Introduction

Philosophy of religion is, I believe, one of the most fascinating and profound areas of philosophy, in part because it asks basic questions about our place in the cosmos and about the possibility of a reality that may *transcend* the cosmos. Is the cosmos created or uncreated? Alternatively, should the natural world itself be thought of as sacred or divine? What is the relationship between (apparently) competing concepts of God found in different religions and even in the same religion? Is a Buddhist concept of the self or a Christian view of the soul credible in light of modern science? A philosophical exploration of these and other questions requires an investigation into the nature and limits of human thought.

Philosophy of religion is also a robust, important undertaking due to its breadth. Religious traditions are so comprehensive and all-encompassing that almost every domain of philosophy may be drawn upon in the philosophical exploration of their coherence, justification, and value. I can think of few areas of philosophy that lack religious implications. Any philosophical account of knowledge, values, reason, human nature, language, science, and the like will have a bearing on how one views God or the sacred; religious values and practices; the religious treatment of birth, history, and death; the varieties of religious experience; the relationship between science and religion; and other substantial terrain. At least two other factors contribute to the importance of philosophy of religion.

Because it explores embedded social and personal practices, philosophy of religion is relevant to practical concerns; its subject matter is not all abstract theory. Given the vast percentage of the world population that is either aligned with religion or affected by it, philosophy of religion has a secure role in addressing people's values and

commitments.[1] A chief point of reference in much philosophy of religion revolves not around hypothetical, highly abstract thought experiments but around the shape and content of living traditions. Because of this practical embeddedness, philosophy of religion involves issues of great political and cultural significance. Questions are raised about the relationship between religious and secular values; religious toleration and liberty; and the religious implications and duties concerning medicine, the economy, public art, education, sexual ethics, and environmental responsibility.

Finally, for those interested in the history of ideas in the modern era, there is an inescapable reason for studying philosophy of religion: most modern philosophers explicitly address religious topics. One cannot undertake a credible history of modern philosophy without taking philosophy of religion seriously.

This book follows the custom of taking the "modern era" to begin with the birth of modern science.[2] I start to build a history of modern philosophy of religion in the middle of seventeenth-century Europe when Isaac Newton enters the scene. Beginning the book in the mid-seventeenth century provides a view of philosophical work on religion in the midst of debate over the religious importance of an emerging, powerful empirical science. It also shows philosophy of religion being carried out in the context of tumultuous political and social changes that help define the centuries that follow.

In the first volume of the series "The Evolution of Modern Philosophy," Roberto Torretti offers an account of modern physics, noting that his topic differs from philosophy of religion and other areas in terms of its continuity with the past. "While the modern philosophies of art, language, politics, religion, and so on seek to elucidate manifestations of human life that are much older and probably will last much longer than the philosophical will for lucidity, the modern philosophy of physics has

[1] Reliable statistics on religion are difficult to obtain, but I note the following figures on some world religions from the *Britannica Book of the Year, 2003*: Christianity – more than 2 billion (32.9%); Islam – more than 1.2 billion (19.8%); Hinduism – more than 800 million (13.3%); Buddhism – more than 360 million (5.9%); Judaism – more than 14 million (.2%). The *Britannica* has a useful overview of adherents to sixteen religions.

[2] There are other customs; some pinpoint the beginning of the "modern era" or "modernity" in the late 1700s at the time of the French Revolution. Alternatively, "modern" and "modernism" have been used to describe a system of logic (*via moderna*) in the fourteenth to sixteenth century in contrast to older systems (*via antiqua*).

to do with modern physics, an intellectual enterprise that began in the seventeenth century as a central piece of history itself."[3] Unlike Torretti's modern physics, there are significant connections between philosophy of religion today and earlier philosophy, including philosophy in ancient Greece. In planning a starting point for this book, I wanted to appeal to one or more philosophers who had deep roots in earlier philosophical traditions but who were also party to modern science. I kept thinking of the ancient Roman pictures of the keeper of doorways, Janus, the god of beginnings. He has two faces, one looking to the past, the other to the future. I settled on a cluster of philosophers known as the Cambridge Platonists, who flourished at Cambridge University in the seventeenth century, to begin this narrative.

The Cambridge Platonists occupy an important middle ground in the history of ideas. They understood the power of modern science (there is reason to believe one of the members of this movement, Henry More, influenced Newton's science), and yet they worked in allegiance with an important Platonic philosophical and religious heritage spanning ancient, medieval, and Renaissance philosophy. They forged an extraordinary synthesis designed to incorporate modern science while retaining what they believed to be the best of Greek and Hebrew wisdom. Like Janus, the Cambridge Platonists invite us to adopt that double vision of looking both to the past and to the future. I believe that they are also deserving of more than a passing glance because of their work to promote nonviolent political life and toleration in a time of war and bitter political and sectarian struggle. Their goal of synthesizing ancient and modern wisdom may or may not be tenable and, looking back, we may readily conclude that their case for toleration did not go far enough, but I believe their critique of religious persecution and their respect for liberty of conscience (both philosophical and political) is a good place to begin.

The Cambridge Platonists are also a promising starting point because in their literature one may see almost all the themes that define early modern philosophical work on religion, as well as themes that occupy the philosophy of religion up to the present day. Among the many subjects addressed by the Cambridge Platonists is a topic that bears not just on philosophy of religion but on philosophy of science, philosophy of art, and other subfields of philosophy. A philosophy of X,

[3] Roberto Torretti, *The Philosophy of Physics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), xiii.

be it religion, science, art, history, or whatever, may be in radical opposition to X as it is practiced. So, a philosopher of religion may think of religion as intellectually and morally bankrupt, just as some philosophers of art find some contemporary "art" either not art at all or aesthetically abominable. Unfortunately, the obvious point needs to be made that a philosophy of X must be accurately apprised of X.[4] Some artists, scientists, and religious practitioners complain that philosophy of art, science, and religion utilize misleading pictures of the way art, science, and religion are actually practiced. For better or for worse, the Cambridge Platonists were *philosophers* of religion and, at the same time, committed to the practice of religion. They *practiced* the very thing they were *studying* and *philosophically reflecting on*, and in that respect the Cambridge Platonists were like artists or scientists working out a philosophy of art or science. They also thereby raise questions about the roles of detachment and religious commitment in the course of philosophical inquiry.[5]

[4] Regrettably, it is not unusual to see an observation like the following in philosophy of science and other areas of philosophy: "Philosophers of science nowadays tend to be much better informed than their predecessors about the details of the sciences they are philosophizing about, and this, I have no doubt, has led to important improvements in the field," from John Worrall, "Philosophy and the Natural Sciences," in *Philosophy* 2, ed. A. C. Grayling (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 243. To those new to philosophy as a field, it must seem bizarre that philosophers of science, art, religion, and the like would be unacquainted with the history and current practice that define their subject matter.

[5] On the importance of philosophers of religion looking to the way religion is practiced, see M. Jamie Ferreira, "Normativity and Reference in a Wittgensteinian Philosophy of Religion," *Faith and Philosophy* 18:4 (2001): 443–464. In *The Religious* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2002), John Caputo charges that some philosophy of religion "prove to be almost completely irrelevant to anyone with the least experience of religious matters, which beg to be treated differently and on their own terms" (3). The Cambridge Platonists had a great deal of experience in religious matters as well as matters philosophical. On the advantage of combining the philosophy of X – be it religion or art – with practice, consider Arthur Danto's comment on how aesthetics has benefited from contributors who truly wrestle with art rather than just write about it. "The dreariness has been driven out of aesthetics, it seems to me, by virtue of the fact that it is more and more written by philosophers engaged in the raw world of artistic conflict" (*The Body/Body Problem* [Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999], 245). Like Danto's nondreary philosophers of art, the Cambridge Platonists offer us an *engaged* philosophy of religion. On the advantage of such engaged work, see also Basil Mitchell's *The Justification of Religious Belief* (London: Macmillan, 1973), especially 103.

A further reason for my starting point is that there is now a revival of the kind of philosophy of religion advanced by the Cambridge Platonists. Beginning and ending this book with Cambridge Platonism offers one way to take stock of the history of the field. (With all these reasons for giving prominence to this philosophical movement, I want to assure readers that the narrative that follows does not construe the history of philosophy of religion as a series of footnotes on Cambridge Platonism!)

Several other features of this narrative history need to be highlighted. In order to prevent this book from becoming too encyclopedic or dispersed, I use the concept of evidence and its associates (justification, entitlement, warrant, reason to believe, and so on) as recurring reference points. This is the reason behind the title of the book, *Evidence and Faith* (recommended to me by my editor Paul Guyer) rather than the more generic *The Evolution of Modern Philosophy of Religion*. I am concerned with questions such as these:

- What do different philosophies of religion count as evidence for their viability?
- How does concern for evidence or intellectual legitimacy relate to moral and religious values?
- What standards of evidence or legitimization may be employed in religious views of the subjects cited at the outset of this Introduction – alternative pictures of the divine, for example?
- Can you or I have a justified "true experience" or apprehension of God?
- Is evidence something normative or objective, or is it relative to specific religious traditions, communities, and gender?
- How important is it to have evidence for or against religious beliefs?

I keep one eye on these and other, similar questions throughout the text. Philosophy of religion involves far more than the theory of knowledge and the justification and critique of religious beliefs and practices. Still, the concept of "evidence" (understood in very broad terms) serves as a useful reference point because questions of justification and entitlement are customarily addressed in the modern philosophical exploration of virtually all religious topics. Moreover, to discuss when or if evidence is vital for the legitimization of religious belief and practice inevitably involves taking on such important topics as the trustworthiness of our cognitive faculties, concepts of truth, responsibility, the reliability of testimony, the difference (if any) between fact and interpretation,

the limits of inquiry, burdens of proof, and fundamental questions of values.[6]

"Evidence" is only a touchstone in this narrative history, not the dominating, exclusive subject. So, in the exploration of the seventeenth-century Cambridge Platonists in Chapter 1, I seek to bring to the fore their views of faith and reason while at the same time not bypassing their philosophy of human nature and their conception of God's relation to the world. In a sense, the Cambridge Platonist chapter explicitly underscores the difficulty of writing a history of the concept of evidence or a history of what is categorized as "religion" or "religious," in complete isolation from other concerns. The Cambridge Platonists did not simply work with a barren concept of evidence but with a whole scheme of ideas, culminating in a conception of ourselves in the world in which we are so created in order to enable the fruitful exercise of reason.[7] Their view of reason had an important moral and religious role in the (eventual) British opposition to slavery.

In order to keep this book to a manageable length, I center the narrative more on themes and arguments rather than give pride of place to the biographical details of individuals. Biographies, autobiographies, and other texts are suggested for further study. Most of the figures

[6] For better or worse, the list is not exhaustive. In the course of my research, I have been struck by how the history of theories of evidence is intertwined with philosophy of religion. Just as a history of philosophy of religion may use the topic of evidence as a reference point, a history of theories of evidence may give prominence to philosophy of religion. William Twining, one of the leading figures in the field of evidence scholarship, notes that the history of evidence theory in law is linked to debate in philosophy of religion; see *Theories of Evidence: Bentham and Wigmore* (London: Weidenfield and Nicolson, 1985), 1. Also see "Some Skepticism about Some Skepticism," in *Rethinking Evidence* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1990), chap. 4, in which Twining explores the legal ramifications of different forms of skepticism, some of which are central topics in philosophy of religion.

[7] The difficulty of addressing evidence in a solitary, narrow fashion may be driven home by taking account of all the presuppositions behind interesting questions about evidence. The question "Are your beliefs supported by evidence?" presumes (at a minimum) that there is a subject, you, and such things as beliefs. Moreover, if someone calls out to you, "Make sure you act in accord with the evidence," I suspect you will respond to different cues and at different speeds depending on what you take to be your circumstances – whether, for example, you have jumped out of a plane and are trying to open your parachute, or you are thinking through Euclidian geometry in tranquillity. Given the right conditions, you also might even like to ask the person hailing you: "Who are you?" "Why this request *now*?" So, questions of evidence very quickly generate other questions about the nature and role of circumstance.

covered in this book have been and still are the subject of enormous study, and often heated, contentious debate. I flag some of the salient points in dispute and suggest some routes into the secondary literature. I am also selective about locating places to address specific arguments in detail; for example, rather than examine the argument from design in many different chapters, I take note of the argument in Chapter 1 and elsewhere, but I make it central to Chapter 4 (on Humean philosophy of religion) and discuss it only briefly in other places. The first chapter references many arguments and claims that are singled out for in-depth discussion later.

I assume some acquaintance with the common terms employed in philosophy of religion but no more than what may be gleaned from standard introductions to the field.[8] *Evidence and Faith* is not chiefly addressed to those already in the field but to those with a background in philosophy who are interested in this vital area of inquiry. To facilitate your engagement with (and contribution to) philosophy of religion, there is an appendix of relevant journals, book series, centers, and societies. I believe that philosophy of religion is best done in collaboration, and my hope is that this book may be of use in drawing more people to the field.

It needs to be stressed that I make no claim to be telling *the* definitive story of modern philosophy of religion. I offer *a* reading of the field in terms that I hope will invite further (including *contrary*) philosophical investigation and the development of different interpretations of modern philosophy of religion. The goal I do *not* have in this historical study is the sequential construction of monuments to movements that serve only historical interests. I believe that many of the struggles from the seventeenth century onward are relevant today. The book is largely a narrative of figures and ideas in their setting, but the text also includes observations on subsequent philosophy and suggested lines of reasoning to further debate. In brief, *Evidence and Faith* is my best effort at locating material for philosophical reflection on the nature and value

[8] For an introduction, see my *Contemporary Philosophy of Religion* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1998). Most of the main academic presses have introductions to the field that provide a guide to the common terms used in the philosophical study of religion. The following authors have introductions, any one of which would provide a reasonable background for this history: W. Abraham, S. Brown, K. J. Clark, R. Creel, Brian Davies, C. S. Evans, J. C. A. Gaskin, J. Hick, A. O'Hear, M. Peterson et al., B. R. Tilgman, T. V. Morris, K. Yandell.

of religion in the past and present. Most of the chapters include the reconstruction of at least one relevant argument (along with objections and replies), which I hope will have a bearing on projects some readers will engage and perhaps rework (critically or constructively) in the field today.

Although I am writing primarily for those with only some background in the field, a word needs to be said to and about seasoned scholars. The history of philosophy as a field has increased in caliber dramatically over the past thirty years. There is now considerable scorn for making huge generalizations about eras in philosophy, as well as in employing some of the standard categories like rationalism and empiricism. In a recent exchange among four prominent historians in the *Journal of History of Philosophy*, Richard Watson notes how many histories of philosophy are more a matter of shadows than accurate accounts of what "really" happened.

> The shadow history of philosophy is a kind of received view consisting of stories of philosophy that most philosophers accept even though they know that these stories are not really quite precisely right. For example, everyone knows that the division between Continental Rationalists and British Empiricists is bogus. There are strong rationalist elements in Berkeley and strong empiricist elements in Descartes. And so on. Loeb says, "No serious scholar subscribes to [this] standard theory." But most historians continue to teach courses in Rationalism and Empiricism, even if they change the course titles to, say, Early Modern Philosophy or The British Tradition.[9]

I take heed of the need for a more careful use of terms and seek to employ the big "-isms," as in empiricism, idealism, and the like, only for the purpose of a very general organization of some of the material.[10]

[9] "Shadow History in Philosophy," *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 3:1 (January 1993): 97.

[10] As an aside, it is interesting to note that many of the standard textbook categories such as empiricism, rationalism, and idealism do not fade away; they remain useful, notwithstanding the frustrations of some scholars over precise definitions. In an important study in the 1930s, *Idealism: A Critical Survey* (London: Methuen, 1933), A. C. Ewing lamented the use of "idealism" and made this prediction: "My view is that the term will soon die out except as a name for a past movement, since most philosophers of the present day seem to feel that it is better not to label themselves expressly as idealists or realists, while they still draw on the resources of either or, better, both schools" (5). For better or for worse, the term "idealism" is alive and very much in currency today. Here are two representative titles of recent, important works:

I also underscore a point that I am certain Watson would not deny: a narrative history needs to include not only work on what we now think philosophers were *actually* getting at, but also material on how they were treated by their contemporaries and in the following centuries. In this book I address the philosophers themselves, as well as the shadows they cast.[11]

It is perhaps obvious that someone setting out to write a focused history of philosophy is at least somewhat optimistic about the possibility of describing (or, given the task of covering 350 years in just over 400 pages, *sketching*) some of what took place from the seventeenth century onward. As it happens, I am not skeptical about the viability of historical inquiry. I do not share the dictum that all history is really about the present and our contemporary projections. Still, I am writing this book for you, my contemporaries, and not as a timeless record of events. In what follows, then, I cross-reference works of the past with the present – mentioning, for example, how seventeenth-century Cambridge Platonist views of human nature differ from current, twenty-first-century views. Sometimes, in order to bring past philosophical debates into view, current projects need to be mentioned in order to set them explicitly to one side, lest they implicitly color our judgment.

Philosophy of religion as it is practiced today includes cross-cultural studies and sustained work on widely divergent, nontheistic traditions. This is an exciting development, and yet it is a *development*. Much of the initial modern era was centered mainly on theism and its alternatives (usually what today we would call deism, naturalism, agnosticism, and skepticism). The Cambridge Platonists had a keen interest in non-Christian traditions; for example, Leibniz was fascinated by Confucianism, and Spinoza's God is not theistic, but it is not until later that nontheistic notions of God, and work in and on Hindu, Buddhist, Taoist, and African philosophy definitively enlarge the practice of philosophy of religion in the West. *Evidence and Faith*

T. L. S. Sprigge, *The Vindication of Absolute Idealism* (Edinburgh: University Press, 1983), and John Foster, *The Case for Idealism* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1982).

[11] For example, some current historians have offered very different pictures of some philosophers (e.g., Descartes, Hume, Kant) from the ways in which they have been interpreted in the past. I reference some of the more promising projects that recast the "received view" while also offering some of the "standard" interpretations.

narrates the expansion of philosophy of religion, beginning with a theistic philosophy in mid-seventeenth-century England and ending with today's pluralistic, some would say tumultuous, environment. In a narrative history beginning with ancient Asian philosophy of religion, there would be a parallel story of the expansion of Asian philosophy to include the encounter with Abrahamic faiths (Judaism, Christianity, and Islam). At present, the expansive, amplified practice of philosophy of religion worldwide has initiated a vibrant era for both the history and practice of philosophy, as scholars engage important theistic *and* non-theistic philosophical religious traditions.

Most chapters begin with a brief sketch, a kind of snapshot, of a historic event. The first one is an address to the House of Commons during the tragic English Civil War in 1647.