

# **Philosophy of Religion**

## **A Beginner's Guide**

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ONE WORLD  
OXFORD

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# Preface

Is there a God? Is the cosmos created? Is evil compatible with an all-powerful, all-knowing, all-good creator? Can we experience God? How can we tell whether religious experiences are reliable? What is the relationship between religions? How are their different concepts of the sacred and of ultimate reality related? How should we assess the value of religious practices like prayer, meditation, worship, pilgrimages, and the love of God and neighbor? Do they make sense? Could we survive death? What is the relationship between religion and science? Between religion and morality? What should be the relationship between religion and politics?

These are only some of the questions that define the philosophy of religion. Philosophically reflecting on religion is not an abstract theoretical enterprise of interest only to the professional philosopher. It also has clear relevance to contemporary life, requiring philosophical engagement with the beliefs and practices of the majority of the world population. Only 550 million of the world's 6.7 billion people claim to be non-religious, secular atheists, agnostics, or skeptics. In the 1960s it was thought by some sociologists that world religions would severely atrophy in the coming decades, but quite the reverse has taken place (Berger 1997, 974; Stark 2006).

The philosophy of religion provides an exciting point of contact between different cultures. Its themes bear on both Eastern and Western thought, and the relationship between the Northern and Southern Hemispheres. I have been part of

delegations of philosophers from the West to Russia and China which have taken part in sustained, rich exchanges on the subject of philosophy of religion. There, rather than being dismissed as an opiate of the people or as of only marginal historical interest, as it was in Soviet and Maoist days, religious traditions are now taken seriously as sources for contemporary thinking not only about God but about value theory and the philosophy of language and culture. This is a far cry from the first philosophy conference I attended as an undergraduate student: the Fourteenth World Congress of Philosophy held in Bulgaria in 1973, before the collapse of Soviet power. At the philosophy of religion session, a Chinese philosopher gave an enthusiastic report on the Chinese government's success in secularizing Mongolia. Now, Chinese scholars spend time not on thinking about the social engineering of religious doubt or belief, but on investigating the nature and credibility of religion in the context of the democratic culture being fostered on the campuses of the great Chinese universities.

Philosophy of religion is one of the most intellectually exciting areas of philosophy, for it touches on virtually *every* other area of philosophy, from the philosophy of space and time, of science, to ethics, logic, and epistemology.

Finally, the philosophy of religion speaks directly to the meaning of life. The teachings of the world religions may seem to some to be antiquated and irrelevant, but a moment's exploration of religion reveals them to be *radically* important – should one or more of them be true. In the 1970s and 1980s it was fashionable for academic philosophers to dismiss questions about the meaning of life. Life is too fragmented to have a meaning, at least a meaning we can discern. But we persist in asking about the *meaning* or *significance* of our life and therefore about the possible role and truth of religion. Buddhism holds that the concept of the self as a substantial, concrete individual enduring over time and a life built on the pursuit of desire is deeply

problematic. Christianity (in its traditional form) holds that we are enduring substantial beings (sometimes thought of as embodied souls) who are made such that our deepest desires for fulfillment are found in relationship with God. If Buddhism is right, the meaning of our ego-driven, desire-ridden lives contains deep illusions. If Christianity is right, the cosmos is created and the arena of a fierce conflict between good and evil, and each person's well-being depends ultimately on an order of loving desire (what Augustine referred to as the *ordo amoris* or the order of love).

This *Beginner's Guide* will introduce you to the main themes of contemporary philosophy of religion. It will explore the five major world religions – Judaism, Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, and Buddhism – and religious pluralism and the secular challenge to religious traditions.

Before we begin, it is worth pausing to reflect on the emotions and attitudes that can come into play in philosophizing about religion.

Recent books like Daniel Dennett's *Breaking the Spell*, Sam Harris's *Letter to a Christian Nation* and *The End of Faith*, and Richard Dawkins's *The God Delusion* seem, in my view, to be both over-confident in their assertions and very one-sided in their approach to religion. The books by Dawkins and Dennett will be taken seriously in what follows, for they contain important arguments. They have done a great deal of good by bringing the topic of religion to the fore in public discourse. I could not agree more with Daniel Dennett's claim that

It is high time that we subject religion as a global phenomenon to the most intensive multidisciplinary research we can muster, calling on the best minds on the planet. Why? Because religion is too important for us to remain ignorant about. It affects not just our social, political, and economic conflicts, but the very meanings we find in our lives. For many people, probably a

majority of the people on Earth, nothing matters more than religion. For this reason, it is imperative that we learn as much as we can about it.

(Dennett 2006, 14, 15)

But though I commend his counsel and many of his insights, I hope this book will be more generous than his, Harris's, and Dawkins's to both 'believers' and 'skeptics'. I will not, for example, advance brazen and I believe unsupported charges that either religious belief or skepticism about religion is ignorant, hateful, and greedy, as does Harris (2004, 226). A spirit of generosity is called for in the philosophy of religion because there are good arguments for almost every position. There are good reasons for theism as well as for atheism, good reasons for being a Christian, and good reasons for being a Buddhist, and good reasons for being a skeptic.

I propose what may be called 'the golden rule in philosophy': that one should treat other philosophies as one would like one's own to be treated. Unfortunately, this golden rule is not always followed. There are, for example, two important philosophical texts currently in print that refer to Christian philosophers of religion as 'Christian apologists'. There is nothing wrong with being an apologist, which technically means someone who advocates or defends some position, but for most philosophers an 'apologist' is a *missionary* or *preacher*, not someone undertaking honest philosophical inquiry. Would the authors of these texts – who happen to be naturalists (people who believe that there is no God and that only nature exists) – like to be labeled 'apologists for naturalism'? They certainly do not use the term 'apologist' when referring to themselves or their fellow naturalists and that is a good reason for them not to refer to 'the opposition' as apologists. It is more respectful – and more fruitful – to describe views with which you disagree in the way you would like your own convictions to be addressed: fairly, respectfully, and with sympathy.

Closely related to a philosophical golden rule, I propose one more practice: 'philosophical good-Samaritanism', the practice of going to someone's aid when in need. At a North American philosophy conference I witnessed a vibrant, ideal exchange between a very prominent theist, Eleonore Stump, and the well-known philosopher David Lewis. Stump had developed a nuanced, philosophically interesting concept of the Christian belief in the incarnation. She faced a series of trenchant objections. Almost at the very end, Professor Lewis raised his hand and said something like: 'Although I am an atheist, and I do not believe in the Incarnation, *if I did think there was a God*, then an Incarnation might occur in the following way ...' I do not recall the detailed alternative that Lewis articulated that afternoon (an account that complemented Stump's theory), but his intellectual generosity and openness were impressive. This was not by any mean an isolated event (professional philosophers almost routinely seek to develop arguments and objections against their own views), but the Lewis–Stump exchange took place with particular grace and good humor in an otherwise quite uncomfortable lecture hall.

Such generosity is so much more appealing than the sometimes martial way in which debate can be carried out when people set out to *destroy, attack, undermine, defend* (etc.) this or that position. In my experience, philosophy is best done among groups where there is an authentic spirit of friendship or camaraderie. And it is in that spirit that one should not take too much delight in opposing a fellow philosopher's position; rather, from time to time one should also positively repair or reconstruct the work of others, even those with whom one profoundly disagrees. I suggest, then, that good philosophical inquiry, especially in matters of religion, should include cooperative assistance.

My final point in this introduction concerns a practical matter. Whether you are reading this book alone or in a large

class, find a friend (or two) who welcomes arguments and good-humored, open-ended dialogue. Getting started in philosophy is like learning a language: practice is essential. On your own, you may read closely or listen well to lectures, and even cultivate an internal dialogue on the issues (Plato defined 'thinking' as 'a dialogue within the soul'). But after more than twenty years as a college professor, I am convinced that nothing can replace the enormous value and excitement of ongoing exchange with a friend who listens sympathetically, challenges your insights, and contributes fresh observations of her or his own.

# 1

## Philosophical inquiry into religion

The word 'philosophy' is derived from the Greek word for 'love of wisdom'. In the West and East, the love of wisdom first took shape largely in response to mayhem and crisis. The ancient Greek philosopher Socrates (470–399 BCE) was a veteran of a defeated army. He served Athens in the war against Sparta (the Peloponnesian War), a war that Athens provoked, and lost decisively. In ancient China, Confucius (551–479 BCE) developed his philosophy of education, virtue, and rites during a period of widespread violence fomented by warlords; in addition to being among China's first philosophers, Confucius probably served as an officer of the law. Both developed what we call 'philosophy' in a period of cultural and political instability, for in such times there grows a desire to know the answers to questions like: What is justice? What is our duty to our family and our city? What is courage? Friendship? For what reasons – if any – should I be willing to die? Is it ever right to kill another person? What are the gods and what role should they play in our lives? Is there life beyond death? Should we honor our ancestors? If so, how?

For Socrates and Confucius, the pursuit of wisdom involves addressing basic questions about the nature and value of life. As a working definition of philosophy, I suggest a two-fold distinction. *To have a philosophy* is simply to have a view of reality and value. Given this definition, almost all reflective persons are philosophers, even if a person's philosophy happens to be quite haphazard and incomplete. Apart from this general definition, to

*practice philosophy* is to do what Socrates and Confucius did: to investigate the ways in which reason and experience justify views about justice, the divine, the meaning of birth, life, and death, and so on. The practice of philosophy is not, then, simply to entertain different views of reality; it's to engage in disciplined inquiry. Such inquiry often involves close attention to the meaning of terms; Confucius believed that one of the most important rules of thought is the careful use of words and Socrates argued that a source of great confusion and conflict is our failure to understand the terms we use. Philosophers, then, seek to clarify our views of reality, values, language, and to carefully consider what we may or should believe and feel, and how we should act. Some philosophers have been profound skeptics, arguing that humanity is deeply ignorant about reality, but the majority of philosophers have advanced competing theories and constructive arguments that call for engaging reflection.

The English term 'religion' is derived from the Latin term for 'to bind' and was used originally to refer to what bound people together in their beliefs about the gods and the practices they followed. Today, the word covers the five major world religions – Judaism, Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, and Buddhism – and more. Let us consider an overview of these religions and then examine several possible definitions of 'religion'. In addition to the five world religions, there are numerous other significant traditions that are customarily identified as religious. These include Confucianism, Taoism, Baha'ism, and Zoroastrianism, as well as the diverse African and Native American traditions. These will not all be bypassed in this *Beginner's Guide*, but for now let us consider the larger religions.

### The three monotheistic religions

Three of these traditions are called *Abrahamic* because they trace their history back to the Hebrew patriarch Abraham (often dated

to the twentieth or twenty-first century BCE). Judaism, Christianity, and Islam each see themselves as rooted in Abrahamic faith, as displayed in the Hebrew Bible, the Christian Old Testament (essentially the Hebrew Bible) and New Testament, and the Qur'an. 'Theism' has been since the seventeenth century the common term in English to refer to their central concept of God. According to the classical forms of these faiths, God is the one and sole God (they are *monotheistic* as opposed to *polytheistic*) who created and sustains the cosmos. God either created the cosmos out of nothing (*ex nihilo*) or it has always existed but depends for its existence upon God's conserving, creative will. (Some Islamic philosophers have claimed that the cosmos has always existed as God's sustained creation, but the great majority of philosophers in these three traditions have held that the cosmos had a beginning.) Creation from nothing means that that which is created was not created by God shaping or using anything external to God. The cosmos depends upon God's conserving, continuous will the way light depends on a source or a song depends on a singer. If the source of the light goes out or the singer stops singing, the light and song cease. Traditionally, the creation is not thought of as a thing that an agent might fashion and then abandon; the idea that God might make creation and then neglect it the way a person might make a machine and then abandon it is utterly foreign to theism.

In these religions, God is said to exist *necessarily*, not *contingently*. God exists in God's self, not as the creation of some greater being (a super-God) or force of nature. God is also not a mode of something more fundamental, the way a wave is a mode of the sea or a dance is a mode of movement. The cosmos, in contrast, exists *contingently* but not *necessarily* – it might not have existed at all; God's existence is unconditional insofar as it does not depend upon any external conditions, whereas the cosmos is conditional.

Theists hold that God is, rather, a *substantial reality*: a being not explainable in terms that are more fundamental than itself. God is without parts, that is, not an aggregate or compilation of things. Theists describe God as holy or sacred, a reality that is of unsurpassable greatness. God is therefore also thought of as perfectly good, beautiful, all-powerful (omnipotent), present everywhere (omnipresent), and all-knowing (omniscient). God is without origin and without end, and everlasting or eternal. Because of all this, God is worthy of worship and morally sovereign (worthy of obedience). Finally, God is manifested in human history; God's nature and will are displayed in the tradition's sacred scriptures.

Arguably, the most central attribute of God in the Abrahamic traditions is *goodness*. The idea that God is not good or the fundamental source of goodness would be akin to the idea of a square circle – an utter contradiction.

Theists in these traditions differ on some of the divine attributes. Some, for example, claim that God knows all future events with certainty, whereas others argue that no being (including God) can have such knowledge. Some theists believe that God transcends both space and time altogether, while other theists hold that God pervades the spatial world and is temporal (there is before, during, and after for God). We will consider some of these differences in the next chapter. But it is largely in their views of God's special revelation that the three monotheistic traditions diverge.

In Judaism, God's principal manifestation was in leading the people of Israel out of bondage in Egypt to the Promised Land (Canaan) as recounted in Exodus. This 'saving event' is commemorated perennially in the yearly observation of Passover. The tradition places enormous value on community life, a life displayed in the Hebrew Bible as a covenant between God and the people of Israel. The more traditional representatives of Judaism, especially the Orthodox, adopt a strict reading

of what they take to be the historic meaning of the Hebrew scripture as secured in the early stages of its formation. Other groups, like the Conservative and Reformed, treat scripture as authoritative but do not depend on a specific, historically defined interpretation of that scripture. Although there is some lively disagreement about the extent to which Judaism affirms an afterlife of individuals, Judaism has historically affirmed there is an afterlife.

Christians accept the Hebrew scriptures and Judaism's understanding of God's action in history, and expand them in holding that God became incarnate as Jesus Christ (a person who has both divine and human natures), whose birth, life, teaching, miracles, suffering, death, and resurrection are the principle means by which God delivers creation from its sin (moral and spiritual evil) and devastation. As part of its teaching about the incarnation, Christianity holds that while God is one, God is constituted by three persons in a supreme, singular unity called the Trinity (to be discussed briefly in chapter 5). Traditional Christianity asserts that through God's loving mercy and justice, individual persons are not annihilated at death, but either enjoy an afterlife of heaven or endure one of hell. Some Christians have been and are *universalists*, holding that ultimately God will triumph over all evil and there will be universal salvation for all people, though a greater part of the tradition holds that God will not violate the free will of creatures and that if persons seek to reject God, then those persons will be everlastingly separate from God.

Some unity of Christian belief and practice was gradually achieved in the course of developing various creeds (the word comes from the Latin *credo*, 'I believe', with which the creeds used in worship traditionally began) that defined Christian faith in formal terms. The Nicene Creed, most of which was written and approved in the third century, is the most famous and most widely shared of these. At the heart of traditional Christianity is

a ritual of initiation (baptism) and the Eucharist, a rite that re-enacts or recalls Christ's self-offering through sharing blessed bread and wine (sometimes called *communion* or *mass*). What unity Christianity achieved was broken, however, in the eleventh century with the split between the Western (now the Roman Catholic Church) and Eastern, Byzantine Christianity (now the Orthodox Churches), and broken again in the sixteenth century with the split between the Catholic Church and the churches of the Reformation. Many denominations emerged after the Reformation, including the Anglican, Baptist, Lutheran, Methodist, and Presbyterian Churches. Since the middle of the twentieth century, greater unity between Christian communities has been pursued with some success. Some Christians treat the Bible as infallible and inerrant in its original form (free from error), while others treat the Bible as authoritative and inspired but not free from historical error or fallible human influence.

Islam traces its roots back to Judaism and Christianity, acknowledging a common, Abrahamic past. Islamic teaching was forged by the Prophet Mohammed (570–632), who proclaimed a radical monotheism that explicitly repudiated both the polytheism of his time and the Christian understanding of the incarnation and the Trinity. The Qur'an (from *Qu'ra* for 'to recite' or 'to read'), its holy book, was, according to tradition, received by Mohammed, who dictated this revelation of Allah (Arabic for 'God') revealed to him by the Archangel Gabriel, and is taken to be God's very speech. Central to Islam is the sovereignty of Allah, his providential control of the cosmos, the importance of living justly and compassionately, and that of following a set practice of prayer, worship, and pilgrimage.

A follower of Islam is called a Muslim, an Arabic term for 'one who submits', for a Muslim submits to God. The Five Pillars of Islam are reciting the Islamic creed, praying five times a day while facing Mecca, alms-giving, fasting during Ramadan

(the ninth month of the Muslim calendar), and making a pilgrimage to Mecca. The two greatest branches of Islam are the Sunnis and Shi'ites, which developed early in the history of Islam over a disagreement about who would succeed Mohammed. Sunnis comprise a vast majority of Muslims. Shi'ites put greater stress on the continuing revelation of God beyond the Qur'an as revealed in the authoritative teachings of the *iman* (holy successors who inherit Mohammed's 'spiritual abilities'), the *mujtahidun* ('doctors of the law'), and other agents.

Like Christianity, Islam has proclaimed that a loving, merciful, and just God will not annihilate an individual at death, but provide either heaven or hell.

## Hinduism and Buddhism

While Judaism, Christianity, and Islam originated in the Near East, the other two major world religions, Hinduism and Buddhism, originated in Asia.

Hinduism is so diverse that it is difficult to use the term as an umbrella category even to designate a host of interconnected ideas and traditions. 'Hindu' is Persian for 'Indian' and names the various traditions that have flourished in the Indian subcontinent, going back to before the second millennium BCE. The most common feature of what is considered Hinduism is reverence for the Vedic scriptures, a rich collection of work, some of it highly philosophical, especially the *Upanishads* (written between 800 and 500 BCE). Unlike the three monotheistic religions, Hinduism does not look back to a singular historical figure such as Abraham.

According to one strand of Hinduism, Advaita Vedanta (a strand that has received a great deal of attention from Western philosophers in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries), this world of space and time is ultimately illusory. The world is *Maya*

(literally 'illusion'). The world appears to us to consist of diverse objects because we are in a state of ignorance. Behind the diverse objects and forms we observe in what may be called the phenomenal or apparent world (the world of phenomena and appearances) there is the formless, impersonal reality of Brahman, and this school's principal aim is the rejection of this duality ('Advaita' comes from the Sanskrit term for 'nonduality').

Brahman alone is ultimately real. This position is often called *monism* (from the Greek *monos* or 'single') or *pantheism* ('God is everything'). Shankara (also spelled Sankara, Samkara, or Sankaracharya) (788–820) was one of the greatest teachers of this monist, non-dualist tradition within Hinduism. In his *Crest Jewel of Discrimination* he explained that 'Brahman alone is real. There is none but He. When He is known as the supreme reality there is no other existence but Brahman' (Shankara 1970, 82). 'In dream', he wrote in the same book, 'the mind creates by its own power a complete universe of subject and object. The waking state [too] is only a prolonged dream. The phenomenal universe exists in the mind' (71).

Other, theistic strands of Hinduism construe the divine as personal, all-good, powerful, knowing, creative, loving, and so on. Theistic elements may be seen, for example, in the *Bhagavad Gita* (sixth century BCE) and its teaching about the love of God. Some of the breathtaking passages about Krishna's divine manifestation seem similar to the great passages in the Gospel of John when Christ proclaims or implies his divinity or divine calling. Madhva (thirteenth and fourteenth centuries) is one of the better-known theistic representatives of Hinduism.

There are also lively polytheistic elements within Hinduism. Popular Hindu practice includes a rich polytheism, and for this reason it has been called the religion of 330 million gods. The recognition and honor paid to these gods are sometimes absorbed into Brahman worship, since the gods are understood to be so many manifestations of the one true reality.

Whether their beliefs are monist or theistic, many Hindus believe that a trinity of Brahma, Vishnu, and Shiva is the cardinal, supreme manifestation of Brahman. Brahma is the creator of the world, Vishnu its sustainer, manifested in the world as Krishna and Rama, incarnations or avatars (from the Sanskrit for 'one who descends') who instruct and enlighten, and Shiva the destroyer.

Most Hindus believe in reincarnation. The soul migrates through different lives, according to principles of *karma* (Sanskrit for 'deed' or 'action'), the moral consequence of one's actions. The final consummation or enlightenment is *moksha* (or release) from *samsara*, the material cycle of birth and rebirth. In the monist forms, liberation comes from overcoming the dualism of Brahman and the individual self or soul (*atman*, 'breath'), and sometimes from merging into a transcendental self with which all other selves are identical.

Karma is often associated with (and believed to be a chief justification for) a strict social caste system. Not all Hindus support such a system, and many Hindu reformers in the modern era argue for its abolition. One of the well-known reform movements is the Arya Samaj, founded by Swami Dananda Saraswati (1824–83).

Hinduism has a legacy of inclusive spirituality. It understands other religions as different ways to enlightened unity with Brahman. In the *Bhagavad Gita*, Krishna declares,

If any worshipper do reverence with  
faith to any God whatever,  
I make his faith firm,  
and in that faith he reverences his  
god,  
and gains his desires,  
for it is I who bestow them.

(vii, 21–2)

Hinduism has also absorbed and, to some extent, integrated some of the teaching and narratives of Buddhism. It has also assimilated Christian elements, especially since on the onset of British colonial rule, Jesus being seen as the tenth avatar of Vishnu. Although Hinduism and Islam have sometimes been in painful conflict, there are cases of tolerance and collaboration. One of the aims of Sikhism, a sixteenth-century reform movement within Hinduism, was to bring together Hindus and Muslims.

Buddhism emerged from Hinduism, tracing its origin to Gautama Sakyamuni, who lived in northern India sometime between the sixth and fourth centuries BCE and came to be known as the Buddha ('Enlightened One'). His teaching centers on the Four Noble Truths. These are that: (1) life is full of suffering, pain, and misery (*dukkha*); (2) the origin of suffering is in desire (*tanha*); (3) the extinction of suffering can be brought about by the extinction of desire; and (4) the way to extinguish desire is by following the Noble Eightfold Path. The Eightfold Path consists of right understanding; right aspirations or attitudes; right speech; right conduct; right livelihood; right effort; mindfulness; and contemplation or composure.

Early Buddhist teaching tended to be non-theistic, underscoring instead the absence of the self (*anatta*) and the impermanence of life. In its earliest forms, Buddhism did not have a developed metaphysics (that is, a theory of the structure of reality, the nature of space, time, and so on), but did include belief in reincarnation, skepticism about the substantial nature of persons existing over time, and either a denial of the existence of Brahman or the treatment of Brahman as inconsequential. This is its clearest departure from Hinduism. The goal of the religious life is *Nirvana*, a transformation of human consciousness that involves the shedding of the illusion of selfhood.

Schools of Buddhism include Theravada Buddhism, the oldest and strictest in terms of promoting the importance of

monastic life, Mahayana, which emerged later and displays less resistance to Hindu themes and does not place as stringent an emphasis on monastic vocation, Pure Land Buddhism, and Zen.

## The definition of religion

Many countries have laws about religion. In the United States, these laws prohibit the compulsory imposition of religion, protect religious liberty, and exempt some religious institutions from taxation. A good, common definition of 'religion' is required if these laws are to be well defined. Consensus on a definition would help us decide, for example, whether the theory that God created life on earth is a religious theory that should not be taught in public schools or a scientific theory that can and should be.

In light of the above brief overview of the five world religions, how should one define 'religion'? Unfortunately, religion is not easy to define. Consider six possible definitions.

(1) In *Breaking the Spell* the American philosopher Daniel Dennett defines religions 'as social systems whose participants avow belief in a supernatural agent or agents whose approval is to be sought. This is ... a circuitous way of articulating the idea that a religion without God or gods is like a vertebrate without a backbone' (Dennett 2006, 9). This definition will include Abrahamic faiths and some forms of Hinduism. It also rightly sees much of religion in terms of seeking something transcendent that is a vital reference point in terms of value or divine approval.

And yet this definition faces at least two difficulties. First, traditions we recognize as religious, like Theravada Buddhism and forms of Daoism, do not have a God or gods. Second, in some religions God or the divine is conceived of in highly impersonal terms and not as a being who approves or disapproves

of human activity. In some forms of Hinduism, for example, Brahman transcends personal manifestations and intentions.

Dennett's definition appears to be too narrow. (A definition is too narrow if it excludes traditions or institutions that we have reason to believe should be considered religious, and it is too broad if it includes traditions or institutions that there is reason to think should not be included.)

(2) Consider the American anthropologist Clifford Geertz's famous definition of religion:

- (1) A system of symbols which acts to
- (2) establish powerful, pervasive, and long-lasting moods and motivations in men by
- (3) formulating conceptions of a general order of existence and
- (4) clothing these conceptions with an aura of factuality that
- (5) the moods and motivations seem uniquely characteristic.

(Clifford Geertz, cited by Dennett 2006, 391)

This definition seems richer than Dennett's, because it highlights symbols, emotions, and motives. Unfortunately, however, the definition appears to be too broad. Secular institutions like the National Science Foundation in the United States and totalitarian governments such as Maoist China have routinely advanced systems of symbols, pervasive moods, motivations, and so on, and yet it would be odd to thereby count them as religious. The definition is also needlessly obscure; it seems peculiar to think of Jesus or Buddha promoting a 'mood' rather than a way of life, and the meaning of 'aura of factuality' is hard to pin down. Does the National Science Foundation have a greater aura than, say, the Roman Catholic Church? Perhaps, but how can we form a clear concept of "an aura of factuality?"

Geertz's definition seems both too broad and too obscure or vague.

(3) At one point in *Breaking the Spell*, Dennett seems to allow, in principle, an expanded definition of 'religion', for he takes on

the question of whether his own orientation to science (evolutionary theory, in particular) might constitute a religion. He thinks evolutionary theory provides an awesome, essential means to bring about 'salvation' and is a proper object of 'delight', 'love', and 'glory' and he wishes to 'spread the word' about evolution. (Dennett is a naturalist who might consider himself an apologist.) But then he claims that his view is *not* religious, because religion obstructs clear, rational reflection and promotes incomprehensibility and mystery: '[T]here is a major difference,' he writes.

We who love evolution do not honor those whose love of evolution prevents them from thinking clearly and rationally about it! ... In our view, there is no safe haven for mystery or incomprehensibility. Yes, there is humility, and awe, and sheer delight, at the glory of the evolutionary landscape, but it is not accompanied by, or in the service of, a willing (let alone thrilling) abandonment of reason. So I feel a moral imperative to spread the word of evolution, but evolution is not my religion. I don't have a religion.

(Dennett 2006, 268)

Regardless of whether you think Dennett does have a religion, his suggestion that religion should be defined as that which is contrary to clear reflection as determined by Daniel Dennett begs the question. All the great world religions, East and West, have advanced philosophies of the sacred which have a serious claim to be considered acts of clear reflection. Moreover, the bare fact that a tradition obstructs reason cannot alone be a reliable sign that it is a religion. Lots of secular political parties and philosophies may obstruct reason without thereby becoming religious.

This definition of Dennett's therefore seems to be question-begging, too broad (it would include institutions that are secular

and yet obstruct reason) as well as too narrow (it would exclude religions that promote clear, rational inquiry).

(4) The Canadian philosopher John Schellenberg proposes we define religious propositions or claims as those that assert or entail there is an ultimate reality 'in relation to which an ultimate good can be attained. Otherwise put, religious claims are claims entailing that there is an ultimate and salvific reality' (Schellenberg 2007, 3). This gives center stage to goodness (or what is believed to be good) and to an ultimate or unsurpassable worldview, something all the prominent world religions do. The definition is promising, but there is some reason to think it is too broad. If we adopt Schellenberg's definition, explicit secular views of the world as ultimate and the source of goodness (like Dennett's) would wind up being defined as religious, even though their advocates clearly renounce religion. Like Geertz's definition, Schellenberg's seems too broad.

(5) 'Religion' might also be defined by example: 'Religions include, Judaism, Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, and Buddhism, and those traditions like them.' (Arguably, this is the definition most widely employed by the United States Supreme Court.) There is nothing, in principle, wrong by defining a term by examples ('color' is frequently defined by referring to red, orange, yellow, and so on), and this method has the advantage of leaving open-ended what kinds of things are 'religious'. But I have proposed this view elsewhere and it has been challenged for being too broad: 'Taliaferro's definition may or may not include atheism, Marxism, sport, and nationalism' (Mod e 2005, 21).

By way of a reply, I suggest that American football and soccer in Italy *can* resemble the religions so much that they might well be rightly considered religious. (Traditional religions might view these activities as idolatrous or perversions of a worthy, religious practice of worship.) And political ideologies like Marxism certainly resemble a religion like Christianity.

Marxism has a kind of prophet (Marx himself) and a scripture (his writings) that promotes something like the kingdom of heaven (the rule of the proletariat) through triumphant suffering (class warfare finally transcended by revolution).

But while I persist in thinking this definition acceptable, I recognize the importance of arriving at a more informative definition. Let us then consider one further definition that combines a number of the alternatives.

(6) A religion is a body of teachings and prescribed practices about an ultimate, sacred reality or state of being that calls for reverence or awe and guides its practitioners into what they describe as a saving, illuminating, and emancipatory relationship to this reality through a personally transformative life of prayer, ritualized meditations, and/or moral practices like repentance and moral and personal regeneration.

This definition covers all the major world religions, but I confess it is quite abstract and may still leave us with cases that fit but are not usually thought of as religious. It is more selective than the earlier definitions (Dennett's love of evolution would turn out to be secular, given definition 6, since he does not propose praying to evolution or engaging in ritual meditation), but I leave it to you to improve upon or to replace definition 6 with a better one.

## Religions as worlds and worldviews

Enough with definitions! We can overdo linguistic analyses. Having gotten a rough but adequate definition of religion, let us consider what initially seems the natural role of philosophy with respect to religion. I suggest a metaphor for religion that will help us understand this role.

We sometimes refer to 'the art world', 'the world of sports', or 'the world of chess', and I propose that it is natural to think

of different religions as different worlds: there is 'the world of Judaism', 'the world of Christianity', 'the world of Buddhism', and so on. The terms are fitting to use of religion because exploring a religion is very much like exploring a world. Just as finding one's way into 'the world of agriculture' involves grasping some biology, ecology, and cultural anthropology, finding one's way into the world of a religion involves grasping its central tenets and beliefs about the sacred. The term also offers a useful way of visualizing the relationship between religions, as circles with some parts overlapping and some separate. The worlds of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam may be seen as overlapping, while each also contains elements not shared by the other two religions.

Additionally, seeing religions as worlds provides a natural way to depict conversions. A convert to a religion may be understood as entering a new world. An analogy may be useful. You cannot see the world of chess if all you see is a colored board with toys placed on squares. To see – let alone enter – the world of chess, you must grasp the rules and know the experience of playing the game. Some seek to enter a new world but do not quite make it. David Hume (1711–76) tells us of a young Turk who was instructed in the Christian religion and 'at last agreed to receive the sacraments of baptism and the Lord's supper', taking the name 'Benedict'.

The priest, however, to make every thing sure and solid, still continued his instructions, and began the next day with the usual question, How many Gods are there? None at all, replies Benedict; for that was his new name. How! None at all! cries the priest. To be sure, said the honest proselyte. You have told me all along that there is but one God: And yesterday I ate him.

(Hume 1976, 68)

Benedict did not really understand the world of Christianity in which God's sacramental presence in bread and wine is not a

literal transformation in which the whole of God becomes no more than a piece of bread that is destroyed when eaten.

Entering the world of a new religion must also involve some affective appreciation of the relevant emotions. You might go to a yoga class, but if you treat it only as a stretching exercise and do not know the role of yoga in the Hindu practice of leading an individual into union with the universal soul (to cite one school of yoga) you have not fully experienced yoga as an affective and spiritual discipline. You have not entered its world. People who identify themselves as Christians and yet hate other people have left the world of Christianity. In my view, the command that Christ's followers love others, including their enemies, is simply too foundational to the religion (e.g. 'If someone says, "I love God," and hates his brother, he is a liar' [I John 4:20]) to be seen as optional. Though I have been describing religions as worlds, one may also refer to 'the secular world' and describe the experience of someone who comes to renounce their religious upbringing as leaving the world of some religion and entering the secular world.

If religions are like worlds, what is the task of philosophy? A natural task, and one that has been undertaken throughout the history of philosophy, is to elucidate a clear account of the beliefs and practices making up such a world and to inquire into reasons for thinking such a world is actually true. It may be that a philosopher concludes (as some have) that there are no compelling intellectual reasons for accepting one or more of the world religions, but that such reasons are not required in order for one to be justified in accepting a given religion. A justified belief can be defined here as one that a person embraces without compromising their intellectual integrity. Some philosophers have defended a concept of *faith* that they believe is a legitimate (in principle) orientation to the religious life. But historically the majority of philosophers who have reflected on religion have devoted themselves to reflection on the reasons that favor or

challenge religious beliefs and practices, and even those who defend the concept of faith as free from evidence develop reasoned arguments why such faith is legitimate.

Philosophy of religion, historically and today, includes an examination of the most basic beliefs (or objects of faith) in the great world religions. Of the shared conviction of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam that there is one God, for example, the philosophy of religion asks: What does it mean to say 'there is one God'? And do we have any reason to think that God exists? This question about religion and the general question about whether there is a God – quite apart from any religious context – have exercised philosophers throughout the history of ideas.

Before we advance to explore the coherence and justification of religious beliefs, an important challenge needs to be faced. Could it be that religions are not, fundamentally, about truth or falsehood?

### Truth and meaning in religion

Some philosophers have argued that religion is fundamentally about values and illuminating or wise images and metaphors, and not about the truth or falsity of the existence of God or Brahman or karma.

The Anglican philosopher Don Cupitt, for example, once wrote that 'I continue ... to pray to God,' but then went on to say that 'God is the mythical embodiment of all one is concerned with in the spiritual life. He is the religious demand and ideal ... the enshriner of values. He is indeed – but as a myth' (Cupitt 1981, 167). The American philosopher Howard Wettstein has proposed that, just as religious believers use parables to express moral truths, the central beliefs of their religions should be treated as illuminating parables and

metaphors for living wisely. Religious practitioners may not believe in the factual truth of their religion's claims about God and providence, but they could instead treat their religious narratives as a matter of profoundly important internal meditation. Wettstein describes such a person:

She, not unlike one who reads the narrative as an actual account of creation, dwells in the potent imagery ... For her, of course, the story is not factually correct. But this is, to her mind, almost not worthy of mention; it is both obvious and completely beside the point, the religious point. The powerful religious resonances and intimation of the story are available to her, as they are to the fundamentalist, as a consequence of dwelling so wholeheartedly in the drama of creation.

(Wettstein 1997, 274)

A Jew or Christian may be deeply religious through a wholehearted focus on biblical narratives while at the same time denying that the God those narratives describe actually exists. One can live fully in the world of the Exodus or the Resurrection without believing in a God who saves those in bondage. One of my professors in graduate school, Gordon Kaufman, developed an elaborate interpretation of symbols which seemed to preserve Christianity while not requiring any belief that there is a God. In Kaufman's theology, 'God' refers to the evolution of human creativity as applied in humane directions (e.g. one serves 'God' by responsibly seeking justice). 'Christ' does not refer to the second member of the Trinity or the world's savior, but refers to the value of self-sacrificing love and living inclusively. Kaufman, Wettstein, and Cupitt each offer an account of the world of Christianity that does not include a commitment to believing there is a creator God, a divine-human liberator in the person of Jesus Christ, and so on.

The Welsh philosopher D.Z. Phillips is more difficult to pin down. He does not explicitly describe himself as an atheist, but he appears to hold that to argue there are grounds to believe or disbelieve that there is a God is a deep grammatical or conceptual confusion and that the current and historical practice of philosophy of religion should be shunned. According to Phillips, philosophers should not try to offer reasons for or against the belief in God or Brahman, the afterlife, salvation, or enlightenment, and so on. Phillips's reason for this conclusion is that religious terms like 'God' and 'Brahman' get their meaning principally and foundationally in religious practices. To refer to 'God' outside of the religious practices that give meaning to the term is to misunderstand the term 'God'. Phillips thinks it proper (involving no distinctively philosophical error) to pray to God or sing hymns or seek to live life before God, but he thinks that once a philosopher seeks to ask whether God exists and to come up with reasons for or against God's existence, that philosopher has ceased to make sense.

These four proposals to remove religion from philosophical scrutiny are significant, but I suggest that they do not give us reason to reject the ancient and still widespread practice of philosophically exploring and arguing about religious beliefs about reality. Cupitt, Wettstein, and Kaufman are straightforward in their rejection of theism (though Wettstein has changed his mind subsequently). If atheism is in fact true, those of us who pray to God are only praying to an image of a being that does not exist, and our love for God is not the love of an actual being, but more like the love of a fictional character. As H.D. Lewis argues in *Our Experience of God*, religious practices like prayer are profoundly different from the practice of meditating on what is known to be fictitious.

We take delight in fiction as well as in fact, and the extent to which spice is added to a story by knowing that it is true must,

I imagine, vary a great deal from one individual to another ... But whether or not the value of fiction turns on some subtle truth it succeeds in conveying, it is certain that religion would [have] lost its hold upon us if we had to regard it as fiction. If someone invented a religion, however colorful its rites and attractive the ideas to be entertained within it, we could not take it seriously unless we were convinced of its truth. We cannot just divert ourselves with a religion or play at it.

(Lewis 1959, 21)

If Lewis is right, religious practice is inextricably bound up with the conviction that these practices truly reflect reality. It may be that Kaufman, Wettstein, and Cupitt can redefine religious terms so that when someone claims to believe in God they are only asserting that it is good to pursue goodness creatively, but it is hard to believe that, historically and today, this is a reasonable account of what most people mean when they claim to believe in or love God.

As for Phillips, though there is not space to examine his views in detail, on close consideration, the arguments he advances for his claim that we should not philosophically debate whether God exists turn out to be arguments that God (as understood in theism) does not exist. So Phillips has argued extensively that though prayer has a good role in religious life, once you ask whether there is a divine personal or person-like reality that actually hears the prayers and responds to petitions or prayers for forgiveness, you have made a mistake. That's because such a being would have to be imagined to hear without sense organs, for God (as traditionally conceived) is incorporeal and without ears. Phillips writes that to argue about whether 'you can hear without ears, or see without eyes, is a good example of language going on a holiday', by which he means that it is an example of failing to understand terms like 'prayer'. So Phillips adopts the paradoxical position of claiming that it is nonsense to

think there is a God who actually hears prayers, but at the same time he does not want to deny that (in a religious ritual of praying) God hears prayers.

The consequence, however, is not to deny the sense of saying that we live under God's eye, or that he hears our prayers, or to start speculating about the superiority of divine listening and seeing equipment. Instead, we should look for the meaning of these expressions in religious practice.

(Phillips 2007, 301)

Phillips rightly draws attention to the ways in which the terminology of 'God' and 'prayer' is anchored in religious practices, but it is very difficult to believe that most religious persons would continue praying if they were convinced there is no divine reality listening. It certainly appears that when persons in the monotheistic religions pray to God they are addressing what they believe to be a merciful, supreme creator who lovingly hears and cares for their petition and has the power to respond. If *everyone* became convinced that there is no such being, why would *anyone* continue to petition, praise, or confess to the divine? It seems that religious believers and skeptics alike have a stake in exploring the reasons for and against the reality of a divine being who may be encountered through prayer, meditation, and experience.

While I propose that philosophy has a proper role in developing reasons for and against religious belief, I suggest that the challenge by Phillips and the others should lead us to appreciate that if we are engaged in philosophy of *religion*, and not just the philosophy of *God*, we should not neglect actual religious beliefs and practices. This is something I stress in later chapters. Also, if it turns out we may reasonably conclude that the foundational beliefs of a religion are false, it could still be the case that the religion has produced profoundly important insights. If there is

no God, maybe Cupitt or Wettstein or Kaufman is right that we should still live as though there is a God of love or we should retain religious language in order to express our deep commitment to the creative pursuit of justice. Even if one concludes that atheism is right and the monotheistic religions mistaken, there is still the possibility that these religions have vital moral content and meaning that should still be taken seriously.

In the next chapter, let us consider some concepts of God and divine attributes, and then, in chapter 3, some of the classical and contemporary arguments for and against the existence of God.