientific reasoning. Consequently, the rest of the chapter focuses on several options for relating faith and reason.

One element of religion common to all the major traditions is religious experience. Chapter 9 explores this phenomenon in several of its various forms. It also examines the question of whether this kind of phenomenon can provide justification for religious belief and whether scientific explanations of religious experience demonstrate that such experiences are merely the result of neurophysiological causes (and thus ultimately delusory).

All the religious traditions provide an understanding of what it means to be a self, and they all offer hope for oneself – hope for this life and especially hope after death. How we understand our own nature plays a significant role in how we understand what the afterlife entails. These topics of the self, death, and the afterlife are considered in Chapter 10, the final chapter of the book.

## PEDAGOGICAL FEATURES AND RESOURCES FOR FURTHER EXPLORATION

This book incorporates a number of pedagogical features to enhance your learning experience, including summaries at the end of each chapter, provocative reflection questions to clarify important points and reinforce your understanding of the material, tables and boxes to keep definitions and arguments clear and concise, a glossary of important terms that are unfamiliar to many readers, and an extensive index. At the end of each chapter I have also provided an annotated further reading section which includes many of the major works on the chapter's topic. I have tried

to be comprehensive, inclusive, and balanced in choosing these selections. Relevant websites are included at the end of each chapter as well. Many of these sites include important articles, summaries, and further resources on the relevant topics.

*The Philosophy of Religion Reader* (Routledge, 2008) is designed to work in tandem with this text as it provides a considerable number of related seminal articles in philosophy of religion, both classical and contemporary, Eastern and Western. It would be an excellent companion to utilize as you work through this material.

My hope is that as you read this book you will engage with the ideas, diving deeply into the positions, arguments, and counterarguments; that you will sift through the further reading material and websites listed at the end of the chapters and do your own research and reflect on the topics that especially interest you; and that through these engagements you will find yourself absorbed in the kind of philosophical reflection on religious ideas which have spanned the centuries and inspired some of its greatest minds.

# 1

## Religion and the philosophy of religion

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## RELIGION AND THE WORLD RELIGIONS

Sigmund Freud (1856–1939), one of the great psychologists of the twentieth century, wrote that religion is comparable to a childhood neurosis.<sup>1</sup> If this is so, the world is filled with something like five billion neurotic individuals. As I type these words, in sheer numbers there are roughly two billion Christians, consisting of Roman Catholics, Protestants, and Orthodox; there are well over a billion Muslims, close to 80 percent of whom are Sunni and 20 percent Shiite; there are over a billion Hindus; roughly 350 million Buddhists (Theravada and Mahayana); approximately 350 million adherents of the Chinese traditions of Confucianism and Daoism; about 300 million adherents of African traditional religions (Animists, Shamanists, etc.); 25 million Sikhs; 14 million Jews; 7 million Baha'i; 4 million Jains, and the list goes on (see Figure 1.1<sup>2</sup>). And the religious traditions are not limited to geographic regions. Western religions have migrated East and Eastern religions have traveled West. As a case in point, Diana Eck – Director of the Pluralism Project at Harvard University – has pointed out that the formerly “Christian country” of the United States has now become the most religiously diverse nation in the world, with millions of adherents of Eastern as well as Western religions.<sup>3</sup> Worldwide, nonreligious people are clearly in the minority, making up only about 15 percent of the world’s population.

No doubt, religion is ubiquitous. Nevertheless, attempting to offer a *definition* of religion which captures all and only what are taken to be religions is notoriously difficult. Central to some religions is a personal God and other spiritual entities; for other religions, there is no God or spirits at all. Some religions view the eternal, personal existence of the individual in an afterlife as paramount to understanding Ultimate Reality and much more important than temporary earthly existence. Others see what we do in *this* life as fundamental, with little if any consideration of the hereafter. Other differences among the religions abound.

But as diverse as religions are, several components seem to be central to the world religions: a system of beliefs, the breaking in of a transcendent reality, and human attitudes of ultimate concern, meaning, and purpose. Given these three elements, the following perhaps captures what most take to be the essence of the concept of religion: *a religion involves a system of beliefs and practices primarily centered around a transcendent Reality, either personal or impersonal, which provides ultimate meaning and purpose to life.*<sup>4</sup>

While this is not a book on world religions, work in the philosophy of religion would be deficient without taking into consideration the diversity of beliefs among at least the major religious traditions. It would be an enormous task to include all of what are commonly taken to be the major religions (and I consider the list above to be fairly inclusive of the *world* religions) in a textbook such as this one, so limitation is necessary. This delimiting process was not easy, but several factors made it more manageable than it could have been.

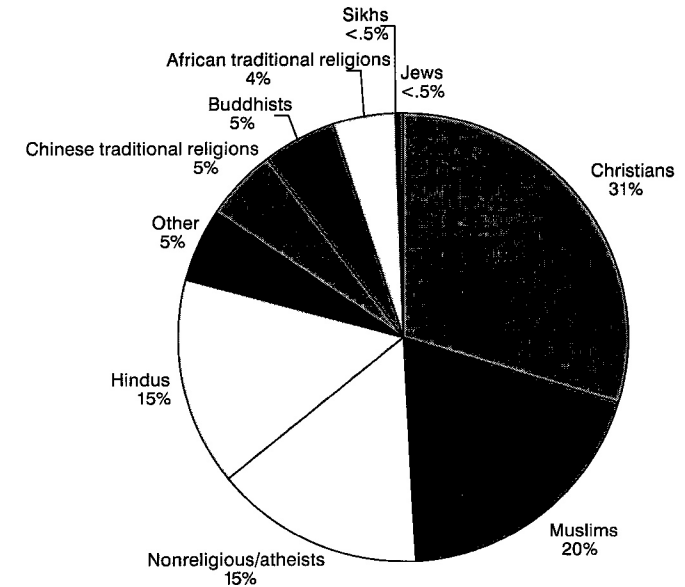


Figure 1.1 World religions

First, since I am writing from within the English-speaking world and am most familiar with the traditions predominant within it, it makes sense to **emphasize** them over others. For someone else with a different background and writing from a different place, other emphases would be appropriate. So, emphasis will be **placed** on the monotheistic religions of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. **Historically**, the monotheistic traditions have included the belief that there is only one **God** – a personal God who is omniscient (all-knowing), omnipotent (all-powerful), and omnibenevolent (completely good in every way), and thus worthy of worship. **This** God is the creator and sustainer of the world. Furthermore, a distinction is **often** made among monotheists between *theists*, who believe that God is distinct from the world and yet actively involved in the world (guiding human history, for example, and offering divine revelation); *deists*, who believe that God is distinct from the world and not actively involved in the world; and *pantheists*, who believe that **God** permeates and is co-dependent with the world.

Second, besides the monotheistic traditions, Hinduism and Buddhism have also received more attention by philosophers of religion in the English-speaking world than other traditions have received. The school of thought within Hinduism which has received the most attention is Advaita Vedānta (“Advaita” is a Sanskrit term which means “non-dual,” and “Vedānta” means pertaining to the Hindu scriptures called the Vedas). The view of God, or Brahman, for those affirming Advaita Vedānta is called *monistic pantheism* (“monism” is from the Greek term *monos* which means

“one” or “single”; “pantheism” is from the Greek terms *pan* which means “all” and *theos* which means “God”). On this view, Brahman is all; Brahman is one; Brahman is everything. This is not the only or even the most prominent form of Hinduism; there are also theistic and *polytheistic* (many gods) forms of Hinduism. But it is the most discussed form within the philosophy of religion, and so it will receive more attention here than other forms.

Third, the dialectical process of presenting arguments for positions, offering rebuttals to those positions, and giving responses to the rebuttals – the process that we will be following in this book – has been part and parcel of the philosophical examination of the monotheistic religions for many centuries. This has also been the case within some of the other traditions, including Hinduism and Buddhism. So, given these factors, along with attempting to keep a reasonable focus, the primary emphasis in the pages that follow will be on the three monotheistic traditions with some attention given to Hinduism and Buddhism as well. While mention will be made of other traditions besides these five, they will constitute the bulk of the discussion.

## PHILOSOPHY AND THE PHILOSOPHY OF RELIGION

Philosophy of religion is currently a major field of study, and the range of topics encompassed within it is considerable. Nevertheless, its scope is fairly narrow, for philosophy of religion is simply the philosophical reflection on religious ideas. The terms “philosophical reflection” and “religious ideas” need elucidation. “Philosophical reflection” in this context includes the careful analyses of words, reasons and evidences for claims, hypotheses, and arguments. These analyses themselves include fundamental issues about the nature of reality (metaphysics) and the way in which we come to know things (epistemology).

Regarding these fundamental issues, philosophy of religion and, indeed, philosophy itself have taken new directions in recent times. While philosophical reflection on religious ideas has been occurring for centuries, even millennia, it underwent a momentous setback in the early-to-mid twentieth century through the work of the logical positivists. Logical positivists held, among other things, that for a claim to be true and meaningful it must be empirically verifiable. As religious claims were for the most part taken to be empirically unverifiable, philosophical reflection on religious themes was widely considered to be a specious endeavor and religious ideas were often taken to be meaningless. However, due to the work of a number of leading philosophers who were responding to positivism and defending the philosophical viability of religious beliefs – philosophers such as John Hick and Alvin Plantinga – by the 1970s the field began to take a significant turn. Today, philosophy of religion is flourishing and it is not uncommon to see philosophy journals, anthologies, and monographs devoted exclusively to religious themes.<sup>5</sup>

**Logical Positivism** (later called “logical empiricism”) is a philosophical position which grew out of philosophical discussions in the 1920s by a group of philosophers referred to as the Vienna Circle. The positivists maintained that all cognitively meaningful language is in principle either empirically or formally verifiable.

By the phrase “religious ideas” I mean the primary issues and concepts which have been discussed and debated within the religious traditions throughout the centuries, including for example the existence and nature of God or Ultimate Reality; conflicting truth claims among the different religious traditions; the relation between science and religion; creation; *nirvana*; and salvation, among other topics. It is important to note that these are not just abstract and ethereal concepts discussed and debated among ivory-tower theologians and philosophers. To the contrary, they are fundamental issues in the life and thought of those in living traditions – traditions which have deep, existential meaning and ongoing significance for much of contemporary humanity.

Philosophy of religion has a rich and diverse history. As the timeline (Table 1.1) demonstrates, the history of philosophy of religion has been a global enterprise which can be demarcated by four historical time periods: the ancient world, the medieval world, the modern world, and the contemporary world.

## PHILOSOPHY OF RELIGION TIMELINE

Dates	Events/Descriptions	Relevant People
<b>Ancient World</b>		
c. 2600 BCE	Indus Valley civilization Religious Hindu images created	
c. 1500–1200 BCE	Development of Brahmanism Likely composition of Hindu Vedas	
c. 1300 BCE	Moses and the Ten Commandments	Moses
c. 1000 BCE	Kingdom of Israel begins	David/Solomon
c. 800–400 BCE	Likely composition of early Hindu Upanishads	
c. 800–200 BCE	Axial Period*	
c. 660–583 BCE	Founder of Zoroastrianism	Zoroaster
c. 640–546 BCE	Western philosophy begins	Thales
c. 599–527 BCE	Founder of Jainism	Mahavira Jeni
586–587 BCE	Fall of Jerusalem/Jews taken into captivity in Babylon	
c. 570–510 BCE	Founder of Taoism and author of early form of the Tao-Te-Ching	Lao Tzu
c. 570–495 BCE	Ionian (Greek) mathematician and philosopher and developed the Pythagorean theorem	Pythagoras
c. 551–479 BCE	Founder of Confucianism	Confucius
566–486 BCE	Founder of Buddhism	Sidhartha Guatama (Buddha)
c. 500–450 BCE	Greek philosopher, chief representative of the Eleatic school	Parmenides
c. 500 BCE	Founding of Shintoism (Japan)	
c. 469–399 BCE	Greek philosopher	Socrates
427–347 BCE	Greek philosopher	Plato
384–322 BCE	Greek philosopher	Aristotle
c. 372–289 BCE	Confucian philosopher	Mencius
341–270 BCE	Founder of Epicurean philosophy	Epicurus

\*The phrase "Axial Period" was so dubbed by philosopher Karl Jaspers to denote the period from roughly 800 BCE to 200 BCE – a time of widespread revolution in religious and philosophical thought which occurred in both the East and the West. It includes such important figures as Homer, Socrates, Isaiah, Zoroaster, Siddhartha Gautama, Confucius, and the authors of the Hindu Vedas. During this time new "axes" were created which influenced philosophical and religious thought for the next two millennia.

Dates	Events/Descriptions	Relevant People
331 BCE	Alexander the Great spreads Greek culture, philosophy and religion throughout the Eastern Mediterranean	
c. 331–264 BCE	Founder of Stoic philosophy	Zeno the Stoic
c. 300 BCE	Likely final composition of Tao-Te-Ching	
c. 200 BCE	Early portion of Bhagavad Gita written (completed in 400 CE)	
200–100 CE	Buddhism divides into Theravada and Mahayana	
c. 4 BCE–c. 30 CE	Founder of Christianity	Jesus of Nazareth
c. 10–c. 68	New Testament apostle and author of many New Testament letters	St. Paul
c. 30	Crucifixion of Jesus of Nazareth	
50–100	Likely composition of Christian Scriptures	
70	Temple in Jerusalem is destroyed by the Romans	
c. 150–200	Founder of Madhyamika school of Buddhism (India)	Nagarjuna
205–270	Founder of Neoplatonism	Plotinus
c. 215–276	Founder of Manicheanism	Mani
325	Christian Council of Nicaea (focuses on Trinitarian doctrine)	
354–430	Last Christian Church Father	St. Augustine
410	Fall of Rome	
451	Christian Council of Chalcedon (focuses on Christocentric issues)	
c. 480–524	Christian Roman philosopher	Boethius
<b>Medieval World</b>		
570–632	Founder of Islam	Mohammed the Prophet
c. 788–820	Founder of Advaita Vedānta Hinduism	Adi Shankara
c. 800–866	Islamic philosopher	Al-Kindi
c. 870–950	Islamic philosopher	Al-Farabi
980–1037	Islamic philosopher	Ibn Sina (Avicenna)
1017–1137	Founder of Vishishtadvaita Vedānta Hinduism	Ramanuja
1033–1109	Christian monk; developed the ontological argument	St. Anselm of Canterbury
1058–1111	Islamic philosopher	Al-Ghazali

<i>Dates</i>	<i>Events/Descriptions</i>	<i>Relevant People</i>
1126–1198	Islamic philosopher	Ibn Rushd (Averroës)
1135–1204	Jewish philosopher/theologian	Moses Maimonides
1200–1253	Japanese Zen master (founder of Soto school)	Dogen Kigen
1225–1274	Christian philosopher/theologian	St. Thomas Aquinas
1266–1308	European philosopher, logician, and Franciscan theologian	John Duns Scotus
c. 1285–1349	English philosopher and Franciscan friar	William of Ockham
1400s	European Renaissance	
1473–1543	Polish astronomer who offered the first modern formulation of a heliocentric solar system	Nicholas Copernicus
1483–1546	Protestant Reformer	Martin Luther
1469–1539	Founder of Sikhism	Guru Nanak Dev
1496–1561	Founder of Anabaptist Protestant movement	Menno Simons
1500–1600	European Scientific Revolution	
1509–1564	French theologian, Protestant Reformer, and founder of Calvinism	John Calvin
1515–1582	Christian mystic	St. Teresa of Avila
1517	Protestant Reformation begins with Luther's "95 Theses"	
1542–1591	Spanish Carmelite friar	St. John of the Cross
1545–1564	Council of Trent	
1560–1609	Dutch theologian and founder of Arminianism—the anti-Calvinistic school in Reformed Protestant theology	Jacobus Arminius
1564–1642	Italian astronomer, physicist, and philosopher	Galileo Galilei

**Modern World**

1596–1650	French rationalist philosopher (founder of modern Western philosophy)	René Descartes
1623–1662	French physicist, mathematician, and religious philosopher	Blaise Pascal
1632–1677	Jewish rationalist philosopher from Amsterdam	Benedict (Baruch) Spinoza
1643–1727	English physicist, astronomer, mathematician, and natural philosopher	Sir Isaac Newton
1646	Westminster Confession	

<i>Dates</i>	<i>Events/Descriptions</i>	<i>Relevant People</i>
1646–1716	German rationalist philosopher	Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz
1685–1753	Irish bishop and empiricist philosopher	George Berkeley
1694–1778	French Enlightenment philosopher	Voltaire
1703–1758	American theologian and Congregational pastor	Jonathan Edwards
1711–1776	Scottish philosopher, historian, and economist	David Hume
1724–1804	German philosopher	Immanuel Kant
1743–1805	Christian philosopher and apologist	William Paley
1770–1831	German philosopher	Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel
1809–1882	British naturalist who established evolution by common descent	Charles Darwin
1813–1855	Danish philosopher	Søren Kierkegaard
1817–1892	Founder of Baha'i	Baha'u'llah
1818–1883	German philosopher and political economist	Karl Marx
1844–1900	German philosopher	Friedrich Nietzsche
1893	World Parliament of Religions, Chicago, Illinois	

**Contemporary World**

1842–1910	American pragmatist philosopher	William James
1804–1872	German philosopher	Ludwig Feuerbach
1856–1939	Austrian neurologist and founder of the psychoanalytic school of psychology	Sigmund Freud
1861–1947	British mathematician and philosopher	Alfred North Whitehead
1870–1945	Japanese philosopher who attempted to assimilate Western philosophy into the Oriental spiritual tradition	Kitaro Nishida
1870–1966	Japanese Zen Buddhist philosopher and author who was instrumental in bringing Zen to the West	Daisetz Teitaro (DT) Suzuki
1872–1970	British logician, mathematician, and philosopher	Bertrand Russell
1879–1955	German-born theoretical physicist and author of the general theory of relativity	Albert Einstein
1888–1975	Indian philosopher and second president of India	Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan
1889–1951	Austrian philosopher	Ludwig Wittgenstein

Dates	Events/Descriptions	Relevant People
1889–1976	German philosopher	Martin Heidegger
1898–1963	Cambridge Medievalist, novelist, and Christian apologist	C. S. Lewis
1905–1980	French existentialist philosopher, novelist, and dramatist	Jean-Paul Sartre
1886–1968	Reformed Christian theologian and a leader of the neo-orthodox movement	Karl Barth
1908–1986	French author and philosopher	Simone de Beauvoir
1919–2001	British analytic philosopher	Elizabeth (G.E.M.) Anscombe
1922–1996	American philosopher of science	Thomas Kuhn
1922–	Philosopher of religion and Christian theologian	John Hick
1923–	British philosopher and former atheist (now a deist)	Antony Flew
1926–1984	French post-structuralist philosopher	Michel Foucault
1929–	Scottish moral philosopher	Alasdair MacIntyre
1930–2004	French literary critic and deconstructionist philosopher	Jacques Derrida
1932–	American philosopher of religion	Alvin Plantinga
1934–	British philosopher of religion	Richard Swinburne
1935–	Supreme head of Tibetan Buddhism	Tenzin Gyatso, the 14th Dalai Lama
1959–	Feminist philosopher of religion	Pamela Sue Anderson
1963–1965	Second Vatican Council	Pope John XXIII

## RELIGIOUS BELIEFS AND PRACTICES

There are a variety of beliefs held by the religions or by religious people. The monotheistic religions, for example, assert that a personal God exists and that God is good. Buddhists maintain that the Four Noble Truths provide a path to enlightenment. Many Hindus affirm that Brahman is the one reality. Taoists (also Daoists) affirm that the *dao* is the fundamental process of reality itself. And so on. Most religious adherents consider the central claims of their religion to be true. But an important philosophical question is whether these religious claims are true or false in the same way that other claims, such as scientific ones, are true or false. There are two very different positions taken by philosophers of religion with respect to the concept of truth in religious discourse: realism and non-realism.

### Realism

Probably the vast majority of religious adherents are religious realists.<sup>6</sup> That is, most religious adherents hold that their beliefs are about what really exists independent of the human beings who are having those beliefs. Assertions about Allah, for example, or Brahman, or salvation, or *moksha*, or reincarnation are true if there are actual referents for them. Thus, for Muslims, the claim that Allah is the one true God is true if, in fact, there is a being who exists independently of human conceptual frameworks or thoughts and beliefs about (or practices related to) Allah and is identifiable as Allah, the one true God. The same holds for adherents of the other religions who are realists: they believe that the claims of their religion have actual referents beyond their own beliefs and practices.

### Non-realism

Although they are in the minority, there are also religious non-realists. While there are different forms of religious non-realism, in general non-realists maintain that religious claims are not about realities which transcend human language, concepts, and social forms; religious claims are not about something “out there.” The following words from a leading religious non-realist helpfully summarize the distinction between realism and non-realism:

Today, a realist is the sort of person who, when his ship crosses the Equator, looks overboard, expecting to see a big black line across the ocean. Realism tries to turn cultural fictions into objective facts. A non-realist sees the whole system of lines of latitude and longitude as a framework, imposed upon the Earth by us, that helps us to define locations and to find our way around. For a realist Truth exists ready-made out there; for a non-realist we are the only makers of truth, and truth is only the current consensus amongst us. We cannot any longer suppose that our knowledge is validated by something wholly extra-human... .

In religion, the move to non-realism implies the recognition that all religious and ethical ideas are human, with a human history. We give up the old metaphysical and cosmological way of understanding religious belief, and translate dogma into

**Don Cupitt (1934–)** is a Life Fellow and former Dean of Emmanuel College, Cambridge. He is one of the leading religious non-realists and is often described as a “radical theologian.” He has written over forty books, including *Way to Happiness*, *Taking Leave of God* and *After God: The Future of Religion*.



**Sigmund Freud** (1856–1939) was an Austrian psychologist and medical doctor who founded the psychoanalytic school of psychology. Widely regarded as one of the most influential thinkers of the twentieth century, he wrote extensively about religion, describing it this way: “Religion is an illusion and it derives its strength from the fact that it falls in with our instinctual desires.” Three of his most important books devoted to religion are *Totem and Taboo* (1913), *The Future of an Illusion* (1927), and *Civilization and Its Discontents* (1930).

spirituality (a spirituality is a religious life-style). We understand all religious doctrines in practical terms, as guiding myths to live by, in the way that Kant, Kierkegaard and Bultmann began to map out. We abandon ideas of objective and eternal truth, and instead see all truth as a human improvisation. We should give up all ideas of a heavenly or supernatural world-beyond. Yet, despite our seeming scepticism, we insist that non-realist religion can work very well as religion, and can deliver (a sort of) eternal happiness.<sup>7</sup>

Among non-realists there are those who are, as it were, favorable toward religion and those who are not. Consider the words of Sigmund Freud:

These [religious ideas], which are given out as teachings, are not precipitates of experience or end-results of thinking: they are illusions, fulfillments of the oldest, strongest and most urgent wishes of mankind. The secret of their strength lies in the strength of those wishes.<sup>8</sup>

For Freud, there are no referents for religious beliefs about transcendent entities such as God, the *dao*, and so forth. Rather, religion is an illusion and religious beliefs are merely manifestations of this illusion. The belief in God, for example, is simply the projection of a Father image.<sup>9</sup>

More recently, Oxford geneticist Richard Dawkins (1941–) and philosopher Daniel Dennett (1942–) have advanced the notion that a Darwinian account of cultural evolution may explain religion and religious beliefs via the replication of something very much like genes. There are, they suggest, *cultural* replicators, what they refer to as *memes*, which are units of cultural transmission or imitation.<sup>10</sup> Says Dawkins:

Just as genes propagate themselves in the gene pool by leaping from body to body via sperm or eggs, so memes propagate themselves in the meme pool by leaping from brain to brain by a process which, in the broad sense of the term, can be called imitation.<sup>11</sup>

He includes the following beliefs as religious memes:

- You will survive your own death.
- Belief in God is a supreme virtue.
- Faith is a virtue.
- There are some weird things (such as the Trinity, transubstantiation, incarnation) that we are not *meant* to understand.<sup>12</sup>

For Dawkins, the widespread belief in God is not due to there actually being such an entity, or because there are good reasons for believing there are. Rather, people believe because the “god-meme” has spread – in ways akin to a virus – throughout human populations. Religion turns out to be an “accidental by-product – a misfiring of something useful.”<sup>13</sup> So too with all attending religious beliefs.<sup>14</sup>

Other non-realists are more favorable toward religion. Ludwig Wittgenstein (1889–1951) for example – one of the most influential philosophers of the twentieth century – took religion very seriously, even to the point of considering the priesthood.<sup>15</sup> Nevertheless, he was opposed to natural theology, the attempt to demonstrate the existence of God from evidence in the natural world, and to the development of religious doctrines. He was more interested in religious symbol and ritual.

In his later works Wittgenstein understood language to be not a fixed structure directly corresponding to the way things actually are, but rather to be a human activity susceptible to the vicissitudes of human life and practice. Language does not offer a picture of reality, he argued, but rather it is a set of activities which he described as “language games.”<sup>16</sup> The concept of a language game was “to bring into prominence the fact that the speaking of language is part of an activity, or a form of life.”<sup>17</sup> Wittgenstein uses the example of a builder to make the point:

The language is meant to serve for communication between a builder A and an assistant B. A is building with building-stones: there are blocks, pillars, slabs and beams. B has to pass the stones, in the order in which A needs them. For this purpose they use a language consisting of the words “block,” “pillar,” “slab,”

**Ludwig Wittgenstein** (1889–1951) is considered by many to be one of the leading philosophers of the twentieth century. His two major works, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* and *Philosophical Investigations* were fundamental in establishing first logical positivism and then ordinary language philosophy. His work on language and religion is much discussed and relevant to the realism/non-realism debate.

“beam.” A calls them out; – B brings the stone which he has learnt to bring at such-and-such a call.<sup>18</sup>

In teaching language, one needs to be able to respond to words in certain contexts; speech and action work together. In many cases, then, the meaning of a word is its use in the language.<sup>19</sup> For Wittgenstein, this is true in religious discourse as it is elsewhere. Thus in speaking of God or Brahman or *nirvana* or the *dao*, the meanings of such words have more to do with their use than with their denotation.<sup>20</sup> The language games of the religions reflect the practices and forms of life of the various religious adherents, and so religious claims should not be taken as providing literal pictures of reality which somehow lie beyond these activities.<sup>21</sup>

Religious non-realists who are favorable toward religion also make note of the alleged failure of realism to provide evidences for the objective truth of any religion, or of religion in general. Whether referring to arguments for the existence of God, or evidences for divine inspiration of sacred scriptures, for example, non-realists maintain that such apologetic projects are abject failures. We will look at some of the evidences for faith in later chapters. But such non-realists are convinced that since there are no conclusive reasons to believe that a religion is true, a better way of approaching religious claims and beliefs is to view them through non-realist lenses.

Realists respond to this argument in various ways. For one, some agree that there are no solid reasons to believe any religion is true. Nevertheless, they claim that it does not require evidence. We will explore this position in Chapter 8. Other realists respond by claiming that there are good reasons and evidences for religious faith, and we will explore some of these reasons in Chapters 4, 5, 6, 9 and 10.

Another reason for holding to religious non-realism is the fact that religious claims, beliefs, and practices do in fact exist within a given social context and involve human language and concepts. Since religious claims and activities are always made within a particular human context, and since the mind structures all perception within that context, the meanings of these claims are determined and limited by that context. One need not – indeed, one legitimately cannot, it is argued – posit objective, transcendent realities beyond human language and cognition. To do so is to simply go too far.

Realists respond by noting that while much of what occurs in religious discourse (and practice) is of human origin, one need not take a reductionist stance in which all religious meanings and symbols are reducible to human language. As already noted, some realists argue that there are reasons for believing that a particular religion is true – that there are objective referents for their claims.<sup>22</sup>

I have given space here to non-realism – more so than for realism – both because it is an important development in contemporary philosophy of religion and because, in lieu of the predominant work in the field, the remainder of the book is oriented toward a realist perspective.

## SUMMARY

Our world is in many ways a religious world, with roughly 85 percent of the populace affirming some form of religious belief. But religions and their attending beliefs are diverse. Some affirm a personal deity, some don't; some believe in many deities; some only one; some maintain that Ultimate Reality and the universe are one or co-dependent, others disagree. The differences are multifarious. But there are also similarities as all religions include beliefs, ideas, and practices centered around a transcendent Reality – a Reality which provides ultimate meaning and purpose to life.

The philosophical reflection on religious beliefs and ideas – an activity which has been ongoing for millennia – underwent a major challenge in the last century with the critiques of the logical positivists. However, with the demise of positivism in the 1970s, it re-emerged and is today a flourishing field of study.

In contemporary philosophy of religion discussions it is not only the different beliefs and practices of the various religions which are discussed and debated, but the more fundamental question of what religious beliefs and practices are about is of central concern. Religious realists maintain that religious beliefs are about transcendent realities which actually exist outside of human language and conceptual frameworks. Religious non-realists deny this. Some non-realists, such as Sigmund Freud and Richard Dawkins, maintain that religions are human constructions and religious beliefs are illusions or perhaps even delusions. Other non-realists, such as Don Cupitt and Ludwig Wittgenstein, agree that religions are about human practices, beliefs, and ideas. Nonetheless they maintain that religion is a meaningful human enterprise.

In the following chapters we will explore the rich diversity of religious beliefs and experiences, claims to religious truth, and other important areas of religious agreement and disagreement as we engage in the philosophy of religion.

## QUESTIONS FOR REVIEW/DISCUSSION

1. How would you define "religion"? Does your definition include all and only what are generally taken to be the religions?
2. What are some similarities and differences between beliefs systems such as communism or secular humanism and religion?
3. The circular graph at the beginning of the chapter includes the current numbers of adherents among the world religions. Do the numbers affect your assessment of a religion's credibility? Should they? Explain.
4. Do you think it is possible to understand and assess a religion without actually being a believing member of the religion? Of any religion? What are some ways of attempting such understanding and assessment?
5. What are some areas of agreement and disagreement between religious realists and non-realists?
6. Do you consider yourself to be a religious realist or non-realist? What do you deem to be plausible reasons for affirming one or the other?
7. Do you believe that religion can and should be subject to rational or scientific investigation? Why or why not?
8. How might the positions of realism and non-realism affect the way one thinks about the following issues: human rights, religious tolerance, global responsibility?
9. Mohandas Gandhi stated that "A religion that takes no account of practical affairs and does not help to solve them is no religion." Do you agree? Is there a connection between religion and ethical action? Explain.
10. What are some possible areas of common ground between religious realists and non-realists? Can you think of ways for developing a rapprochement between them?

## FURTHER READING

- Byrne, Peter (2003) *God and Realism*. Burlington, VT: Ashgate. (A critical survey of issues relevant to the realist/non-realist debates.)
- Cupitt, Don (1997) *After God: The Future of Religion*. New York: Basic Books. (A non-realist presentation in which God is viewed not as a transcendent reality but a reflection of the human self.)
- Kant, Immanuel (1960) *Religion Within the Limits of Reason Alone*. Trans. Theodore M. Greene and Hoyt H. Hudson. New York: Harper & Brothers. (Interprets religious faith in ethical terms.)
- Meister, Chad and Paul Copan, eds. (2007) *The Routledge Companion to Philosophy of Religion*. London: Routledge. (Includes many entries relevant to the material in this chapter with each offering further annotated bibliographies.)
- Phillips, D. Z. (2001) *Religion and the Hermeneutics of Contemplation*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. (Working through central ideas of Hume, Feuerbach, Marx, Freud,

Durkheim, and others, he makes the case that religious thinkers should be focused on understanding religion rather than being for or against it.)

Puttill, Richard (1978) *Thinking about Religion: A Philosophical Introduction to Religion*. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson/Prentice Hall. (A solid work introducing philosophical thinking about religion.)

Ramapalli, Radhakrishnan and Charles A. Moore, eds. (1957) *A Sourcebook in Indian Philosophy*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press. (Includes a large selection of texts which amount to a survey of the major philosophies of India spanning the last three millennia.)

Rhodes, Arvind (1993) *Our Religions: The Seven World Religions Introduced by Preeminent Scholars from Each Tradition*. San Francisco, CA: HarperSanFrancisco. (An excellent general survey of seven world religions.)

Rubin, Ninian (1999) *Worldviews: Crosscultural Explorations of Human Beliefs*. 3rd edn., Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall. (Explores a number of religious traditions and worldviews and shows how they define human values and life forms.)

Rush, Wilfred Cantwell (1963) *The Meaning and End of Religion: A Revolutionary Approach to the Great Traditions*. Oxford: Oneworld. (Argues that religion, as now understood, is a fairly recent European construct.)

Taliaferro, Charles (1998) *Contemporary Philosophy of Religion*. Oxford: Blackwell. (One of the best introductions to thinking philosophically about religion.)

Ward, Keith (2008) *The Case For Religion*. Oxford: Oneworld. (Examines and replies to a wide range of arguments against religion.)

Wittgenstein, Ludwig (1953) *Philosophical Investigations*. Ed. G. E. M. Anscombe and R. Rhees. Trans. G. E. M. Anscombe. Oxford: Blackwell. (Wittgenstein's later work in which he discusses the influential notion of language games, forms of life, and family resemblance.)

## WEBSITES

<http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/philosophy-religion/>

A concise entry from the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* on philosophy of religion written by Charles Taliaferro.

<http://www.religionfacts.com/>

A helpful and well-documented site; contains a useful comparison chart of religions.

<http://www.philosophyofreligion.info/>

Introduces many of the major areas of philosophy of religion as well as major philosophers of religion.

<http://www.aarweb.org/>

A professional society of teachers and research scholars whose primary object of study is religion.

<http://apa.udel.edu/apa/>

The primary professional organization for American philosophers.