Keith Yandell’s *Philosophy of Religion: A Contemporary Introduction* was one of the first textbooks to explore the philosophy of religion with reference to religions other than Christianity. This new, revised edition explores the logical validity and truth-claims of several world religions—Christianity, Judaism, Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism, and Jainism—with updated, streamlined discussions on important topics in philosophy of religion such as:

- religious pluralism
- freedom and responsibility
- evidentialist moral theism
- reformed epistemology
- doxastic practice epistemology
- the problem of evil
- ontological and cosmological arguments.

Other new features include updated Questions for Reflection and new annotated bibliographies for each chapter, as well as an updated Glossary. This exciting new edition, much like its classic predecessor, is sure to be a classroom staple for undergraduate students studying philosophy of religion, as well as a comprehensive introductory read for anyone interested in the subject.

**Keith E. Yandell** taught at the University of Wisconsin-Madison until his retirement in 2011. He is author of *Christianity and Philosophy, Basic Issues in the Philosophy of Religion, Hume’s “Inexplicable Mystery”, The Epistemology of Religious Experience*, and (with Harold Netland) *Christianity and Buddhism*. 
This innovative, well-structured series is for students who have already done an introductory course in philosophy. Each book introduces a core general subject in contemporary philosophy and offers students an accessible but substantial transition from introductory to higher-level college work in that subject. The series is accessible to non-specialists, and each book clearly motivates and expounds the problems and positions introduced. An orientating chapter briefly introduces its topic and reminds readers of any crucial material they need to have retained from a typical introductory course. Considerable attention is given to explaining the central philosophical problems of a subject and the main competing solutions and arguments for those solutions. The primary aim is to educate students in the main problems, positions, and arguments of contemporary philosophy rather than to convince students of a single position.

**Ancient Philosophy**  
2nd Edition  
Christopher Shields

**Classical Modern Philosophy**  
Jeffrey Tlumak

**Continental Philosophy**  
Andrew Cutrofello

**Epistemology**  
3rd Edition  
Robert Audi

**Ethics**  
2nd Edition  
Harry J. Gensler

**Metaethics**  
Mark van Roojen

**Metaphysics**  
3rd Edition  
Michael J. Loux

**Moral Psychology**  
Valerie Tiberius

**Philosophy of Art**  
Noël Carroll

**Philosophy of Biology**  
Alex Rosenberg and Daniel W. McShea

**Philosophy of Economics**  
Julian Reiss

**Philosophy of Language**  
2nd Edition  
William G. Lycan
Philosophy of Mathematics
2nd Edition
James Robert Brown

Philosophy of Mind
3rd Edition
John Heil

Philosophy of Perception
William Fish

Philosophy of Psychology
José Luis Bermudez

Philosophy of Religion
2nd Edition
Keith E. Yandell

Philosophy of Science
3rd Edition
Alex Rosenberg

Philosophy of Social Science
Mark Risjord

Social and Political Philosophy
John Christman

Forthcoming:

Bioethics
Jason Scott Robert

Feminist Philosophy
Heidi Grasswick

Free Will
Michael McKenna
and Derk Pereboom

Metaphysics
4th Edition
Michael J. Loux
and Thomas M. Crisp

Phenomenology
Walter Hopp

Philosophy of Action
Sarah Paul

Philosophy of Film
Aaron Smuts

Philosophy of Literature
John Gibson

Social and Political Philosophy
2nd Edition
John Christman

Virtue Ethics
Liezl van Zyl
This page intentionally left blank
For Sharon
This page intentionally left blank
## Contents

Annotated Table of Contents  
Preface to Second Edition  
Preface to First Edition  

1 Introduction  
   Suggested Readings  

PART I  
Philosophy and Religion  

2 What Is Philosophy? What Is Religion?  
   What Is Philosophy of Religion?  
   Philosophy  
   Objectivity  
   Religion  
   Philosophy of Religion  
   Questions for Reflection  
   Suggested Readings  

3 What Sorts of Religion Are There?  
   Monotheistic Religion  
   Nonmonotheistic Religion  
   Criteria for Individuating Religions  
   Suggestions as to Common Features  
   Conclusion  
   Questions for Reflection  
   Suggested Readings  

4 What Sorts of Religious Experience Are There?  
   Structure and Content  
   Descriptions  
   Direct/Indirect Experience  
   Questions for Reflection  
   Suggested Readings  


5 The Importance of Doctrine and the Distinctness of Religious Traditions 39
   Doctrine 39
   Truth-Claims 42
   Identity 43
   Diversity 47
   Questions for Reflection 50
   Suggested Readings 51

6 Religious Pluralism 53
   Religious Plurality and Religious Pluralism 53
   Hick’s Purposes 53
   More Recent Normative Religious Pluralism 58
   Conclusion 61
   Questions for Reflection 61
   Suggested Readings 62

PART II
Religious Conceptions of Ultimate Reality 65

7 Monotheistic Conceptions of Ultimate Reality 67
   Generic Philosophical Monotheism 67
   Greek Monotheism 67
   Semitic Monotheism 70
   Hindu Monotheism 71
   Monotheisms and Atheisms 72
   Questions for Reflection 77
   Suggested Readings 78

8 Nonmonotheistic Conceptions of Ultimate Reality 80
   Advaita Vedanta Hinduism 80
   Jainism and Buddhism 87
   Conclusion 93
   Questions for Reflection 93
   Suggested Readings 95

PART III
Arguments concerning Monotheistic Conceptions 97

9 Arguments against Monotheism 99
   Three Questions 99
   The Problem of Evil 100
   The Consistency Issue 103
   The Evidential Issue 106
10 Arguments for Monotheism

Proof
Logical Necessity
Purely Conceptual Proofs and the Ontological Argument
Empirical Proofs, Argument Strategies, and Principles of Sufficient Reason
Arguments by Thomas Aquinas
Questions for Reflection
Suggested Readings

11 Monotheism and Religious Experience

Phenomenologically Thick Experiences
Experience as Direct Evidence
A Principle of Experiential Evidence
Being Evidence versus Providing Evidence
The Evidential Argument from Religious Experience
The Principle of Experiential Evidence Applied
Questions for Reflection
Suggested Readings

PART IV

Arguments concerning Nonmonotheistic Conceptions

12 Arguments concerning Nonmonotheistic Conceptions

Appeals to Argument and Appeals to Experience
Advaita Vedanta
Jainism and Buddhism on Persons
Identity
Personal Identity
Bundle Theory
Substance Theory
Questions for Reflection
Suggested Readings

13 Enlightenment-Based Arguments and Nonmonotheistic Conceptions of Ultimate Reality

Appeals to Enlightenment Experience
Self-Authentication
Advaita Appeal to Enlightenment Experience
Jain-type Appeals to Experience
Buddhist-type Appeals to Experience
The Contrasting Arguments
Contents

Questions for Reflection ........................................... 228
Suggested Readings ............................................... 230

PART V

Religion, Morality, Faith, and Reason ..................... 231

14 Religion, Morality, and Responsibility .................. 233
   Divine Command Ethics ........................................ 234
   Euthyphro Dilemma ............................................ 235
   Ultimate Values: Buddhism .................................... 237
   Ultimate Values: Jainism ....................................... 238
   Morality without Religion? .................................... 239
   Depth, Breadth, and Length ................................... 241
   Questions for Reflection ....................................... 266
   Suggested Readings ............................................. 268

15 Faith and Reason ............................................... 269
   Faith ............................................................... 269
   Reason and Rationality ......................................... 276
   Confirmationism .................................................. 280
   Questions for Reflection ....................................... 288
   Suggested Readings ............................................. 289

16 Some Further Vistas ............................................. 290
   Moser ............................................................. 291
   Plantinga ......................................................... 291
   Alston ............................................................. 292
   Questions for Reflection ....................................... 293
   Suggested Readings ............................................. 293

Glossary .............................................................. 295
Bibliography .......................................................... 301
Index ................................................................... 314
Chapter 1: Introduction
Four different basic types of religious traditions are described: monotheism, absolute monism, atheistic substance dualism, and atheistic non-dualism. The former two are in effect views of monotheism as ultimate versus apparent, and the latter views concern the nature of human persons.

Philosophy is the construction and assessment of conceptual systems; religions are views of the cosmos that diagnose and propose a cure for a universal human spiritual illness; and philosophy of religion analyses and assesses the core concepts and arguments relative to these diagnoses and cures.

Chapter 3: What Sorts of Religion Are There?
Criteria are offered for discerning types of religion in terms of their doctrinal stances.

Chapter 4: What Sorts of Religious Experience Are There?
By comparison between religious and non-religious experience, and their structure and content, criteria are developed relative to reflection on the evidential potential of religious experience.

Chapter 5: The Importance of Doctrine and the Distinctness of Religious Traditions
It is argued that doctrinal difference is to be expected among diverse religious traditions and that no diagnosis or cure is offered without doctrine. This is so even for religions that may claim to lack doctrines altogether.

Chapter 6: Religious Pluralism
Assuming moral agreement among at least the major religious traditions, religious pluralists set aside the diagnoses and cures central to those traditions. Even granting the controversial assumption, the enterprise seems deeply flawed.
Chapter 7: Monotheistic Conceptions of Ultimate Reality
Comparisons and contrasts are drawn among a stylized Greek, Christian, and Hindu monotheism. These are relevant to future discussions.

Chapter 8: Nonmonotheistic Conceptions of Ultimate Reality
The basic views as to what there is according to Advaita Vedanta Hinduism, Jainism, and Theravada Buddhism are presented in philosophically accessible terms and their philosophical commitments laid out.

Chapter 9: Arguments against Monotheism
Arguments that belief in God and evil is logically inconsistent, consistent but against the evidence, and inconsistent to hold God blameless for allowing things we hold humans wrong to allow are assessed.

Chapter 10: Arguments for Monotheism
The arguments that it is impossible that God not exist and that if there are things that exist dependently then God exists are analyzed in detail.

Chapter 11: Monotheism and Religious Experience
Appeal to religious experiences that are apparently experiences of God is considered in the context of a principle of experiential evidence developed by considering counter-examples.

Chapter 12: Arguments concerning Nonmonotheistic Conceptions
The difference between arguments appealing to enlightenment experience and those appealing to other matters is noted, and arguments of the latter sort related to Advaita, Jainism, and Theravada are discussed.

Chapter 13: Enlightenment-Based Arguments and Nonmonotheistic Conceptions of Ultimate Reality
Since appeal to esoteric enlightenment experience is absolutely central to each tradition, the phenomenological description of such experiences—the way they seem to their subjects—and their use in supporting the traditions in which they occur are assessed.

Chapter 14: Religion, Morality, and Responsibility
The difference between freedom with determinism and freedom against determinism, and their connection to moral responsibility, is analyzed. Metaphysical value and moral value are distinguished and related.

Chapter 15: Faith and Reason
Faith that and faith in are distinguished. The deepest critique of faith, if it succeeds, is the claim that there are no religious claims to believe or not since they are neither true nor false. A variety of such views are discussed. Then the strategy of arguing to the best explanation, or at least as good as its competition, is discussed as a means of giving content to faith.
Chapter 16: Some Further Vistas

Paul Moser’s appeal to moral experience as evidence for God’s existence, Alvin Plantinga’s reformed epistemology for which it is reasonable to believe in God without evidence, and William Alston’s view that religious experience and belief should be seen in the context of a belief-forming practice, are sketched as further ways of giving content to faith.
Preface to Second Edition

The *Second Edition* continues the structure of the *First*: it explores central issues in philosophy of religion in comparative terms cross-culturally by considering ideas and practices from Christianity, Hinduism, Jainism, and Buddhism.

A new first chapter structures the book as a whole, providing a large-scale conceptual map for what is to come. The second chapter, after explaining the nature of philosophy, religion, and philosophy of religion, fills in that larger-scale map with the most pertinent details. It contains more precisely defined criteria than were offered in the previous edition.

Other major topical improvements to the *Second Edition* include:

- Updates to Chapter 6, “Religious Pluralism,” building on the earlier focus on the work of John Hick now to discuss Paul Knitter and other newer ways of approaching religious pluralism.
- A revised and updated discussion of the problem of evil in Chapter 9, “Arguments against Monotheism.”
- A new sort of disguised compatibilism, discussed in Chapter 14, “Religion, Morality, and Responsibility.”
- A new concluding Chapter 16, “Some Further Vistas,” which discusses the philosophy of religion in relation to three perspectives in epistemology not under review in the *First Edition*—moral evidentialism, reformed epistemology, and doxastic practice epistemology. Although presented by Christian monotheists, they have potential application to other traditions as well.

Pedagogically, the main significant new feature is a new annotated Table of Contents, with every chapter description including reference to key concepts and claims discussed therein.

Updated bibliographies are included at the end of each chapter and updated notes and a general glossary along with a general index are included at the end of the volume.
Contemporary academia is secular. The idea that religious views of any traditional sort should guide the research or inform the worldview of any discipline is rejected out of court. Things were not always so. Professor John Bascom, former President of my own university, used to give a capstone undergraduate course in how to prove the existence and nature of God; his practice was more typical than surprising. Times have changed.

A student of mine once published a paper he wrote for a seminar he took with me. It argued that there is reason to reject a particular set of religious beliefs. In effect, the responses of his former professors ranged from we all know that stuff is false through considering whether religious claims are true or false isn’t part of the academic game to saying someone’s religious beliefs are false is impolite and politically unwise. None of these responses is atypical.

Nonetheless, both traditionally and currently, the philosophy of religion has made rational assessment of religious claims central to its purposes. Endeavoring to determine the meaning, and the truth value—the sense and the truth-or-falsity—of religious claims is part and parcel of this discipline. Some philosophers have denied that there are any religious claims, proposing that what seem to be such really are meaningless. Other philosophers have held that religious traditions can only be understood in their own terms, each describing a conceptual world inaccessible to any other so that there is no “neutral place” from which assessment can be offered. (As we will see, this misleading metaphor disguises a perspective whose incoherence has, alas, not mitigated its influence.) Taking either the all supposed religious claims are nonsense or the every religion its own conceptual world unrelated to all others line is itself opting for some philosophical views as opposed to others. Those outside of philosophy who assume one line or the other assume what desperately needs proof. In so doing, they draw intellectual drafts on empty accounts. These days, the nonsense line1 is seldom heard but the own conceptual world line is everywhere. The best way to show that the nonsense and the own conceptual world lines are utterly mistaken is to offer the sorts of assessments that these lines suppose to be impossible. That is the basic task before us. This task has three components: presentation of data, assessment of arguments, and reflection on experiences.
Presentation of Data

We begin by saying what religion is and what philosophy is. There are no non-controversial answers to these questions. Nonetheless, clarity about how religion and philosophy are construed in this text should be helpful for understanding the rest of what is said. Then we consider what kinds of religions there are, what religious experience is, and what kinds of religious experience there are. Some religious experiences, for example, are seen as experiences of God; others are not. Some religions are monotheistic; they hold that God exists and has very strong powers. Others hold that ultimate reality is not God, but something else. Both sorts of religious traditions not surprisingly offer accounts of what persons are, and one tradition typically offers a different view of this matter than another. Such differences are philosophically as well as religiously significant, and they require our attention. There is more than one concept of God, and so more than one kind of monotheism. Similarly, nonmonotheistic religions differ in terms of how they conceive of what exists and has religious importance. So we need to look at different notions of ultimate reality, conceived as divine or not.

Since the variety of religions is great, no one book could responsibly deal with philosophy of religion in connection with all of them. Our scope will include representative views from Judaism, Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism, and Jainism. Each of these traditions is itself complex, and while we can hope to be fair, we cannot pretend to be exhaustive. One great divide among religious traditions comes between those that are monotheistic and those that are not. Our discussion will be divided along these lines with no suggestion that “nonmonotheism” is more than a label of convenience; each variety of nonmonotheism we discuss, like each variety of monotheism, will be positively characterized in terms of its own indigenous perspective.

Without any suggestion that this is their only or primary importance, religions provide the raw material for philosophical reflection. At this point, we will have our raw data for philosophical reflection. Once we have reflected briefly on how arguments can be constructed and assessed, and on how appeal to experience as evidence may be crafted and evaluated, we can turn to asking what reason, if any, there is to think that the religious perspectives already described might be true.

Escaping Incoherence

There are academic circles in which talk of truth, let alone religious perspectives being true, is about as popular as a teetotal sermon at a local pub. For this to be the line to take, it must be true (in the sense of “true” that was supposedly dismissed) that talk of truth is somehow so problematic as to require its abandonment. This line thus appears to be incoherent; it appears so because it is.

The devotees of a religious tradition typically take what their sacred texts say to be true. Nor is it beyond their ability to think what this “being true” might amount to. Monotheists will take God exists to be true—they will suppose that
an omnicompetent being exists on whom the world depends. Some religious non-
monotheists will think this claim false, and will think that such claims as Persons
are indestructible or Persons are nothing more than momentary states are true. As
Aristotle once said, a proposition is true if things are as it says they are, and not
otherwise. Aristotle, and most devotees of most traditions, have no difficulty in
understanding what this means. It is possible to educate oneself out of all possibil-
ity of learning anything. Aristotle and ordinary religious people have not suffered
this injury.

**Using the Data (I)**

Arguments have been offered for, and others against, religious beliefs. This is so
regarding both monotheistic traditions and nonmonotheistic traditions. Far from
such arguments going deeply against the grain of the religious traditions, sinc-
cere and admired devotees of such traditions have offered arguments for their
own perspective and against other perspectives. If it is true that some religious
believers have rejected any such idea as needless if not inappropriate, others have
entered enthusiastically into the enterprise. The idea that offering such arguments
is somehow inherently against all religious thought and practice is not substanti-
ated by the history of these traditions. Many of these arguments are provocative
and powerful; they deserve our attention. Some of these arguments concern the
existence and nature of God; others concern the nature of persons. In each case,
such disputes tie in tightly with different views of salvation and enlightenment,
of what one may expect and hope. The arguments interact significantly with the
traditions in ways often ignored.

Related to the possibility of such arguments are competing notions of faith, of
reason, and of their connections. Also related are competing views of the capaci-
ties and limits of religious language. If all claims about God, for example, are
non-literal, how does this affect what sorts of arguments can be offered on behalf
of these claims? Does this place them simply beyond argument altogether? Are all
claims about God non-literal? Hence, along with considering arguments, we must
discuss issues concerning the nature and scope of religious language.

**Using the Data (II)**

People claim to have religious experiences. We thus ask what evidence, if any,
such experience provides for religious belief. Appeal to at least apparent experi-
ence of God, for example, can but need not be another version of an argument for
God’s existence. One could argue: people seem to have experience of God; the
best explanation of this fact is that God causes those experiences; hence there is
reason to think that God exists. Similarly, one could argue: there seems to be a
computer in front of me; the best explanation of things so appearing is that there
is a computer in front of me; so there is reason to think a computer is there. But
I seem simply to see the computer; my belief that it is there is a matter of at least
seeming to see it and having no reason to think that things are not as they seem. I neither see something else from which I infer to my computer nor offer claims about best explanations. Similarly, many have claimed to experience God, not to have some experience of something from which they can then properly infer that God exists. We will consider religious experience, viewed as evidence for God’s existence by virtue of its being a matter of “seeing God” rather than simply as a matter of its being the source of a premise in a proof of God’s existence.

Differing views of persons are also supported by appeals to experience, particularly to introspective and enlightenment experiences. How such experiences should be described, and what significance they bear, is a matter of central dispute, particularly between such nonmonotheistic traditions as Jainism and Buddhism. Further, competing accounts of what persons are connect closely with diverse accounts of morality and of value generally. These close connections are no insignificant part of what gives the disputes their importance to the traditions involved. Discerning these traditions widens one’s understanding of the views involved, and enriches the sorts of possible assessments of competing appeals to experience. Closely connected with these topics are competing notions of human survival of death and whether any of them have any basis or support.

**Summary**

The core of philosophy of religion, as of philosophy generally, is metaphysics and epistemology, systematic attempts to give defensible answers to the questions *What is there?* and *How can we know what there is?* At the core of any religious tradition is its own answer to these questions, construed as and embedded in an answer to the basic problem to which the tradition addresses itself as the rationale for its existence—thus our own concentration on accounts of religious reality and religious knowledge. How is ultimate reality conceived, and how are human persons viewed in relation to ultimate reality? With what consequences for salvation or enlightenment, morality, and any afterlife there may be? What arguments are offered for, and what against, these views? What appeals to experience are made for one view and against another? What assessment should be offered of these arguments and appeals?

In sum, our intent is to describe the basic perspectives concerning ultimate reality and our relations to it as seen by several of the major religious traditions, and to ask what, if anything, there is by way of reason or evidence to think any of the claims that define these perspectives are true, or are false. The underlying conviction is that an academia in which such questions are not somewhere raised, and competing answers debated, illegitimately ignores issues of great importance, and does so without decent excuse.

Besides being important, philosophy of religion is fun. One gets to learn what people in quite different cultural contexts believe about God, the nature of persons, good and evil, salvation, and enlightenment; to see what they take to follow from these beliefs; and to think as clearly and well about them as one can. Perhaps
this is not everyone’s cup of tea, but for those at all inclined to it, it should be a thoroughly enjoyable project. I hope that this volume is as much serious fun to read as it was to write.

**Suggested Readings**


This page intentionally left blank
I  Introduction

There are a great many religions being practiced as you read this sentence. Each has its ways of interpreting and responding to the world. Expressed in rites and rituals, institutions and practices, each has a view of what there is—of the cosmos as a whole and of the role and status of persons in it. Taken seriously, these views have implications for most if not all of life. Some practice withdrawing from the world, looking internally into oneself for answers to questions as to what one is and how one may flourish. Others look to a community for such answers. Many if not all treat verbal traditions or oral texts, or both, as being at least helpful and more likely authoritative in terms of discerning a proper path in life. Among these religions, we will consider four examples. Each includes a view of what there is (metaphysics), of how it may be known (epistemology), and of what has deep value (value theory, including ethics). Our choices are cross-cultural and intended to be representative of two diverse sorts of religious tradition. No disrespect is intended to any religious tradition in this selection. The field is too vast to cover in one volume, and one cannot help being selective. The idea is to provide very diverse samples. One type is monotheistic, centering on God. The other is non-monotheistic, centering on the individual. The former considers how one may be rightly related to a personal God, the other how we may become rightly related to an impersonal ultimate reality. Within these broad categories, there are further differences. Within monotheism (among other alternatives) there are philosophical sources in Plato and Aristotle; the Semitic religions Judaism, Christianity, and Islam; and two Hindu varieties developed by Ramanuja and Madhva. Among these we will largely consider Christianity in the sense of what seems the most generally agreed-upon central doctrines without entering into denominational disputes. A similar practice will be followed with respect to our other examples. Hindu thought also contains a religious tradition Advaita Vedanta, with ‘Vedanta’ referring to the teaching of the Vedas, ancient Hindu sacred texts. ‘Advaita’ means non-dual. It is Advaita’s view that persons, physical objects, and God are appearances, and what is real is an impersonal, qualityless Brahman. Developed classically by Shankara, this view is probably best presented in comparison and contrast to the relentless monotheism of the later Ramanuja, though the emphasis will be on the perspective of Advaita Vedanta as an example of a type of religious tradition distinct from our other three. A quite different approach is taken by Jainism,
another Indian religious tradition. It holds that there are two fundamentally distinct sorts of existents, immaterial souls or minds and material particles of which physical objects are composed. Neither are viewed as created, both are held to be beginningless and endless, and the view is atheistic. Jainism is basically doctrinally homogenous in contrast to the varieties of Vedantic religion. Indian thought also offers our fourth example of a distinct religious tradition, namely Theravada Buddhism. Known as “The Tradition of the Elders” (the early followers of the Buddha) this tradition contrasts sharply to Jainism. For Jainism, the ultimate constituents of the world are things or substances, things that endure over time and throughout change. Crucially, on this view, minds are indestructible. Theravada view the cosmos (nirvana aside) to be entirely composed of conscious states and physical states, each of which is momentary, lasting barely long enough to exist at all. A mind on this view is a causally linked bundle of conscious states at a time and another entirely new bundle at the next time, the new bundle being caused by the old. The series is nothing more than the individual bundles. A physical object is analogously structured, with non-conscious states as its constituents. Later Buddhist traditions often drop out the reference to non-conscious states.

The goal of our religions is salvation in the case of monotheism and enlightenment in the case of our nonmonotheistic traditions. The former involves sinners, persons who have acted in ways that are against God’s will, repenting of those sins and asking God’s forgiveness. Assuming the repentance is genuine, God will forgive and grant the repentant sinner everlasting life with God and other believers. This is, of course, a very brief account of the matter, but perhaps it will serve to make clear how different the monotheistic view is in this regard from the non-monotheistic views. The typical term for the goal of our other religions, as noted, is ‘enlightenment.’ The conceptual background to this idea contains reference to reincarnation and karma. The basic idea of reincarnation is that each person beginninglessly and, without becoming enlightened, endlessly is in a cycle of birth and rebirth into one new life after another. The law of karma can be thought of as a mindless rule book that states the penalties to be exacted for wrong actions and rewards for good actions. Then it is the nature of the universe that these penalties be exacted to their full limit, no merciful exceptions allowed. Only if a person has an enlightenment experience in which the truth of the Jain (in one case) or the Buddhist (in another case) is existentially seen can one become enlightened. This can occur only in a lifetime in which all remaining karmic credits and debits can be paid out. Only by coming to existentially believe a true doctrine can enlightenment be achieved, so getting the doctrine right matters. This gives us a taste of some of the views discussed in what follows.

Suggested Readings

Christianity


### Hindu Vedanta

Dasgupta, Surendranath (2000) *A History of Indian Philosophy* (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass). In five volumes, detailed and balanced; arguably the successor to Radhakrishnan.


Radhakrishnan, Sarvepalli (2009) *History of Indian Philosophy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press). From Rig Veda to Ramanuja, in two volumes, views Advaita as the consummation of Indian philosophy; has become a classic.


### Jainism


### Buddhism


4 Introduction


Part I

Philosophy and Religion
This page intentionally left blank
What Is Philosophy?

No non-controversial answer is possible, and this is not a book about what philosophy is. So I will just say what I take philosophy to be, and go on to do philosophy. Philosophy is the enterprise of constructing and assessing categorial systems. The tasks necessary to this enterprise are philosophical tasks, and the requisite skills are philosophical skills. The tasks in question, and the skills, need not be restricted to only philosophical ones. The obvious example of cases in which not only philosophical tasks and questions are necessary is in the “philosophy of” disciplines—philosophy of the arts, mathematics, logic, physics, biology, history, or religion, for example. A categorial system is, not surprisingly, a system of categories. A category is a basic concept, primitive in the sense that it is not analyzable in terms of other concepts. The categories of a full-blown philosophi-cal system will be concepts of things or entities (in the broadest sense of ‘thing’ or ‘entity’), thoughts, or values. Philosophy is the enterprise of constructing and assessing categorial systems. Much of Ancient, Medieval, and Modern philosophy was deliberately pursued systematically. Plato, Aristotle, Aquinas, Descartes, Leibniz, Spinoza, Locke, Berkeley, Hume, and Kant all constructed complex systems of philosophy. Their intent was, as a later philosopher put it, “to see things, and see them whole”—to develop an integrated account of (say) things, knowledge, and values. Much of contemporary philosophy has been suspicious of any such large-scale endeavors and has tended to stick to particular problems. Nonetheless, in dealing with particular problems, these philosophers too accepted general claims that placed constraints on what they could consistently accept elsewhere; even philosophy concerned only with particular problems is implicitly general.

I take religious claims to be neither more nor less open to rational assessment than any other sorts of claims. Any difference there is concerns difficulty, not possibility. Nor do I see any reason to think that offering rational assessment of religious claims is in principle harder than, say, assessing attempts to offer a unified theory for all of physics, or to solve the problems of the foundations of modal
logic. Contrary to the preferences of some philosophers, some Religious Studies professors, and even some religious thinkers themselves, religious traditions do partly consist of literal propositions, belief in which constitutes being a member of the tradition, the falsehood of which is inconsistent with the tradition being a means to salvation or enlightenment. These traditions are anything remotely like what they claim to be only if what they say is true. I shall offer respect to the diversity of religious traditions by taking those claims seriously enough to try to see what can be said for and against them.

One can easily ask How can you tell whether a religious belief is true or not?, try to think of some general way in which this could be done, and give up. That question is a paralysis question. There is no single answer to it; religious claims are made about quite a diversity of things, and some must be assessed in one way and others in other ways. The only sensible way to proceed is on a claim-by-claim, case-by-case basis; given enough cases, one may then be able to generalize. In what follows, I will try to understand, and then assess, a variety of religious beliefs. The sorts of assessments offered will typically be relevant to other, similar claims not mentioned here. There are simply too many religions to deal with all of them in one book, even if one knew enough to do that. If you like to think in terms of books having agendas, my major agenda is to show, by detailed argument, that it is possible to rationally assess religious beliefs. In this respect, it runs against a belief that is very popular in our culture, namely that matters of religion are simply private affairs concerning how you feel about big things. This belief seems to me patently false.

It also runs against the tendency in some (certainly not all) Religious Studies circles, and (worse) even among some philosophers, to the effect that to think of religions as seriously containing propositions whose truth greatly matters so that accepting them involves accepting claims is to misunderstand them. It is possible to reply to such philosophers on their own terms. Since it challenges the very possibility of faith, we will do so in our chapter on Faith and Reason. Another reply is given by looking carefully at what is supposedly meaningless in the sense of being neither true or false—by doing philosophy of religion to show the falsity of this view by looking at the actual authoritative texts of religious traditions, and seeing what they actually do say. It is highly unlikely that the scriptures of the world religions really say nothing that is true or false—that is, that they say nothing. Even if one wanted to say that all the apparent declarative sentences in these sources were really imperatives, an imperative makes sense only in the context of a set of truth-value-bearing propositions. Efforts to claim that so-called religious propositions are not meaningful because (a) they are not mere reports of what can be sensed, or (b) they cannot be falsified by appeal to sensory evidence, or (c) they cannot be confirmed by sensory observation alone, commit intellectual suicide. They make no claim that can be tested by appeal to any or all of (a), (b), and (c); on their own terms, they convey no sense. Thus they rule out nothing. If we can properly believe only what science tells us, then we cannot properly believe that we can properly believe only what science tells us. I grant that much can be learned by tracing the myriad mistakes made by those who suppose that
there is no such thing as a religious truth or falsehood. But the success rate for those who have most vociferously asserted this has been dismal, and we may draw the veil of silence over their efforts. Others feel that trying to assess religious beliefs is not really polite, something no nice person would do. I note that those who possess these standards for politeness or nicety do not find much support in the religious traditions themselves. There we find real disagreement and argument. The religious traditions typically are not patron of such philosophical politeness—or political correctness. They do not say that those who reject the idea that seeking for religious truth, and arguing for or against religious doctrines—being impolite—are to be shunned. Those who reject serious inquiry into the truth or falsity of religious beliefs, by firmly rebuking and rejecting those who think this task worthwhile, themselves engage in what on their own terms is itself a sad lack of politeness. Such notions of politeness and nicety are cases of failure of nerve and unwillingness to think hard about some of the most important matters.

The book that follows offers a sustained argument. It does not offer a particular philosophical system, though no doubt its philosophical commitments (as would any others) considerably constrain the sort of system that one who accepts them could consistently accept. Arguably, some sorts of religious tradition come off better under rational assessment than do others. As the argument develops it will become clear as to how there can be a basis for such judgments.

Objectivity

Objectivity is rightly prized in philosophy as elsewhere. To be objective in the relevant sense is, roughly, to accept or reject a belief on the basis of what can be said in favor of, and what can be said against, its truth, no matter whether one would prefer the belief to be true or not. There are two views about objectivity that I reject. On one account, a book on the philosophy of religion can be objective only if it conforms to the pattern “Tradition A says this, Tradition B says that, Philosopher C argues against this in this way, but Philosopher D argues against the same thing like that, and now everybody decide for themselves without the author interfering.” The assumption is that description can be objective, but assessment cannot be. Of course the author or authors of such a text have had to decide what was important enough to be favored by their attention, which interpretations of the traditions so favored were probably accurate, what arguments were the more interesting and forceful, what could properly be said about these arguments, and the like. It remains baffling as to why one should suppose these assessments can be objective whereas assessments of the religious beliefs themselves are impossible, particularly since offering the relevant descriptions involve tasks very similar to those included in making assessments. If it is granted that one can be objective about description, it is arbitrary to think that one cannot be objective about assessment. The other view is that objectivity is impossible to obtain about anything. There is obviously no reason to take this view seriously. It proclaims Objectivity about any belief is impossible to obtain and so if its proponents are right they are just being so kind as to share a small bit of their autobiographies, something on
the level of *I don’t like seafood*, which of course has no philosophical relevance whatever. If they are wrong, then again we need not worry about their claim. The truth about objectivity is that it is hard to achieve, especially about things that matter, and that one can do one’s best to try. Sometimes one succeeds. For an easy example, the objective truth is that if James says *Nothing said in English is ever true*, what he says is either true or false. If it is false, then it is false. But if it is true, then it is false. So, either way, it is false.

**Religion**

**What Is Religion?**

Our world contains a perplexing diversity of religious traditions. Increasingly, representative congregations or conclaves of these traditions can be found in any major city. Our question is simply *What is religion?* Responsible answers will reflect what one finds in traditions universally agreed to be religious.

**A Definition of Religion**

Broadly speaking, definitions of ‘religion’ tend to fall into one of two classes. One sort of definition is substantial or doctrinal; a given religion is defined in terms of the beliefs its adherents accept that make them adherents of that religion, and religion generally is characterized in terms of beliefs that all religions are alleged to share. Another sort of definition is functional or pragmatic; ‘religion’ is defined in terms of what it is alleged that all religions do or what the social function of religion is alleged to be. Some definitions, of course, are somewhat less than objective. Marx’s claim that religion is the opiate of the people is not proposed as a scholarly and neutral definition of religion—or, even if it is presented as neutral, it isn’t. It is a functional definition rather than a substantial definition. “Religion is the superstitious acceptance of the belief that God exists” is a non-neutral substantial definition. “Religion is the act of getting right before God” is a non-neutral definition that is partly substantial and partly functional.

As a basis for answering our question, we need a neutral definition. A neutral definition will not presuppose some particular answer to any of our substantial philosophical questions. It will not presuppose that some particular religious tradition is true (or false) or that no religious traditions are true (or false). For reasons that will become clear shortly, it will be nice if the definition can be both functional and also recognize the important point made by attempts to give a substantial definition. Consider this definition: a religion is a conceptual system that provides an interpretation of the world and the place of human beings in it, bases an account of how life should be lived given that interpretation, and expresses this interpretation and lifestyle in a set of rituals, rites, institutions, and practices. This is a functional definition; it views religions as providing persons with accounts of their world and their place in it—interpretations that are relevant to day-to-day living and that are given life in institutions, practices, and rituals. It recognizes the
importance of religious activities. It also recognizes the importance of a doctrinal element in religious traditions. If doctrines without rituals are empty, then rituals without doctrines are blind. By ‘rituals’ here one should not think only of a Catholic Mass or a highly liturgical Anglican or Lutheran Service. A Plymouth Brethren celebration of the Lord’s Supper or a Baptist celebration of adult baptism is a ritual in the sense of being a religious activity charged with theological meaning. The intent is that this definition be neutral in the sense recently characterized. Social science treatments of religion tend to focus on the institutions, rites, rituals, and practices, viewed either collectively as cultural artifacts or individually as sources of personal meaning. Philosophical discussions of religion tend to focus on the doctrines that religions offer and live by. These approaches are supplementary, not competitive, though academics often play down, or even deny, the importance of what they do not happen to study. Since this definition includes a conceptual component, it is inevitable that some reject it as too intellectual in spite of its containing emphasis on the embodiment of religion in institutions, rites, rituals, and practices. The tendency to downplay the centrality of doctrine to religion is as pervasive as the reluctance to consider truth or falsehood in connection with religious belief.

**Another Definition**

A different, but compatible, characterization of religion makes use of the notions of diagnosis and cure. A religion proposes a *diagnosis* (an account of what it takes to be the basic problem facing human beings) and a *cure* (a way of permanently and desirably solving that problem): one basic problem shared by every human person and one fundamental solution that, however adapted to different cultures and cases, is essentially the same across the board. Religions differ insofar as their diagnoses and cures differ. For example, some religions are monotheistic and some are not. Hence some diagnoses are offered in terms of alienation from God and cures are presented that concern removing that alienation, while other diagnoses and cures make no reference to God. Other diagnoses will find the basic problem is the unsatisfactory nature of human life and offer a cure that altogether removes one from the human condition.

**Philosophy of Religion**

**What Is Philosophy of Religion?**

Metaphysics, epistemology, and ethics are disciplines within philosophy. Metaphysics is the enterprise of constructing and assessing accounts of what there is. Epistemology is the enterprise of constructing and assessing accounts of what knowledge is and how it can be attained. Ethics is the enterprise of constructing and assessing accounts of what makes actions right or wrong, what makes persons good or evil, what possesses intrinsic worth, what sort of life is worth living, and how these matters are related. Philosophy of religion combines these enterprises in offering philosophically accessible accounts of religious traditions and
assessing those traditions. Nothing very complex need inherently to be involved in offering philosophically accessible accounts of religious traditions, though there will be complex cases. The idea is to offer clear and literal expressions of key doctrines. It is not unusual for a religion to contain metaphysical, epistemological, and ethical commitments. Then philosophy of religion will offer philosophically accessible accounts of these commitments and consider what can be said for and against the philosophical positions that have been taken.

A further feature of philosophy is worth highlighting. As Edmund Gettier once remarked, in philosophy you do not really understand a position unless you understand the arguments for it. Such claims as:

A. All that exists is minds and ideas.
B. If a proposition P is necessarily true then P is necessarily true is also necessarily true.
C. The existence of evil is logically compatible with the existence of God.

are such that one does not understand them unless one also grasps the reasons that can be offered on their behalf. This is why trying to teach philosophy without discussion of arguments is like trying to teach mathematics without reference to numbers. The reason, then, why we will pay attention to arguments is that this is a book in philosophy. Speculation unsupported by reasons is not science. Neither is it philosophy.

### Questions for Reflection

1. Explain what “Philosophy is the construction and assessment of categorial systems” means.
2. Explain and assess the claims “The claim that objectivity is impossible is self-defeating” and “Objectivity is possible.”
3. Distinguish between functional and substantial definitions of religion.
4. Give and explain a definition of ‘religion.’
5. Give and explain a definition of ‘philosophy of religion.’

### Notes

2. Cf. Alvin Plantinga’s (Professor of Philosophy at the University of Notre Dame) remark to the effect that good philosophizing is just thinking really hard and well is right so far as it goes, and it is what one thinks about that makes one’s thought philosophical.