# An Introduction to the Philosophy of Religion

*An Introduction to the Philosophy of Religion* provides a broad overview of the topics which are at the forefront of discussion in contemporary philosophy of religion. Prominent views and arguments from both historical and contemporary authors are discussed and analyzed. The book treats all of the central topics in the field, including the coherence of the divine attributes, theistic and atheistic arguments, faith and reason, religion and ethics, miracles, human freedom and divine providence, science and religion, and immortality. In addition it addresses topics of significant importance that similar books often ignore, including the argument for atheism from hiddenness, the coherence of the doctrines of the Trinity and the Incarnation, and the relationship between religion and politics. It will be a valuable accompaniment to undergraduate and introductory graduate-level courses.

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CAMBRIDGE
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UNIVERSITY PRESS

University Printing House, Cambridge CB2 8BS, United Kingdom

Cambridge University Press is part of the University of Cambridge.
It furthers the University's mission by disseminating knowledge in the pursuit of education, learning and research at the highest international levels of excellence.

www.cambridge.org
Information on this title: www.cambridge.org/9780521619554



First published 2008
6th printing 2014

Printed in the United Kingdom by Clays, St Ives plc.

*A catalogue record for this publication is available from the British Library*

ISBN 978-0-521-85369-9 Hardback
ISBN 978-0-521-61955-4 Paperback

**To our families**
**Kirsten, Samuel, Elise, and Julia**
**and**
**Chris, Aaron, and Kris**

# Contents

# Preface

Anyone going to a major university library and searching for books on "philosophy of religion" would think that this area of philosophy was quite new. By all appearances, it would seem that the philosophy of religion emerged sometime in the middle of the twentieth century, and then blossomed rapidly over the period between then and now. Yet this appearance would be deceiving. Philosophical reflection on religious themes has been a central part of philosophy from the time of its origin to the present. In the Western philosophical tradition this is due at least in part to the fact that most philosophers in the West either have been theists themselves or have written in intellectual climates dominated by theistic presuppositions. Yet while philosophy of religion is not itself new, what is new is the attempt to tease out some of the questions that philosophers raise when discussing religion and to treat them together under a single heading. That is what contemporary philosophers of religion do, and it is what this book aims to do as well.

Some of the issues that philosophers raise when discussing religion are of perennial interest: Is there a God? How could God permit evil? Does morality depend on God in some fashion? And so on. Other questions become more or less important as the discipline of philosophy itself changes and the culture in which this philosophical reflection goes on changes. In this book we try to balance discussion of those central, perennial questions with ones that are just beginning to appear over the horizon. In this way, the text aims to give students access to the long tradition of philosophical reflection in religion, while also acquainting them with where the discipline now stands, and where it seems to be going.

This book opens with a section discussing the nature and attributes of God. We then move to consider questions about the rationality of belief in such a God, as well as a variety of questions about what philosophers in the

major religious traditions oriented around belief in this sort of God have said (or ought to say) about science, morality, politics, mind, and immortality. Readers will notice that the focus throughout is on theistic belief – that is, belief in the God of the Western monotheistic traditions. Those unaware of the way in which contemporary philosophy of religion in the English-speaking world has developed over the past several decades might find this focus puzzling, or even objectionable. Thus, a few words of explanation are in order.

Religious beliefs and practices have proliferated in virtually every human culture; and the supernatural entities that figure in these religious beliefs (if any) are highly variegated. Some religions hypothesize no supernatural beings at all, either because those things that are the objects of religious devotion, attention, or fear are parts of the natural order itself, or because God is identified with the totality of the natural order, the latter view being known as pantheism. Other religious traditions instead propose that God is a larger whole consisting of a body – the physical cosmos – in addition to a divine soul that is intimately joined with this cosmic body. This view is known as panentheism. In addition there are myriad versions of polytheism in the history of religion. More familiar to those in the West, however, are religions which argue that there are many supernatural beings (among them, angels and demons) only one of whom counts as God, a supremely perfect or ultimate being who creates and controls all that there is. And there are still more variations. In light of this, it seems that any attempt to provide (in the space that we have been given) a suitably inclusive or comprehensive introduction to philosophical problems associated with the concept of divinity will come at the price of objectionable superficiality.

The best way forward, then, is to restrict our focus somehow. Since the primary goal of this book is to provide a properly representative introduction to the field of philosophy of religion as it has developed in English-speaking countries over the past fifty years, and since that field has been overwhelmingly dominated by questions arising in connection with theism in general and particular doctrines of the three major theistic religions (Judaism, Christianity, and Islam), we have elected to restrict our focus largely to these questions.

Some might regard that choice as unfortunate, thinking that more attention should be devoted to non-Western, non-theistic religious traditions. We agree that more reflection should be devoted to these traditions and,

indeed, philosophical work on these topics in English-language philosophy departments is on the rise. But space limitations preclude giving these traditions the full and careful treatment that they would merit. Note, however, that there will be times throughout this book where we will make reference to non-monotheistic religious alternatives when they bear directly on one of the issues we are discussing. Monotheists have, for example, often argued for the truth of monotheism by arguing that it is the only way of making sense of some important evident fact or widely held belief. Sometimes these monotheists seem only to have in view two alternatives: monotheism and atheistic naturalism. But there are going to be many cases where alternative religious traditions would equally well or better explain or make sense of the facts or beliefs in question. In cases like these, we will discuss the relevant alternatives as a way of helping us assess claims that theists make.

How shall we approach the questions that we propose to discuss? Here a few words about disciplinary differences are in order. There are various disciplinary approaches one can take when considering questions concerning the nature of God. For example, one can take a strictly theological approach. Some theologians aim to develop theologies based entirely on the data of purported revelations within particular religious traditions. Islamic theologians, especially those adhering to the Asharite tradition, thus try to piece together a conception of God from the way in which God is described and characterized in the Koran. Theology of this sort is known as revealed or sacred theology. Other theologians look to see what can be known about God by drawing inferences from various facts about the world. The fact that the world began to be, or that its existence is contingent, or that it exhibits special types of design, are invoked in an attempt to show that God exists and has certain characteristics or properties. Such reasoning is known as natural theology.

Alternatively, one can approach questions about the nature of God from within the disciplines of religion or religious studies. Scholars within these disciplines typically seek to explain the concept of God as it is developed and used by various constituencies within a specific tradition. They might thus elucidate and study the emergence of novel Vedic theological traditions in thirteenth-century Hinduism or the differences between Western and Eastern Christianity. Some will take a more fine-grained approach by seeking to describe the concept of God as it is developed by particular

theological figures, like Augustine or John Calvin, or might instead take a wider angle approach, looking to plot the course of theological development over long spans of time. Scholars in these fields also examine the relationship between various conceptions of God and their impact on the behavior and practice of adherents of those traditions.

Philosophers approach theological or religious questions with their own aims and questions. Within the discipline of philosophy there are many subdisciplines, a number of which seek to use the tools and methods of philosophical inquiry to ask distinctively philosophical questions about other disciplines. Thus there is, within philosophy itself, the philosophy of art, the philosophy of science, the philosophy of law, the philosophy of psychology, and so on. There is also the philosophy of religion. What questions do philosophers of psychology or philosophers of art or philosophers of religion consider that are different from the questions considered by psychologists or artists or theologians? When doing philosophy of this sort, philosophers are usually engaged in one or both of two activities that we can call "conceptual clarification" and "propositional justification." These two activities look at the methodologies, presuppositions and outputs of the disciplines in question and ask the following two questions: what do those within the discipline mean when they affirm the claims they do, and why do they think those affirmations are true? In one sense every discipline asks these questions within their own domain. When philosophers ask these questions, however, they are typically directed towards claims or practices that are regarded as fundamental or are perhaps merely presupposed within the discipline. Thus while adherents of a religious tradition will typically assume a certain body of doctrine to be true – doctrines about God, for example – the philosopher of religion wants to explore what exactly is meant by the word "God," whether the meanings are coherent, and whether or not one should even accept the reality of God in the first place. These questions, and others related to them, will be the subject of this book.

In closing, we would like to express our gratitude for comments on earlier partial drafts of various chapters to Robert Audi, Jeff Brower, Fred Crossan, Tom Flint, Dennis Monokroussos, Sam Ochstein, Dan Speak, and Lea Schweitz. We owe a special debt of thanks to Michael Bergmann, who provided detailed comments and advice on several chapters of the penultimate manuscript. Chapter 3 includes material from "Understanding the

Trinity" (*Logos* 8 (2005), 145, no. 57) by Jeffrey Brower and Michael Rea; and chapter 6 includes material from Michael Murray's "Theodicy," forthcoming in Thomas Flint and Michael Rea (eds.), *The Oxford Handbook for Philosophical Theology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008). We are grateful to the respective publishers for permission to use this material.