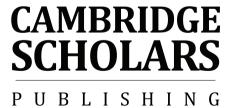# The Relationship of Philosophy to Religion Today

The Relationship of Philosophy to Religion Today

Edited by

Paolo Diego Bubbio and Philip Andrew Quadrio

**CAMBRIDGE
SCHOLARS**

P U B L I S H I N G

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PREFACE

PAOLO DIEGO BUBBIO
AND PHILIP ANDREW QUADRIO

If one wanted to ask the question "What is the relationship between philosophy and religion today?" and one turned to the current literature in philosophy of religion for the answer, it would be difficult not to conclude that the discipline is primarily concerned with metaphysical or conceptual arguments for the existence/non-existence of God, the problem of evil, epistemic discussions of the relation between reason and belief, and (occasionally) questions related to religious pluralism and exclusivism. There is a sense in which this simply reflects the academic and scholarly interests, not to mention the religious/irreligious commitments[1], of those contributing to the field, as well as a certain historical continuity with questions that animated early modern philosophy. Yet while this might be the way things are, or the way they have historically come to be, one can always ask the question of whether this is the way things *ought* to be. The descriptive question regarding the relationship between philosophy and religion today could be taken as implying the normative question "What *ought* the relationship between philosophy and religion be?" While it would be arrogant to provide a strong prescriptive answer to this question, it does critically orientate us on the way this philosophical sub-division is practiced.

Of course there are some interesting philosophical discussions of religion that occur outside of philosophy of religion[2] and, of late, an increasing attention has been given to socio-political issues such as religious pluralism and exclusivism; however, for the most part current literature is focused on the classic metaphysical and epistemic problems

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[1] Cf. Michael Pye, "Religion Shape and Shadow," *Numen* 41 (1/1994): 51-75.

[2] See for instance Alain Badiou, *St. Paul: The Foundation of Universalism*, trans. Ray Brassier (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003); Giovanna Borradori, *Philosophy in a Time of Terror. Dialogues with Jürgen Habermas and Jacques Derrida* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2003); Jeffrey Stout, *Democracy and Tradition* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003).

within religion theistically conceived. Considered as such, philosophy of religion might seem ripe for a broadening of perspective. In order to achieve this broader perspective, insight could be gained by turning toward meta-philosophical reflections into the relationship between philosophy and religion. Thus, the following questions arise: "What ought philosophy of religion be?" or "How ought philosophy relate to religion today?" In fact, it would be naïve to regard the relationship between philosophy and religion without reference to a concrete historical context and the peculiar philosophical and socio-political problems that it precipitates. Hence, the word "today" in the above question implicitly brings with it notions of pluralism and globalism, questions about the role of religious belief in the life of contemporary subjects and cultures, questions about the possibility and plausibility of secularism[3] and the role of substantive values in political life.

A meta-philosophical approach to the relationship between philosophy and religion takes into account contemporary socio-political conditions and seeks to hold an understanding of that relationship *as it is*, against insights into what it *ought to be*. Once this is achieved, these insights can serve as the basis of a critical and transformative engagement with contemporary philosophical practice in order to develop a more comprehensive framework for an understanding of religion and for the production of specifically philosophical knowledge thereof. In addition, this critical perspective might be achieved by considering philosophical perspectives different from the standard analytic approach to the discipline of philosophy of religion. Since philosophy is a dialogical exercise, one way to commence this process is to draw upon the insights of those who have invested intellectual energies into a philosophical engagement with religion.

Through 2007 and 2008, as coordinators of the Philosophy of Religion Research Seminar, we invited several prominent philosophers of religion to the University of Sydney to provide their take on the question "What is the relation of philosophy to religion today?" While we set this question as the theme for the seminar series, we allowed the invited speakers to

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[3] See Jurgen Habermas and Joseph Ratzinger, *The Dialectic of Secularism: On Reason and Religion* (San Francisco, CA: Ignatius Press, 2007); Esther McIntosh, "Religious Reasons in the Public Sphere," *International Journal of Public Theology* 2, (4/2008): 465-483; Simon Critchley, *Infinitely Demanding. Ethics of Commitment, Politics of Resistance* (London & New York: Verso, 2007); Michael J. Sandel, *Public Philosophy: Essays on Morality in Politics* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2005).

determine their own way into that question. Thus we were presented with a series of perspectives on the meta-philosophical issue mentioned above, perspectives that seem to fit within the Kantian/Aristotelian dyad: *theoretical* and *practical* perspectives. Some of the papers tackled the question from a theoretical perspective addressing metaphysical and epistemic issues, while others addressed themselves to practical and political issues. As the papers included in this book show, the way one answers the meta-philosophical question about the relation between philosophy and religion is influenced not merely by one's interests and by one's philosophical orientation, but also by whether one's focus is theoretical or practical.

The aim of this book is predominantly to present the various perspectives that emerged through the seminar series as a way of helping to respond to the meta-philosophical question that we set as our focus, or at least as a way of contributing something to its resolution. It also seeks to contribute to drawing philosophical attention toward these meta-philosophical issues and so lead the practice of philosophy of religion away from metaphysical theology and apologetics (as well as from any dogmatic atheistic standpoint) and towards a more fulsome engagement with religion as a phenomenon worthy of philosophical reflection.

One of the guiding principles of our project, and one which is reflected in the nature of this text, is that we sought to achieve balance and plurality of perspective. We have included contributions from both "analytic" and "continental" philosophy, contributions from atheistic, theistic and agnostic contributors, and contributions from philosophers working within philosophy of religion, political theology, and religious studies. Whereas philosophers of religion in general usually consider problems arising within a monotheistic (and often Christian) framework, philosophers working in religious studies seek broader perspectives on religion and provide philosophical engagements with religion that attempt to be more pluralistic. If analytic philosophy of religion (whether theistic or atheistic) often argues from a committed perspective and contributes to contemporary engagements with classic problems within theism, continental philosophy contributes to thinking about the symbolic and regulative dimensions of religious life, the existential and cultural import of religion, and the question of religion and politics. If atheistic thinkers have made significant impact on public discourse about religion through popular literature, theistic philosophers have engaged in detailed discussion of specific conceptual problems. What we are interested in is how each of these legitimate standpoints might contribute to addressing the meta-philosophical

question we raised. Each of these approaches leads to different ways of understanding the question of the relation of philosophy to religion today.

We have divided the book into two sections that broadly reflect the content of the contributions that we received: the first focusing on theoretical issues, the second focusing on practical issues.

Part I consists of a set of *theoretical* perspectives on the relationship between philosophy and religion, aiming at investigating the terms of this relationship from a meta-philosophical point of view.

The first paper, "Philosophy of Religion in a Secular Age: Some Programmatic Reflections," by Matheson Russell, sets the boundaries of the discussion by presenting the prevailing conceptions of the project of philosophy of religion. Russell claims that philosophy of religion needs to self-consciously situate itself within the broader context of modernity as such, with its political, social and cultural dimensions. What emerges is a renewed vision for philosophy of religion, regarded not merely as a set of debates relevant to individuals with a religious agenda, but equally as a domain of inquiry with profound relevance for our political, social and cultural life together.

John Bishop, in his essay "Philosophy and Religious Commitment," is equally concerned with some of the prevailing conceptions of the project of philosophy of religion, and focuses on the relationship between religious and philosophical commitment that emerges from the "Reformed" epistemology of recent years. He argues that this approach fails to acknowledge a significant element required for authentic philosophical commitment, and concludes by providing a defence of a "modest form" of fideism.

Paul Crittenden focuses on a specific issue in the relationship between philosophy and religion, that of the theme of the God of religion and of faith in keeping with reason, and he does so by turning to Pope Benedict's Regensburg address and reflecting on his concerns about dehellenization and the modern concept of reason ("Faith in Keeping with Reason; a Critique of Pope Benedict's Regensburg Address").

To conclude the first part of the book, Kevin Hart offers (with his essay "Contemplation: Beyond and Behind") an analysis of the notion of "contemplation" and of how this notion can enlighten both the "philosophical" and the "religious" phenomenon.

An analysis of the relationship between philosophy and religion that takes seriously the consequences of this relationship in the real world necessarily implies an engagement with contemporary society and politics.

Part II consists in a set of practical and political perspectives that consider the relationship between philosophy, religion, and politics.

The first essay of the second part is Graham Oppy's paper "New Atheism versus Christian Nationalism". This essay provides a very useful account of the "new atheism" presented in the works of Richard Dawkins, Sam Harris, Christopher Hitchens and other authors, and counters it with the "Christian Nationalism" of well-established and well-regarded professional philosophers, like Robert Koons and William Lane Craig.

Michael Levine's paper "New Atheism, Old Atheism and the Rationality of Religious Belief" is again concerned with the new atheism and considers the motivations and reasons that drive that view. While his work is not aimed at a defence of the metaphysical naturalism of the new atheism, it seeks to rectify what he sees as misunderstandings about the nature and point of their claims. Here he takes up certain themes in the paper by Oppy and provides an alternative view.

The last two essays focus more directly on the relationship between religion and politics, and on the contribution that philosophical reflection can give to the resolution of specific issues or problems. Anthony Langlois's essay "Religious Reasons in Political Debate" considers the proper relationship between religion and politics in liberal democracies, and in particular he focuses on the recent work of the contemporary philosopher of religion Jeffrey Stout, the author of the groundbreaking book *Democracy and Tradition*.

One of the most pressing problems in the relationship between religion and politics in liberal democracy is the question of religious exclusivism. Douglas Pratt's essay "Religious Identity and the Denial of Alterity" considers the phenomenon of religious exclusivism by arguing that there are at least three variants of religious exclusivism, namely open, closed and extreme. This analysis brings him to a discussion of a paradigm of exclusive religion that yet upholds the validation of religious variety.

In conclusion, we think that the eight essays included in this volume have an important element in common: they all assume that the religious element cannot be reduced to psychological intimacy or arbitrary subjectivity, insofar as a personal belief does not conflict with an acceptance of the function of philosophy as the norm or criterion of every judgment.

Philosophy of religion can really play a role in the contemporary world in so far as it remains philosophy. Put differently, philosophy of religion can speak every religious language insofar as it speaks a philosophical language, and not a religious one. Philosophy of religion is neither

"Christian" nor "Islamic," neither "atheist" nor "theist." This does not mean that it must necessarily be neutral, but that its outcome should be the result of a philosophical analysis that takes its object seriously; and not just the development of a thesis or a belief taken for granted or assumed a priori.[4]

As Editors, we are very happy with all the essays that go to make up the volume, and we believe that the diversity of the points of view they provide represents a very meaningful contribution to the current debate on the relationship between philosophy and religion. Of course, this does not mean that we, as philosophers, agree with all the contributors in all their conclusions, and/or with all their assumptions—in fact, sometimes we do not. But this is not a problem: disagreement is a fundamental aspect of the philosophical work. When there is a pressing issue in the philosophical debate, as we believe the relationship between philosophy and religion is, the most important thing is to promote a fruitful and non-dogmatic dialogue among the various possible positions. If such an achievement has been reached, even partially, through this book, we feel we have succeeded.

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[4] Cf. Paolo Diego Bubbio, "Metaphilosophical Reflections on Theism and Atheism in the Current Debate," in *Politics and Religion in the New Century: Philosophical Perspectives*, eds. P. Quadrio and C. Besseling (Sydney: The University of Sydney Press, 2009), 354-382.

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

PART I:

THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVES

CHAPTER ONE

PHILOSOPHY OF RELIGION IN A SECULAR AGE: SOME PROGRAMMATIC REFLECTIONS

MATHESON RUSSELL

Philosophy of religion is a discipline with a curious history and an uncertain future within the modern university. As a form of rational inquiry, philosophy of religion has been shaped largely by the existential questions facing culturally Christian individuals in a post-Enlightenment world: Is belief in God really plausible? Can miracles happen? Do I really possess an immortal soul? Is the natural world the product of an intelligent creator? But does this really do justice to the scope and relevance of philosophical reflection upon religion? Without negating its significance for individual lives, in this essay I shall argue that philosophy of religion needs to self-consciously situate itself within the broader problem context of modernity as such, with its political, social and cultural dimensions. What emerges is a renewed vision for philosophy of religion in this secular age.

1. Prevailing conceptions of the project of philosophy of religion

Philosophers of religion exhibit what they take their job description to be by the manner in which they write and by what they write about. When we survey the philosophy of religion literature, then, what tasks do we find philosophers of religion taking up? What topics and questions do we find them tackling? I can discern four main streams in the contemporary literature. As I shall try to indicate, these four are interrelated.

The first approach sees the philosopher of religion taking the role of *a rational judge or arbiter presiding over the dispute concerning the existence of God*. Let's call discussions of this character Stream One (S1). In this guise, the philosopher of religion asks: *Does God exist?* And the question is traditionally referred to "proofs" for or against the existence of God.

The project of deciding on rational grounds whether or not God exists has so dominated the field of philosophy of religion that in some ways it impresses itself upon us as *the* prevailing question or task that defines the discipline. But this would not give an entirely accurate representation of what contemporary philosophers of religion discuss. The discussion has branched out, and why this has occurred can be explained if we take a moment to notice one or two things about this first way of articulating the project of philosophy of religion.

To begin with, S1 orients the discipline with respect to a *specific*— albeit, to some, fundamental—religious claim, namely that there exists a God. It situates the discipline as a "second-order" or "critical" reflection upon a particular "first-order" belief, namely *theistic* belief. The religious belief to be debated is taken as a given, and the philosophical task is assumed to be that of assessing the truth or falsehood of this religious claim.

Needless to say, there are certain historical reasons why the discipline finds itself critically assessing just this kind of religious claim. The discipline is, after all, a product of the European intellectual tradition, a tradition descended primarily from the Christian culture of the West; hence the focus on monotheistic belief. Nonetheless, some philosophers of religion do insist that there is something beyond mere historical contingency that legitimates the focus on the monotheistic claim. To begin with, what they take as their object of critical reflection, they want to stress, is quite deliberately *not* the Christian doctrine of God (nor the Jewish or Islamic doctrine of God), but instead what has been called "restricted theism"[1] or "classical theism".[2] E. D. Klemke gives a representative definition of "restricted" or "classical" theism: it is the belief "that there exists a being—God—who is all-powerful; all-knowing; supremely good; infinite; eternal; one who possesses all perfections (and no imperfections); transcendent to the natural universe, hence supernatural, but at the same time creator (and sustainer) of the natural universe."[3] Theism defined in this fashion is meant to represent the basic kernel common to all three major monotheistic systems of belief, a pared down idea of God such that only the most essential features of the object of

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[1] William L. Rowe, "Evil and the Theistic Hypothesis: A Response to Wykstra," in *The Problem of Evil*, ed. Marilyn McCord Adams and Robert Merrihew Adams (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990).

[2] Richard Swinburne, *The Coherence of Theism*, rev. ed. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993), 1.

[3] Elmer Daniel Klemke, *To Believe or Not to Believe: Readings in the Philosophy of Religion* (Fort Worth: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich College Publishers, 1992), 7.

belief are insisted upon. It is argued that "restricted" or "classical" theism delineates a minimal set of essential doctrinal commitments, since a being who lacked these characteristics would not be a worthy object of worship. Actually existing monotheistic religions may involve many more commitments, but they cannot involve less. And, as such, if it can be shown that the God of "restricted theism" does not exist or cannot exist, then it can be shown that all more elaborate theistic systems are also false, or at least contain false beliefs at their core. Hence the focus of S1.

Those who understand the task of philosophy of religion in this way may well still represent the mainstream within the discipline. However, because of certain perceived limitations in this received project, it is now the case that discussions within contemporary philosophy of religion have branched out into different topics. These topics, which are related to but distinct from the traditional question described above, have become new focal points of discussion in the literature, taking on a life of their own and even threatening to eclipse the traditional question of God's existence. We can survey these new topics by reconstructing the shifts of attention motivated by the perceived limitations in S1.

(i) The first perceived limitation with the traditional conception of the task of philosophy of religion (represented by S1) is this. It presupposes that there is some method of rational reflection capable of deciding for or against the existence of God, and presupposes furthermore that the method of rational decision will rest upon proofs or arguments. But in lieu of any decisive empirical or rational argument for or against the existence of God (an impasse we reach for perhaps *essential* reasons), we find ourselves casting about for other—perhaps less direct—means of judging whether religious beliefs are reasonable or not. And at this point philosophers of religion have found themselves having to ask more general epistemological questions about the nature of justification and warrant, about the categories of probability, plausibility, reasonability, the ethics of belief, and so forth. A new question therefore emerges within philosophy of religion: *Under what conditions would religious belief be rational or reasonable?* A subtly different understanding of the task of philosophy of religion thus emerges. It is characterized by its *epistemological* focus, in contrast to the traditional *metaphysical* or *ontological* focus of the discipline. Let's call this Stream Two (S2).

One famous attempt to settle the debate within S2 is that of the logical positivists. Quite apart from arguments for or against the existence of God, positivists such as A. J. Ayer maintained that there are no conditions under which religious belief would be rational. This is because religious

propositions are non-verifiability (they do not admit of confirmation), and hence are ultimately meaningless, despite being grammatically well-formed. At one stroke this argument seemed to discredit all forms of religious belief. However, few found this line of argument plausible. The test for "meaningfulness" appeared unacceptably strict and threatened to strike down as "meaningless" countless inoffensive, everyday beliefs as well as those more speculative "metaphysical" beliefs it was intended to expose.

More recent debates, provoked to a large extent by Alvin Plantinga's influential work on belief and warrant,[4] have brought a higher degree of epistemological nuance to this debate. A great wave of discussion has followed in Plantinga's wake, some of which may well have genuine insights to contribute to the field of epistemology in general—not least because the special case of religious belief has forced epistemologists to consider a series of rather complex and delicate issues they may otherwise have overlooked, such as the limits and presuppositions of evidentialism. And all the better for the state of play in the general field of epistemology. In any case, within S2, the centre of attention becomes what we might call the epistemic respectability of religious belief in general, and the debate over this issue is ongoing.

(ii) A second perceived limitation concerns the presumption that "restricted" or "classical" theism should set the terms of the debate within philosophy of religion. I have mentioned why some find this presumption acceptable and compelling. However, it seems legitimate to wonder why we should accept a definition of religious belief that excludes from consideration all religious beliefs beyond those of the monotheistic traditions. Should the philosopher of religion not first turn his or her critical attention to the concept of God rather than taking it as a given? What's more, perhaps the rational acceptability of religious belief depends upon *which* concept of God we are considering. Perhaps the more fundamental question, then, is not "does God exist?" or even "when would religious belief be epistemologically respectable?," but rather "what, if any, concept of God, the gods, or the divine, would be logically coherent and rationally compelling?" Under the force of this line of thinking, a new focus of inquiry emerges within the discipline which has the character of

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[4] See Alvin Plantinga and Nicholas Wolterstorff, *Faith and Rationality: Reason and Belief in God* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1983); Alvin Plantinga, *Warrant: The Current Debate* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993); and idem, *Warranted Christian Belief* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000).

philosophical theology, by which I simply mean philosophical reflection on the doctrine or idea of God (*theos*), very broadly construed. Let's call this Stream Three (S3).

The history of philosophy contains many examples of philosophical theology of this kind; we might think immediately of Aristotle's unmoved mover or Baruch Spinoza's pantheism. But such constructive philosophical theologising is also to be found on the contemporary scene. Among certain Continental strands of philosophy it is seen in a burgeoning and vigorous theorising of "transcendence" and "the divine".[5] Contemporary analytic philosophers of religion are also showing increasing interest in "alternative" concepts of God.[6] But, even in the mainstream, one commonly finds debates over divine knowledge, divine power, God's relation to time—all of which are topics easily identifiable as belonging to philosophical theology—that is, they concern the very concept of God. There is, in other words, no shortage of contemporary literature that considers *what, if any, concept of God, the gods, or the divine might be logically coherent and rationally compelling*.

(iii) There is at least one more perceived limitation in the received project of philosophy of religion (S1) that has set philosophers of religion off in yet another—perhaps even more radical—direction. To illustrate it, let's consider Immanuel Kant. His work one might initially have characterized as belonging to S2, i.e. as providing an assessment of—and, in this case, *defending*—the epistemic respectability or reasonableness of belief in God. Indeed, Kant did propose a novel answer to the question of the reasonableness of religious faith. His critical philosophy, as is well known, offers both an explanation as to why the theoretical debate over the existence of God (S1) inevitably reaches an impasse (in the Transcendental Dialectic of the *Critique of Pure Reason*) and, at the same time, a wholly different kind of argument for the reasonableness and even necessity of belief in God—namely, on the basis that the idea of God is a rationally

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[5] For an analysis of this literature, see Hent de Vries, *Philosophy and the Turn to Religion* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999). Some seminal essays can be found in John D. Caputo, ed., *The Religious* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2002).

[6] See, for instance, Huw Parri Owen, *Concepts of Deity* (London: Macmillan, 1971); John Bishop, "Can There Be Alternative Concepts of God?," *Nous* 32 (1998): 174–188; and Charles Hartshorne "Alternative Conceptions of God," in *Religious Belief and Philosophical Thought*, ed. William P. Alston (New York: Harcourt, Brace, & World, 1963), 320–37.

necessary "Postulate of Pure Practical Reason".[7] But this ingenious approach has rather more radical implications than one might first have supposed. Kant's defence of the reasonability of belief turns on the claim that the stance of belief is *not* an epistemic or theoretic stance *at all*, i.e. does not involve a positing of some possible object of knowledge. Rather, the idea of God, according to Kant, is strictly correlated to the sphere of praxis and is intelligible only as a *postulate* of practical reason. Belief in God is not a knowledge claim, but it is nonetheless a meaningful and intelligible postulation.

We may or may not find this way of characterizing the stance of faith convincing, but it does bring into view a third limitation or blind spot in the traditional self-conception of philosophy of religion: namely, that it presupposes that religious life at its core is founded on a *knowledge claim* that there is a God and that it is therefore open to critical evaluation in just the same way as any other knowledge claim. Kant's novel approach provokes us to consider whether this presupposition bears up to critical reflection. What if faith does not have the character of a truth claim at all?

This line of reflection leads to a fourth conception of the philosopher of religion's task: namely, *to interpret and evaluate the so-called "spiritual" or "religious" dimensions of human experience as such*. What is the religious dimension of life? Where does it sit in relation to theory and practice—or better, in relation to human existence as such? How are we to characterize it? What does it signify, and what is its significance? Here the goal is to suspend the assumption that certain truth claims are at the basis of religion and to seek a philosophically satisfying conceptualisation of religious life as such, in its experiential or existential characteristics, its ways of speaking and acting, its forms of behaviour and social interaction, including those of prayer, meditation, ritual, and hermeneutic practices. While it is true that each of these phenomena has become the object of study in various non-philosophical disciplines—sociology, psychology, anthropology, and so forth—there remains a distinctively philosophical dimension to this line of inquiry. The philosophical dimension concerns those most fundamental questions about what religious faith *is*. Understood in this way, the philosopher of religion has the task of providing a conceptual analysis of religious life. Here the focus is neither metaphysical, epistemological nor theological in the first instance, but rather falls within the sphere of *philosophical anthropology.* Let's call this Stream Four (S4).

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[7] The *locus classicus* of this argument is the "Dialectic of Pure Practical Reason" in Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Practical Reason*, trans. Lewis White Beck (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1956).

Kant is not the only philosopher responsible for the emergence of this stream of discussion in philosophy of religion. But he is the dominant figure we remember today as we reconstruct the history of this strand of philosophical inquiry—so much so that it might make sense to refer to the line of philosophical inquiry that deals with these questions as a "post-Kantian" strand. Much historical and contemporary Continental philosophy of religion can be situated within this line—from Friedrich Schleiermacher through to Søren Kierkegaard, Martin Heidegger and Rudolf Otto, to Emmanuel Levinas and beyond. It is hardly the case, however, that the analytic tradition has failed to contribute to S4.[8] On the contrary, similar questions have been posed with great force, especially by a recent generation of Wittgensteinian philosophers of religion, most notably D. Z. Phillips.[9] (It must be noted, however, that the Wittgensteinians have remained on the periphery of analytic philosophy of religion, and they have often been described as exponents of an "anti-realist," "fideist" or "expressivist" position—descriptions which manifestly remain wedded to the metaphysical and epistemological terms of reference characteristic of S1 and S2.)

It is worth mentioning that within the ambit of S4 we find not only philosophers sympathetic to religious forms of life, such as Kant or Schleiermacher, but also those vehemently opposed. For example, the contributions of Karl Marx, Friedrich Nietzsche and Sigmund Freud should be situated here. Each of these three "masters of suspicion" provides an account of the structure and motivations of religious life, and provides a damning assessment of it on that basis. In each case, a critical analysis of the religious form of life is offered that leaves questions about the existence of God *entirely out of play*. Neither Marx, nor Nietzsche, nor Freud considers arguments for or against the existence of God. Indeed, they are wary of being diverted into arguments over the truth or falsity of the propositional content of religious beliefs since they regard as far more decisive the question concerning the truthfulness of the believing itself. For each of them (albeit for different reasons), religious faith is judged to be *untruthful*—not because it speaks falsely about divine realities, but because it is self-evasive and self-deceptive, because it speaks falsely about this-worldly realities—about the world, others and oneself. By the lights of S1 and S3 (although perhaps not of S2), this kind of reflection

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[8] Although not strictly a "philosophical" text, an important point of reference in the Anglo-American literature has been William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (New York: Longmans, Green, 1916 [1902]).

[9] See, most recently, Dewi Zephaniah Phillips, ed., *Whose God? Which Tradition?: The Nature of Belief in God* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2008).

would not count as philosophy of religion at all. But once we see how S4 emerges from the nest of questions typically dealt with by philosophers of religion, it becomes clear how it belongs to the discipline. Needless to say, these "suspicious" interpretations are themselves controversial, but for my purposes they are meant merely to foreground S4 for us as a stream of debate in the contemporary philosophy of religion literature.

In any case, the important point here is that this fourth conception of philosophy of religion is grounded in the conviction that one must first decide what religious life *is* before one can provide a rational and critical evaluation of what if any *validity*, *truth* or *truthfulness* religious faith might possess. And, if the Kantian departure is well founded, then it suggests that much modern philosophy of religion proceeds on the basis of a *misapprehension* about the nature, significance and function of religious experience and religious talk.

These, then, are the four divergent approaches that I see taken up in the discipline of philosophy of religion at present.

Stream One	Stream Two
Metaphysical reflection upon the existence of God, often referred to proofs for/against	*Epistemological* reflection upon the respectability of religious beliefs as such
"Does God exist?"	"Under what conditions would religious belief be rational or reasonable?"

Stream Three	Stream Four
Philosophical-theological reflection upon the proper *object* of religious belief	*Philosophical-anthropological* reflection upon the nature of religious life as such
"What, if any, concept of God, the gods, or the divine might be logically coherent and rationally compelling?"	"How is the 'religious dimension' of life to be conceptualised? What is its significance?"

Such are the recent major developments and differentiations within the discipline. At this point, however, I wish to take a step back and ask about the situation of the discipline within the broader context of philosophy, the modern university, and contemporary society. I shall argue that philosophy

of religion, whether it is aware of the fact or not, is situated at a crucial nodal point within the intellectual systems of the modern academy and, indeed, within the cultural-scientific edifice of the modern lifeworld (Sec. 2). To a greater or less extent, in all four of its divergent lines of questioning, philosophy of religion directly bears upon the philosophical problem of modernity and especially upon the "cognitive challenge" posed by the persistence of religion in the present ostensibly secular age (Sec. 3). However, I shall contend that philosophers of religion can and should approach their intellectual labours with greater consciousness of their social, cultural and philosophical significance, and that this will give greater coherence and clarity to the discipline (Sec. 4).

2. Philosophy of religion under the conditions of modernity

As it is described above, philosophy of religion obviously addresses questions that are pressing existential concerns for real individuals. We ought not to be surprised when searching souls turn to philosophy of religion as they wrestle in thought and prayer over what to believe. And it is clear that much contemporary philosophy of religion emerges from genuine existential concerns, even if the terms of debate have become increasingly abstract and technical. Herein lies the significance of philosophy of religion for many of its practitioners and much of its audience. What might not be as immediately evident from reading contemporary philosophy of religion, however, is that beyond this personal, existential level, philosophy of religion also serves a crucial function within the dominant intellectual project of the modern, ostensibly secular, age. Indeed, I shall argue in what follows that the significance of philosophy of religion can only be properly understood if it is seen in relation to the broader *social*, *cultural* and *institutional* contexts in which it is practiced, contexts in which the so-called "philosophical problem of modernity" is an ongoing intellectual preoccupation.[10]

Jürgen Habermas has observed that the presence of communities of faith in the modern world poses a "cognitive challenge" to the secular discourses of the rationalized lifeworld.[11] (Conversely, of course, the

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[10] See Robert Pippin, *Modernism as a Philosophical Problem: On the Dissatisfactions of European High Culture* (Cambridge: Blackwell, 1991).
[11] Jürgen Habermas, "Pre-Political Foundations of the Democratic Constitutional State?," in *Dialectics of Secularization: On Reason and Religion*, ed. Florian Schuller (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2006), 38.

rationalized lifeworld poses its own cognitive challenge to communities of faith. But the "challenge" with which we are concerned here is primarily the challenge *for moderns*, not for religious communities.) This "cognitive challenge" is multifaceted. Here are just three strands in the nest of issues it encompasses:

(i) The once popular "progress narrative," the narrative of "enlightenment"—according to which religion represents an adolescent phase of human civilization which we are now finally growing out of into the full autonomy of adulthood—has lost its self-evidence. Religions have persisted in late modernity and even flourished despite the confident predictions by previous generations of their imminent demise. It has now become clear that the cultural rise of secular thought to a position of prestige (especially the natural and human sciences) has not been unequivocally accompanied by a concomitant receding of religious commitment in the West, let alone elsewhere. There is a puzzle here that is of interest to psychologists, historians, sociologists, cultural theorists and so on; but it also compels philosophers to think again about how secular *social institutions* ought to be positioned vis-à-vis religious communities and social institutions now that the legitimating narrative of "the march of reason" has lost its unquestioned status and now that it can no longer be tacitly assumed that religious social systems have been normatively invalidated or de-legitimated.

(ii) One could also point to the political challenges of coordinating and governing multicultural societies, in which the existence of religious communities is just as much a social fact as the existence of secular institutions and modern technologies. Under such conditions, the state and its systems of authority inevitably come up against competing *authority claims* made on behalf of God or some other religious source. At very least, this leaves societies and their governments seeking to form judgments about the status of these competing cultures and social systems claiming divine sanction—if not judgments about the ultimate truth or validity of this or that religious authority *per se*. For example, to what extent should members of religious communities be free to act according to their religious beliefs when those ways of acting are regarded as offensive or immoral by the dominant culture?

(iii) It is intrinsic to the dominant modern self-conception of philosophy and the sciences that they are "secular" forms of inquiry. While these forms of inquiry may have had theological roots, as modern "secular" forms of inquiry they claim not to be dependent upon religious forms of thought but grounded instead upon their own independent and autonomous practices of legitimation and knowledge creation. The

legitimacy and integrity of secular inquiry, therefore, is understood to be
bound up with the vigilant exclusion of the concepts and hermeneutic
methods of religious thought.[12] When conceived in this way, the
persistence of religious life and thought in modernity has appeared as a
threat to secular science. As a consequence, some have taken it as a vital
task for the legitimation and preservation of secular thought itself that
religious language, thought and practice be conceptualised and rigorously
differentiated from secular language, thought and practice.[13]

In these and other ways, the struggle for self-preservation, legitimacy
and recognition on the part of secular life and thought is pursued today at
an intellectual level vis-à-vis the religious.

The fact that we find ourselves in a world characterized by the overlap
of and struggle between the secular and the religious is of course the result
of the remarkable cultural and intellectual history of the West. The
"cognitive challenge" of religious faith is a feature in the modern world
thanks to the social and cultural *differentiation* of the religious and the
secular, combined with the ongoing *overlap* between their respective
projects and concerns. Needless to say, there is a long and complex history
to be recounted here concerning the rise of the secular: the story of
renaissance and reformation, of the emergence of the modern sciences and
the disenchantment of nature, of the rise of new forms of political
organization (most notably from our vantage point the liberal-democratic
nation-state), of industrial revolution and the adoption of capitalist modes
of production, and of the development of concomitant forms
of socialization and individuation.[14]

In any case, it is only against this cultural and historical background
that the situation of philosophy of religion today can be understood. For,
with the intellectual shifts brought about by the scientific revolution and

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[12] "Secularity" in this sense need *not* be synonymous with atheism. Theists are able
to participate in a secular form of inquiry to the extent that they adopt its practices
of knowledge creation and validation. The secular is that which is distinct from the
sacred; it need not be opposed to the sacred.

[13] In this connection, I should clarify that, although the process of legitimation is
very much a struggle for cultural esteem and even hegemony, I don't mean to
imply that the question of legitimacy or legitimation can or should be divorced
from questions of truth and validity *per se* and conceived purely as a power
struggle. Indeed, precisely this is why the question must involve a thoughtful
reflection on the respective validity and significance of philosophy and science,
and religion and theology.

[14] The most significant recent attempt to tell this story is undoubtedly Charles
Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press,
2007).

the Enlightenment, there emerged a new "we"—the so-called "scientific community" and those who identify with it—a community or communities governed by a secular self-conception and possessing their own institutions, traditions and practices of meaning making and knowledge creation. It is for this "scientific community" that it became both intelligible and pressing to consider the significance of religious communities *which they now regarded as their "other" in some sense*. (But "other" in *what* sense? And can this otherness be overcome? Can autonomous scientific inquiry be integrated within a theological viewpoint, or religious life be integrated within a secular viewpoint? Or must either religious mentalities give way to the secular, or secular mentalities give way to the religious? We shall return to these vital questions below.)

From the standpoint of the community of secular inquiry, then, philosophical study concerning the "other" of secular inquiry (i.e. religion) plays a crucial role in the project of establishing the legitimacy and coherence of secular inquiry itself. A critical understanding of religious forms of life and thought is needed for the self-critical self-understanding of "secular" society—not just from a social and political point of view, but also from a cultural-scientific vantage point—since, as described above, the very self-conception of "secular" inquiry requires (as the term suggests) the exclusion or inoculating appropriation of "the religious".[15] Philosophy of religion thus stands at a point of interface, a crucial nodal point at which the relationship between the religious and secular discourses of modernity is discursively negotiated. Philosophy of religion serves to situate secular inquiry by situating it vis-à-vis its "other". It is for this reason that philosophy of religion belongs in truth to the very core of the philosophical enterprise within the modern academy under the conditions of modernity.

In light of this analysis, we ought to recognize that the very project of philosophically placing of religion in question is today an activity undertaken from some definite exterior or "secular" standpoint—institutionally represented by the modern university. The philosopher of religion occupies a speech-position within the linguistic community or communities of secular inquirers, *regardless of whether he or she holds religious convictions*. This is what effectively differentiates philosophy of religion from theology in the contemporary landscape: theology is undertaken for the most part outside of the university context on behalf of religious communities and continues conversations that are "live" within

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[15] This is what Taylor describes as the "inescapable (though often negative) God-reference in the very nature of our secular age" (Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 29).

those circles, while philosophy of religion is undertaken largely within the university context on behalf of the ostensibly "universal" community of rational inquirers and continues conversations that are "live" within those circles.

Having this cultural and functional analysis in view enables us to see why philosophy of religion *matters* and what *legitimates* this field of inquiry from the point of view of the secular academy. It is legitimated from the point of view of the secular academy, I am suggesting, not by fulfilling the existential need of individuals to decide rationally what to believe; and it is certainly not legitimated by serving the curiosity of dispassionate inquirers who wish to determine whether or not there happens to be a God "out there". Rather, it is legitimated by the ongoing need on the part of the systems of secular life and thought—political, social and cultural—to come to terms with the systems of religious life and thought out of which they emerged but over against which they now predominantly conceive themselves.

Of course, one possible outcome of the faithful pursuit of philosophy of religion understood in such terms could be that the distinction between secular and religious inquiry comes to be regarded as untenable. In such a scenario, the currently dominant self-conception of the "secular" academy would collapse. (In fact, according to some, it is already collapsing.) And, at that point, we would have entered a post-secular age. Philosophy of religion is a historically contingent discipline to this extent. But no new grand synthesis has so far emerged.

3. Re-reading the philosophy of religion literature in light of the problem of modernity

Bearing in mind the broader intellectual context of modernity (with its political, social and cultural dimensions) allows us to read the contemporary philosophy of religion literature with fresh eyes. It enables us to see philosophy of religion not merely as a set of debates relevant to individuals seeking salvation but equally as a domain of inquiry with profound relevance for our political, social and cultural life together. And this, in turn, offers a fresh perspective from which to evaluate the significance of the four streams of literature enumerated above. What I shall try to do all too briefly in this section is to review these four streams of inquiry and show how each relates to the problem of modernity and especially to the "cognitive challenge" posed by the persistence of religion in this secular age. As we shall see, these four streams are not equally

promising as contributions to the intellectual problem-context in which philosophy of religion finds itself situated today.

(S1) Debates over the existence of God may appear to be far removed from the "cognitive challenge" described in the previous section. This is hard to deny. Nonetheless, it is possible to read even these debates against the broader intellectual backdrop in something like the following way. Arguments for and against the existence of God can be construed as attempts to show *at one stroke* the compatibility or incompatibility of theism with the philosophical and scientific discourses of modernity, and to do so from *within* the systems of secular discourse itself. If the existence of God can be proved, then secular reason can open its arms to theological discourse without reservation; if the existence of God can be disproved, then secular reason can dismiss all theological talk out of hand. Unfortunately, the ever-growing sophistication of the arguments intended to accomplish this neat resolution belies the rather simplistic either/or rhetorical strategy it pursues: the apparent incongruity between secular and religious discourses is to be resolved when *either* theism utterly gives way under the force of rational refutation, *or* theism is exonerated by the tribunal of reason and crowned with the honour of philosophical legitimacy. This is an all-or-nothing strategy, the philosophical equivalent of shooting the moon. On the one hand, this is what makes S1 such a heady enterprise; like a game of Russian roulette, the stakes are incredibly high. On the other hand, to think that the multi-faceted "cognitive challenge" posed by religious life and thought in modernity might be susceptible to such swift resolution seems somewhat naïve—not least in light of the limitations of S1 discussed above, which, as we have seen, have compelled philosophers of religion to substantially sideline S1 and divert their energies into S2, S3 and S4.

(S2) The debate concerning the epistemic respectability of religious beliefs as such leads directly, as mentioned above, into general reflection upon the standards, limits and procedures of knowledge and legitimation. What becomes the topic of discussion very quickly in these debates is not simply the veracity, legitimacy or warrant for this or that religious or metaphysical belief, but the question of what constitutes veracity, legitimacy or warrant in general. As such, the whole general philosophical enterprise of epistemology is implicated in S2. For this reason, S2 bears upon all forms of belief and not only religious beliefs. Religious belief comes to represent a test case for the coherence of general theories in epistemology—that is, a test case for the coherence of the epistemological

foundations of secular inquiry in general. To this extent, this stream of inquiry has broader implications for our understanding of the project of modernity.

But religious belief is more than a special case of belief in general. It represents a class of beliefs that claim some form of (divine) authorization *beyond* the empirical or rational sources of legitimation sanctioned by our modern institutions of science and learning. And this is where the real "cognitive challenge" is posed by religious belief in the epistemological context. To what extent can beliefs lacking demonstrable empirical or rational legitimation be sanctioned within the rationalized lifeworld? Can secular inquiry acknowledge and permit *limits* to its own project of rationalization, or does this render the project of secular inquiry philosophically incoherent? At issue here is a question of profound importance for the intellectual project of modernity itself: can the secular discourses of modernity ground themselves, divesting themselves of unexamined presuppositions and heteronomous beliefs, as they have traditionally aspired to do; or is the project of rationalization itself conditioned by an unaccountable "given" and contingent upon a constitutive "faith" (something perhaps of the order of the "perceptual faith" described by Merleau-Ponty)?[16] While such questions are not typically made explicit in S2, they lurk beneath the surface; and from the perspective of the philosophical problem of modernity, this is where the deeper significance of S2 lies.

(S3) Critical discussions of the concept of God, the gods, or the divine can also be interpreted from the perspective of the broader intellectual problem of modernity. Such discussions represent an investigation into the possibility of a reconciliation between the religious and the secular discourses of modernity on the basis of a commonly intelligible and mutually acceptable concept of the divine. Needless to say, as a line of inquiry pursued on behalf of the community of secular inquirers, the emphasis is on the intelligibility and acceptability from the perspective of autonomous, secular thought itself; the demand is for a concept of God that is agreeable to the systems and standards of philosophical and scientific discourse. This is why the search is for a *philosophical* theology: a theology developed upon grounds other than revelation and thus sanctioned by the canons of reason accepted by the community of secular inquirers. Whether religious communities would or should recognize the

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[16] See Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1968).