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Religious Beliefs

This chapter surveys the main features of world religions that attract the most attention in contemporary philosophy of religion. I introduce some fundamental philosophical terminology and outline some of the focal points of this text. The chapter concludes with observations about the use of imagination in undertaking philosophy of religion.

Five World Religions

In living religious traditions there are many different strands, sometimes profoundly at odds with one another. Any general description of these traditions will therefore have to be in very broad terms, with the understanding that matters are far more complex than these terms and categories can capture. But however generalized, it is good to begin with an overview of such traditions in order to secure a stable set of shared references at the outset and to have before us a sketch of religious diversity. Philosophers of religion need to take seriously the great variety of religious traditions and practices. Beginning with a survey of these religions may also help underscore that philosophy of religion is not principally driven by reflection on merely academic matters, but first and foremost by philosophical inquiry into extant, living traditions.

In the English-speaking world the better known religions are still Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, and so they are a reasonable starting point for this book.

In the main, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam are *monotheistic*. Monotheists believe one and only one God exists and is to be worshipped. *Polytheists* believe in many gods and *henotheists* align themselves with one God without denying

the existence of other deities. Judaism, Christianity, and Islam each depict God as omnipotent (all-powerful), omniscient (all-knowing), and completely good. God both created the cosmos and conserves it in existence. Without God's conserving power, the cosmos would cease to be. God is imperishable, incorruptible, without beginning, and worthy of obedience. In their traditional forms, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam represent God, not just as creating and conserving the cosmos but also as acting in human history to reveal His nature.

The term *theism* is customarily used to name those monotheistic religions in which God is distinct from the world and yet causally active in it, while *deism* names monotheistic religions, according to which, God is the creator of the cosmos, but not active in the world. Deists, then, deny that God authors any revelation, providentially guides human history, causes miracles or becomes incarnate. An *atheist* is someone who maintains that theism is false (from the Greek *atheos* meaning "without God"). While being an *agnostic* (from the Greek *agnosis* meaning "without knowledge") simply means being unsure whether some belief is true, the term is commonly used with respect to theistic belief. Generally speaking, an agnostic claims not to know whether theism is true. A more radical agnostic claim would be that the truth or falsehood of theism *cannot* be known by any human beings.

Judaism, with its roots going back at least to the second millennium BCE (BCE = "Before the common era"), portrays God as calling the people of Israel to be a just and merciful community, dedicated to worshipping and serving God. Its most important early figures are Abraham (*circa* eighteenth century BCE) and Moses (*circa* fifteenth and fourteenth centuries BCE). In the annual ceremony of Passover there is a ritualized recounting of God's liberation of the people of Israel under Moses' prophetic leadership after a prolonged enslavement in Egypt. In Judaism enormous value is placed on community life, a life which is displayed in the Hebrew Bible as a covenant between God and the people of Israel. The Torah refers to the first five books of the Hebrew Bible, while the Talmud is an extensive commentary on the Torah and religious life in general, outlining religious faith, ethics and ritual observance. Modern Judaism has different strands, including the Orthodox, Conservative, and Reformed. The more traditional representatives of Judaism, especially the Orthodox, adopt a stringent reading of what they take to be the historic meaning of Hebrew scripture as secured in the early stages of its formation. Other groups within Jewish tradition treat scripture as authoritative but do not depend on a specific, historically defined interpretation of that scripture. In line with this open-ended approach to religious identity, Jacob Neusner, a

contemporary Judaic scholar, offers a very broad depiction of Judaism: "When a religious system appeals as an important part of its authoritative literature or canon to the Hebrew Scriptures of ancient Israel, or Old Testament, we have a Judaism" (Neusner 1991, p. 59). Taken alone, this definition might appear to some to be too broad, for Christianity would then count as a form of Judaism. This result is not clearly undesirable, for it underscores that Christianity is rooted historically in Judaism and this is why certain cultures as well as the Christian religion itself are sometimes referred to as "Judeo-Christian."

Christianity emerged from Judaism in the first century and looks to Jesus Christ, a Jew, as its founder. The Christian Bible ("Bible" comes from the Greek *biblia* meaning "the books") consists of two parts: the Old Testament with its record and literature of the religion of the people of Israel (the Hebrew Bible) and the New Testament with its representation of Jesus and his followers. Generally speaking, the New Testament has been interpreted by Christians as depicting Jesus Christ as the incarnation of God, a great healer, a teacher of mercy and justice, who was crucified and later raised from the dead, appearing to his followers after his death, and establishing a community of faith. Salvation is attained through fellowship with and trust in Jesus, following his teaching and example, and finding, in him, God's forgiveness and mercy. The term "Christ" comes from the Greek term for "anointed" and is sometimes used to highlight the role of the person, Jesus, in bringing about salvation. Subsequent developments within Christianity gave rise to formal treatments of salvation, the incarnation, and the Godhead, according to which monotheism is preserved alongside belief in a diversity within God of three persons, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Jesus is identified as the incarnation of the Son, the second member of the Trinity. Some unity of Christian belief and practice was gradually achieved in the course of developing various creeds that defined Christian faith in formal terms (from the Latin *credo*, "I believe"). What unity Christianity achieved was broken, however, in the eleventh century with the split between the Western, Catholic Church and Eastern, Byzantine Christianity (now the Christian Orthodox Churches), and broken again in the sixteenth century with the Reformation and the split between Roman Catholicism and Protestantism. As the Reformation unfolded, many denominations emerged, including the Anglican, Baptist, Lutheran, Methodist, and Presbyterian Churches. And more recently, additional Christian movements and denominations have been formed. In this century, strides have been made to achieve a greater unity between Christian communities throughout the world. One sign of this ecumenism is the establishment of the World Council of Churches in the late 1940s.

Islam traces its roots back to Judaism and Christianity, acknowledging a common past at various points. All three religions are sometimes called "Abrahamic" because each acknowledges the importance of Abraham as the early progenitor of the life of faith. Islamic teaching was forged by the Prophet Mohammed (570–632) who proclaimed a radical monotheism that explicitly repudiated the polytheism of his time and the Christian understanding of the Trinity. The Qur'an (from *Qu'ra* for *to recite* or *to read*), its holy book, was composed by Mohammed who dictated this revelation of Allah (Arabic for "God") which, according to tradition, was given to him by the Archangel Gabriel. The Qur'an has a high place in the tradition and is taken to be God's very speech. Central to Islam is the sovereignty of Allah or God, God's providential control of the cosmos, and the importance of living justly and compassionately following a practice of prayer, worship, and pilgrimage. A follower of Islam is called a Muslim, an Arabic term for "one who submits," for a Muslim submits to God. The Five Pillars of Islam include the requirements of reciting the Islamic creed, praying five times a day while facing Mecca, alms-giving, fasting during Ramadan (the ninth month of the Muslim calendar), and making a pilgrimage to Mecca. The two greatest branches of Islam are the Sunnis and Shi'ites, which developed early in the history of Islam over a disagreement about who would succeed Mohammed. Sunnis comprise the vast majority of Muslims. Shi'ites put greater stress on the continuing revelation of God beyond the Qur'an as revealed in the authoritative teachings of the *iman* (holy successors who inherit Mohammed's "spiritual abilities"), the *mujtahidun* ("doctors of the law"), and other agents.

Common among most adherents of these three religions is belief in an afterlife, God's wisdom, and a final consummation of human history in divine judgment and its consequences. In general, then, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam are theistic, but there are members of each tradition who would more accurately be described as *panentheists* (from the Greek meaning "all is within God") who hold that God and the world are in a close, virtually co-dependent relationship. The evident diversity of such positions drives home the point that for some adherents of these religions, something like the descriptions offered here would count as characterizations of a religious heritage that may be subjected to considerable reinterpretation. Jacob Neusner underscores how the Jewish and Christian traditions can encompass new developments and interpretations of their past:

> While the world at large treats Judaism as "the religion of the Old Testament," the fact is otherwise. Judaism inherits and makes the Hebrew Scriptures its

> own, just as does Christianity. But just as Christianity rereads the entire heritage of ancient Israel in light of "the resurrection of Jesus Christ," so Judaism understands the Hebrew Scriptures as only one part, the written one, of the "one whole Torah of Moses, our rabbi." . . . In both cases, religious circles within Israel of later antiquity reread the entire past in light of their own conscience and convictions. (Neusner 1986, p. xi)

Some theologians have gone so far as to reread their heritage in such a way that they claim to be Christian atheists. From a traditional point of view, "Christian atheism" is an outrageous contradiction in terms. I will not try to settle such disputes of classification and, instead, simply register here the importance of recognizing that, for some, the above categories are neither clear cut nor forever fixed. In Christianity two classic treatments of the need to constantly reinterpret and reappraise one's religious heritage are Augustine's (354–430) *Christian Doctrine* and John Henry Newman's (1801–90) *Development of Christian Doctrine.*

While Judaism, Christianity and Islam originated in the Near East, Hinduism and Buddhism originated in Asia. Hinduism allows for so much diversity that it is difficult even to use the term "Hinduism" as an umbrella category to designate a host of interconnected ideas and traditions. "Hindu" is Persian for "Indian" and names the various traditions that have flourished in the Indian subcontinent, going back before the second millennium BCE. The most common feature of what is considered Hinduism is reverence for the Vedic scriptures, a rich collection of work, some of it highly philosophical especially the *Upanishads* (between 800 and 500 BCE). Unlike Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, Hinduism does not look back to a singular historical figure such as Abraham for its root inspiration.

One strand within Hinduism that has received a great deal of attention, especially from Western philosophers in this century, is Advaita Vedanta, according to which this world of space and time is ultimately illusory; it is *Maya* (literally "illusion"). Behind the diverse objects and forms we observe in what may be called the phenomenal or apparent world there is the formless Brahman. The principal aim of this Advaita school of thought is the rejection of all duality ("Advaita" comes from the Sanskrit term for "non-duality"). The appearance of diverse objects is ultimately due to our ignorance. Note this passage from Shankara's *Crest Jewel of Discrimination*: "In dream, the mind creates by its own power a complete universe of subject and object. The waking state [too] is only a prolonged dream. The phenomenal universe exists in the mind" (p. 71). Brahman alone is ultimately real. This position is often

called *monism* (from the Greek *monus* or "single") or *pantheism* ("God is everything"). Shankara (also spelled Sankara, Samkara, Sankaracharya, 788–820) was one of the greatest teachers of this monist, nondualist tradition within Hinduism. Shankara held that "Brahman alone is real. There is none but He. When He is known as the supreme reality there is no other existence but Brahman" (p. 82).

Advaita Vedanta is not the only form of Hinduism. While Brahman is treated as being beyond form in Advaita Vedanta, and thus an impersonal reality, theistic strands may also be found within Hinduism which construe the Divine as personal, all-good, powerful, knowing, creative, loving, and so on. Theistic elements may be seen at places in the *Bhagavad Gita* (sixth century BCE) and its teaching about the love of God. Madhva is one of the better known theistic representatives of Hinduism (thirteenth and fourteenth centuries). There are also lively polytheistic elements within Hinduism. Popular Hindu practice includes a rich polytheism, and for this reason it has been called the religion of 330 million gods. The recognition and honor paid to these gods are sometimes absorbed into Brahman worship as the gods are understood to be so many manifestations of the one true reality. As Simon Blackburn observes: "It is not easy to count gods, and so not always obvious whether an apparently polytheistic religion, such as Hinduism, is really so, or whether the different apparent objects of worship are to be thought of as manifestations of the one God" (Blackburn 1994, p. 292).

Whether in its monist or theistic form, it is widely believed among Hindus that a cardinal, supreme manifestation of Brahman is a trinity of Brahma, Vishnu and Shiva. Brahma is the creator of the world, Vishnu is its sustainer and manifested in the world as Krishna and Rama, incarnations or avatars (from the Sanskrit for "one who descends") who instruct and enlighten, and Shiva is the destroyer.

Most Hindus believe in reincarnation. The soul migrates through different lives, according to principles of *karma*. Karma (Sanskrit for "deed" or "action") is the name for the moral consequences of action. The final consummation or enlightenment for the Hindu is *moksha* or release from *samsara*, the material cycle of birth and rebirth. In its monist forms, liberation comes from overcoming the apparent dualism of Brahman and *atman* (literally "breath"), which refers to the individual self or soul, and sometimes a transcendental self with which all other selves are identical.

Hinduism is often associated with (and believed to be a chief justification for) a social caste system that groups persons into strict orders of social classification. Not all Hindus support such a system, and some Hindu

reformers argue for its abolition. One of the well-known movements opposed to traditional understandings of caste is the Arya Samaj, which was founded by the Hindu reformer Swami Dananda Saraswati (1824–83). The Arya Samaj movement continues to exist within India, especially in the Punjab, and among many Hindu immigrants in the West. As part of its openness to other faiths, Hinduism has a legacy of inclusive spirituality by which it understands other religious practices as different ways in which one may ultimately converge on enlightened unity with Brahman. Hinduism has thereby absorbed and, to some extent, integrated some of the teaching and narratives of Buddhism. Christian elements have also been assimilated historically into Hinduism, especially since British colonialism, with Jesus being seen as the tenth avatar of Vishnu. Many Hindu texts extol the multifaceted paths to the Divine. The following passage from the *Bhagavad Gita* represents Krishna making an inclusive declaration.

> If any worshipper do reverence with
> faith to any god whatever,
> I make his faith firm,
> and in that faith he reverences his
> god,
> and gains his desires,
> for it is I who bestow them.
>
> (vii. 21–2)

Although historically Hinduism and Islam have sometimes been in painful conflict, there are cases of tolerance and collaboration. One of the aims of Sikhism, a sixteenth century reform movement within Hinduism, was to bring together Hindus and Muslims.

Buddhism emerged from Hinduism, tracing its origin to Gautama Sakyamuni (sometime between the sixth and fourth centuries BCE) who lived in northern India and came to be known as the Buddha ("Enlightened One"). The teaching of the Buddha centers on The Four Noble Truths. These are that: (1) Life is full of suffering, pain, misery (*dukka*); (2) The origin of suffering is in desire (*tanha*); (3) The extinction of suffering can be brought about by the extinction of desire; (4) The way to extinguish desire is by following the Noble Eightfold Path. The Eightfold Path consists of right understanding; right aspirations or attitudes; right speech; right conduct; right livelihood; right effort; mindfulness; contemplation or composure. In its earliest forms, Buddhism was not associated with a developed metaphysics (that is, a theory of the

structure of reality, the nature of space, time and so on), but there was belief in reincarnation, skepticism about the substantial nature of persons existing over time, and a denial (or treating as inconsequential) of the existence of Brahman. Early Buddhist teaching tended to be nontheistic and nondeistic, underscoring instead the absence of the self or *anatta* and the impermanence of life. The goal of the religious life is *Nirvana*, a transformation of human consciousness that involves the shedding of the illusion of selfhood. Theravada Buddhism is the oldest and strictest in terms of promoting the importance of monastic life. Mahayana emerged later. It displays less resistance to Hindu themes and does not place as stringent an emphasis on monastic vocation. Other versions of Buddhism include Pure Land Buddhism and Zen.

Other religions will be addressed in the book. At this point, let us consider the underlying question of what should and should not count as a religion. What is the definition and scope of the term "religion"?

Definitions of Religion

It is not easy to achieve a precise, universally acceptable definition of religion. This is largely due to the vast differences between the traditions that are commonly categorized as religions. Many philosophers of religion today regard this difficulty of definition and diversity of religions in a positive light. Rather than advance a narrow definition from the beginning of what must make up a religion, there are advantages to demarcating "religion" simply by appealing to the examples that most people recognize as religions. This strategy secures a substantial terrain to investigate and ensures that philosophy of religion will be relevant to extant traditions that are widely regarded as religion as opposed to being relevant only to academic circles. Thus, a common delineation of religion is as follows: *Religions include Judaism, Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, and Buddhism, and those traditions that resemble one or more of them.* By this definition, Confucianism, Taoism, Baha'ism, Sikhism, Zoroastrianism, aboriginal spirituality, and many other traditions are easily seen to be religious. This characterization of religion may be termed a *definition by example,* though more technically it may be referred to as a *paradigm case definition* (in which a case is identified where a term applies and other applications are designated in virtue of their resemblance to it).

This definition by example of religion carries no implication that the five world religions are more credible or satisfying than others. The five world religions encompass such diverse practices and beliefs, that employing them as

an initial reference point ensures flexibility and breadth in identifying other religions. The definition can, of course, be expanded by explicitly noting other cases of paradigm religions, e.g. Religions include Judaism, Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism, Confucianism, Taoism, Baha'ism, Sikhism, Zoroastrianism, aboriginal spirituality, and those traditions that resemble one or more of them.

The earlier definition by example is used in this text, but it is good to be wary of its limitations. In the present context it succeeds (if it succeeds at all) only as a rough demarcation of the ground that needs to be covered in subsequent philosophical inquiry. For this definition by example does not dig into the details of what makes these traditions religions. The same problem would arise if one were to define "religion" in terms of its Latin root. The term *religio* means "to bind" and highlighting this may be useful to bring to the fore the notion that religion draws people together or delimits a person's identity. But it provides no more help than that. Presumably not *everything* that draws people together or defines a person's identity is religious. More needs to be done to investigate the binding character of religious traditions, and the aim of this book is to carry out such further investigation. But before proceeding to this task, consider some of the difficulties that face other demarcations of what constitutes a religion. Here are three proposals for defining religion and some of their difficulties.

"Religion" may be defined in terms of the belief and worship of God or gods. But this has the undesirable consequence of classifying atheist versions of Buddhism as nonreligious.

Alternatively, "religion" may be defined in terms of reverence and awe such that to have reverence and awe toward something believed to be sacred is to be religious. But this would prohibit from being considered religious those members of the world religions who treat their relation with the sacred as one of self-interest, rather than of awe and reverence. Some early religions are described as lacking in the awe and reverence that typically characterize "worship," and so these might also be excluded by such a definition of religion. It would also require us to classify as religious those groups that treat nature, their nation, or even their egos as sacred and deserving awe and reverence.

In one of the better texts, *Reason and Religious Belief: An Introduction to the Philosophy of Religion*, the following is proposed as a working definition:

> Religion is constituted by a set of beliefs, actions, and emotions, both personal and corporate, organized around the concept of an Ultimate Reality. (Peterson et al. 1991, p. 4)

This appears to be satisfied by traditional forms of the five world religions outlined above, but if it is advanced as a sufficient condition of what is to be classified as a "religion" it is hazardous. For example, it may be argued that the mainstream scientific community is constituted by a set of beliefs, actions, and emotions as well – whether these be the love of discovery, truth and inquiry, the desire to make certain predictions, and the like – centered around the concept of an ultimate reality (the cosmos). But for all that, it would be a stretch to consider the scientific community a religion. One might try to avoid classifying the scientific community as a religion by adjusting the concept of "Ultimate Reality" so that it would have to refer to something beyond the physical world. Scientists focus on the physical world whereas religious believers focus on the nonphysical. This, however, would have the undesirable consequence of excluding many versions of polytheism, Mormonism (the popular name for a nineteenth century Christian movement, the "Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints") and other religions which construe the divine in physical terms. The authors of *Reason and Religious Belief* do not make this move, for they leave the description of "Ultimate Reality" quite broad: "This Reality may be understood as a unity or a plurality, personal or nonpersonal, divine or not, and so forth" (Peterson *et al.* 1991, p. 4). It is easy to sympathize with this resistance to a more precise definition.

I encourage readers to consider nine other definitions of religion that I list at the end of this chapter among the suggested questions and topics. Readers may also wish to survey and debate the many proposed definitions of "religion" in J. H. Leuba's *A Psychological Study of Religion* (especially chapter 2 and the appendix).

The problem facing the project of precisely defining religion is that when we move beyond the definition by example offered at the outset we seem to be without a clear-cut, principled way to delimit what does and does not count as a religion. How can one settle disputes over whether Marxism, atheistic humanism, New Age movements, fervent forms of nationalism and so on, should be considered religions? The definition by example does not provide an *automatic* answer, but it challenges us to undertake a comparative study of the cases at hand. Questions about religious identity are addressed by investigating the resemblance of these movements and traditions to Judaism, Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, and Buddhism. For example, a question about whether atheistic humanism should be considered a religion can be phrased in terms of asking about whether it resembles those cases of religion that are already widely recognized. If it can be argued plausibly that there are significant similarities between atheistic humanism and any of the five world religions,

then these would count as good reasons for treating atheistic humanism on the same footing as Judaism, Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, and Buddhism. This reasoning by resemblance or analogy has had a role in many United States court cases in which judges have struggled with the definition of what counts as a religion. In the case of *United States* v. *Seeger*, for example, the Supreme Court characterized religious belief as "belief that is sincere and meaningful and occupies a place in the life of its possessor parallel to that filled by the orthodox belief in God." (For other legal references, see suggested question two at the end of this chapter.)

The stance adopted here of accepting a definition by example does not supplant other definitions of religion. For example, insofar as the five world religions really do fit any of the more specific definitions, these may be used in identifying other religions in virtue of their also satisfying such definitions.

By avoiding narrow definitions, contemporary philosophy of religion remains open to exploring new religious concerns. The arena of what many in the English-speaking world count as religion seems to be profoundly fluid at present, which is why so many definitions of religion wind up facing what Galileo's critics faced. When persecuted for his view that the earth moves, Galileo is reputed to have said: *eppur si muove* (Italian for "and yet it [the earth] moves"). One may well have a definition of religion that maps significant, but still bounded terrain, and then the terrain itself seems to move. Philosophy of religion is, at the end of the day, philosophical reflection on ***religion***, and any generalization about religion needs to take into account both ancient and emerging traditions that comprise its subject matter. The same is true in philosophy of science, art, history, and so on.

The Focus of Philosophy of Religion

Having stressed the open character of philosophy of religion, we need to find a point of entry into more detailed inquiry. The survey of the five world religions is at too high an altitude for the grounded approach needed for precise philosophical reflection.

Some work in philosophy of religion today focuses on only a single religion, and there are certainly advantages in doing so. With such a concentration there is less danger of oversimplifying religious traditions and more of an opportunity to reflect philosophically on the way different philosophical ideas are interconnected within a specific religious way of seeing the world. Notwithstanding these merits, a broader approach is required here because of the

religiously diverse society many of us live in and also because an exclusive focus on any one religion can have little hope of being completely successful. Each world religion has been influenced in its development by at least one other religion and so the focus on a single religion is hard to sustain if one wants to bring to light its historical development.

Still, *some* selectivity is in order lest one's philosophical investigation become altogether too generalized. It is also warranted here in order to do justice to the current state of the field. In the English-speaking world, the majority of contemporary philosophy of religion is concentrated on theism, and I estimate that more than half of the current non-English-speaking philosophy of religion literature addresses theism or theistic themes. This book explores nontheistic religious topics, but the philosophical articulation and assessment of theism and theistic themes will be a centerpiece. This does not amount to favoring theism by suggesting we begin with the assumption that it has greater credibility than its alternatives. Atheists and agnostics may find the focus on theism desirable insofar as they are committed to establishing that theism is either false or not known to be either true or false. One may even stress the philosophical investigation of theism in order to establish the off-the-wall, rogue second definition of "Theism" in the *Oxford English Dictionary*: "A morbid condition characterized by headaches, sleeplessness, and palpitations of the heart, caused by excessive tea-drinking"! Be that as it may, serious attention is given in this book to nontheistic religions as we shall consider Advaita Vedanta Hindu conceptions of Brahman, Buddhist theories of the self, and the similarities and differences between theistic and nontheistic religious experiences.

In addition to the widespread representation of theism in contemporary philosophy of religion, there are two other advantages to highlighting theism in the present work.

First, there is some reason to believe that because theism has such a large role in religion world-wide, it may well be the most widely held of religious positions today. Reliable statistics are, of course, difficult to secure, but *The World Almanac* (1997) has some credibility. Its figures provide a reason for thinking theism is at least relevant to a majority of religious people. The *Almanac* estimates there are 1,927,953,000 Christians, 1,099,634,000 Muslims, and 14,117,000 Jews. Insofar as Christianity, Islam, and Judaism are theistic, then theistic religions seem to include the greatest numbers in the world population. Sikhism has a strong theistic component (19,161,000) and there are theistic strands in Confucianism (5,254,000) and among Baha'is (6,104,000). It is estimated that there are 780,547,000 Hindus and

323,894,000 Buddhists, but these are not exclusively atheistic, and for those who are atheists, theism will still be an important topic. Historically a great deal of Buddhist philosophy is devoted to the critique of Hindu forms of theism. Those practicing what are termed "tribal religions" or "ethnic religions" are 111,777,000 (sometimes called "primal," "primary" or "aboriginal" religions) and while many of these are polytheistic, they also have monotheistic or henotheistic elements. Thus, many African societies recognize a multiplicity of gods and spirits and yet acknowledge a supreme being. Kwasi Wiredu observes that,

> African world views usually, though not invariably, feature a supreme being who is regarded as responsible for the world order. Generally, that being is explicitly conceived to be omnipotent, omnibenevolent and . . . omnipotent. A sense of dependency, trust, and unconditional reverence is almost everywhere evident in African attitudes to the supreme being. (Wiredu 1997, p. 35)

Similarly, some native North Americans religions acknowledge a "Great Spirit" (or "Creator").

Of course these statistics should not be treated in a simplistic manner. The United States today has a population of roughly 265 million people, and although it is a democracy, it would be false to conclude that each of its 265 million citizens believes in democracy. Still, democracy, both as a form of government and as a topic, is relevant to a majority of such a large population, and that is all I am claiming about theism.

Second, giving more attention to theism will place at center-stage theories about persons and human nature and thus, presumably, locate the investigation of religion in a context of great interest to many philosophers and students of philosophy alike. In theism, God is said to know the world and to act, and some theists speak of God having intentions, desires, and feelings. All these are terms that find their ready use in describing ourselves. Indeed, one of the marked objections to theism is that such language of intentions and so on is *too* indebted to human categories. The charge that religious conceptions of the divine tend to mirror images from human life is a familiar complaint. In the fifth century BCE Xenophanes is recorded as lamenting over the temptation to import limited, mundane categories into our understanding of the divine:

> If cattle and horses or lions had hands, or were able to draw with their hands and do the works that men can do, horses would draw their gods like horses, and

cattle like cattle, and they would make their bodies such as they each had. (From *The Pre-Socratic Philosophers* (1984), by G. S. Kirk et al., entry 168)

Is it philosophically legitimate to employ our conceptions of self, action, desire, power, knowledge, emotion, and so on in describing, however metaphorically, a supremely perfect divine reality? Are there good reasons for rejecting this as naïvely anthropomorphic, or rather, can these terms be developed in religious contexts to describe God with philosophical credibility? Focusing on theism has the advantage of confronting us immediately with the task of elucidating our conception of ourselves and testing the limits of philosophical inquiry.

As noted earlier, investigating theism in what follows will certainly not be exclusive and it by no means amounts to supposing that theism has any initial advantage over its secular and religious alternatives.

In turning to the task of assessing religious beliefs and perspectives, several observations are in order on the importance of a tool that is regularly employed in philosophy of religion as well as other areas of inquiry.

Thought Experiments in Philosophy of Religion

R. G. Collingwood (1899–1943) proposed that in the course of composing history, it is pivotal for the historian imaginatively to project him or herself into the events under study. On this view, a study of some other epoch requires that one try to imagine oneself in that setting. One should seek to understand historical matters from within, imaginatively re-enacting past experience, as if one were truly a person of that time with its presuppositions and outlook.

Collingwood's account of history has been challenged by some historians (see suggested question eight at the end of this chapter), but his promotion of imaginative projection has a strong claim in the philosophical investigation of different religions. In assessing a religion there is merit in imagining what it would be like (or what it *is* like) to hold the religious beliefs and to adopt the religious life that is being studied. This kind of projection may be severely limited and not required for reaching some justified conclusions, though for one who is committed to exploring a religion in depth it is useful to try to see matters from the inside. Perhaps one must also see a religion from the outside, viewing it from the standpoint of different religions or of a secular view of the world. But the point Collingwood highlights is the importance of an *engaged imaginative identification*. One risks developing a philosophy of

religion that is estranged from its topic, namely *religion*, without some appreciation for how religious life seems to its participants. This use of imagination is not a substitute for first-hand experience, but it can be vital in enhancing one's own experience and appreciating the experience and points of view of others.

The cultivation of an appreciation for different religions requires the use of what some philosophers call *thought experiments*. Philosophers sometimes refer to descriptions of the way things might be as thought experiments. As the term is used here, to engage in a thought experiment is to develop a conception of a state of affairs which may or may not be the case or, putting it differently, may or may not occur or obtain. The term "state of affairs" is not meant to be overly technical and can refer to *the way things might be*. The description of states of affairs may be at any level of generality. The following may all be considered states of affairs: *There being a cosmos*; *There being elephants*; *There being unicorns*; and so on. The first two states of affairs occur or obtain, while the third (probably) does not. To employ a thought experiment in philosophy of religion is, in a sense, simply to use one's imagination in an experimental fashion, to envisage the way things might be. Some of these thought experiments may involve the kind of personal projection commended by Collingwood, while others may not. The descriptions of world religions in this chapter may be read as laying the groundwork for thought experiments which need to be enriched by greater details and enlivened by an imaginative engagement with the teachings and practices of each religion.

The role of thought experiments in philosophy as well as in ordinary life is difficult to overstate. Roy Sorensen notes the widespread appeal to thought experiments in the course of ethical reflection. This involves both imagining different states of affairs as well as the imaginative identification commended by Collingwood.

> Thought experiment is universal to all cultures. This is evident from the persuasiveness of the golden rule: "Do unto others as you would have them do unto you." The role reversal that constitutes the application of this moral test is a form of thought experiment. The agent need not recognize his role reversal as such. Indeed, he may lack the concept of thought experiment. Just as one does not need the concept of sublimation to sublimate one does not need the concept of thought experiment to thought-experiment. (Sorensen 1992, p. 67)

Thought experiments in such ethical reflection may bring to light our own biases, and force us to clarify points left obscure otherwise. Would one still

have the same views on famine relief if the roles were reversed and those who are well fed were victims of malnutrition? In imagining that the roles are reversed in such matters, one may well be imagining a state of affairs that is profoundly unlikely. It is unlikely that Mr X will ever have a gender or ethnic change, but can he imagine, even marginally, what it might be like to be a female or to have a different ethnic identity? The testing ground for answering such questions involves the use of the imagination, the appeal to what we are acquainted with, and the prospects of considering ourselves in profoundly altered states. So, someone who is imagining that reincarnation occurs may well seek to fill out a description of re-embodiment across gender, ethnicity, time, and species. A critic who thinks reincarnation is impossible will try to expose the errors involved with such imaginative descriptions. All this involves a process that is commonplace in the appreciation and criticism of literature. As C. S. Lewis observes in *An Experiment in Criticism*: "We want to see with other eyes, to imagine with other imaginations, to feel with other hearts, as well as with our own" (Lewis 1961, p. 137). Philosophical as well as literary criticism is very often taken up with such imaginative testing.

Novelists, ethicists, philosophers and historians are not the only ones who pay explicit attention to thought experiments. Thought experiments have a rich role in the history of mathematics, economics, and science. Galileo's famous proposal about the rate of falling bodies was at first a thought experiment, and one can readily see thought experiments in Newton's reflections on absolute space, and Einstein's work on the speed of light. The fact that a scientific thesis may be tested by empirical experimentation does not rule out the important role of thought experiments both in the construction of the empirical investigation and in considering its implications (see "Thought Experiments in Einstein's Work" and other entries in *Thought Experiments in Science and Philosophy* edited by Horowitz and Massey).

In philosophy of religion the thought experiments and their analysis can be highly complex. The task of developing and comparing thought experiments, one that is theistic and one that is monistic or deistic for example, will take considerable time, ingenuity and scrutiny. Can one very easily imagine that there is an all-powerful God? The effort to go as far as Collingwood commended in the imaginative projection of oneself into different religious settings may be more difficult still. The best way to come to terms with thought experiments is to see them in action, which we will do in further chapters.

Suggested Questions and Topics

(1) Consider the following characterizations of religion. Do you find any of these successful as either definitions or descriptions of religion? Even if unsuccessful as definitions, in what respects do you find any of these to be philosophically illuminating or helpful in thinking about the nature of religion?

The following are cited by John Hick in his *Philosophy of Religion*:

(A) "The feelings, acts, and experiences of individual men in their solitude, so far as they apprehend themselves to stand in relation to whatever they may consider the divine." William James
(B) "A set of beliefs, practices, and institutions which men have evolved in various societies." T. Parsons
(C) "A body of scruples which impede the free exercise of our faculties." Salomon Reinach
(D) "Ethics heightened, enkindled, lit up by feeling." Matthew Arnold
(E) "Religion is the recognition that all things are manifestations of a power which transcends our knowledge." Herbert Spencer (Hick 1989, p. 2)

The following are cited in *Reason and Religious Belief: An Introduction to Philosophy of Religion*:

(F) "Religion is, in truth, that pure and reverential disposition or frame of mind which we call piety." C. P. Tiele
(G) "Religion is rather the attempt to express the complete reality of goodness through every aspect of our being." F. H. Bradley
(H) "Religion is the belief in an ever living God, that is, in a Divine Mind and Will ruling the Universe and holding moral relations with mankind." James Martineau (Peterson et al. 1991, pp. 3-4)

Consider Swinburne's proposal:

(I) "I propose to understand by a religion a system which offers what I shall term salvation. . . . I shall understand that a religion offers it if and only if it offers much of the following: a deep understanding of the nature of the world and man's place in it; guidance on the most worthwhile way to live, and an opportunity so to live; forgiveness from God and reconciliation to him for having done what we believed morally wrong; and a continuation and deepening of this well-being in a happy afterlife." (Swinburne 1981, p. 128)

(2) Analyze the way in which "religion" has been defined in Supreme Court cases from the 1940s on. See, for example, the *Congressional Quarterly's Guide to the Supreme Court*, 2nd edition. In an important case in 1943, Justice Frankfurter cited the following passage from federal judge Augustus Hand. You may wish to assess this in light of subsequent court cases:

> It is unnecessary to attempt a definition of religion; the content of the term is found in the history of the human race and is incapable of compression into a few words. Religious belief arises from a sense of the inadequacy of reason as a means of relating the individual to his fellow men and to his universe. . . . [I]t may justly be regarded as a response of the individual to an inward mentor, call it conscience or God, that is for many persons at the present time the equivalent of what has always been thought a religious impulse. (*United States* v. *Kauten*)

(3) In this chapter it was assumed the scientific community is not by its very nature religious. But some scientific projects have been described in religious terms. Consider Douglas Hofstadter's construal of his pursuit of a reductionist theory of life:

> [People] have an instinctive horror of any "explaining away" of the soul. I don't know why certain people have this horror while others, like me, find in reductionism the ultimate religion. Perhaps my lifelong training in physics and science in general has given me a deep awe at seeing how the most substantial and familiar of objects or experiences fades away, as one approaches the infinitesimal scale, into an eerily insubstantial ether, a myriad of ephemeral swirling vortices of nearly incomprehensible mathematical activity. This in me evokes a cosmic awe. To me, reductionism doesn't "explain away"; rather, it adds mystery. (Hofstadter 1980, p. 434)

(4) If there are difficulties defining "religion," there are difficulties defining philosophy of religion. Are there problems in defining other areas of philosophy that are similar to the problems of defining philosophy of religion? Consider some of the following areas: the philosophy of art, history, science, law, language, economics, knowledge, action, education, logic, and mind. An interesting project would be to explore the ways in which competing definitions of some other area, art for example, can be used to construct parallel definitions of "religion." An advanced project, for example, may examine the strengths and weaknesses of a definition of religion built on Arthur Danto's definition of art. See *A Companion to Aesthetics* for detailed references.

(5) This chapter takes note of the number of people currently estimated

as belonging to different religions. Do such figures carry any weight in your assessment of the credibility or truth of any religion? At one time it was popular to advance a common consent argument for the existence of God. This argument is criticized in the 1967 *Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, volume one, pages 147–55. You may wish to speculate as to how such an argument may be defended against this criticism and then assess the overall strength and weakness of the revised argument. It would also be useful to compare an argument from common consent with the literature in the philosophy of art on the test of time. Some hold that if a work of art is judged to be good over time, one has some reason to believe the work is indeed a good work of art. See, for example, Anthony Savile's *The Test of Time*. Savile offers a modest defense of appealing to the test of time in assessing art work. He proposes the following criterion:

> A well-chosen autographic or allographic work of art securely survives the test of time if over a sufficiently long period it survives in our attention under an appropriate interpretation in a sufficiently embedded way. This condition will only be satisfied if the attention that the work is given is of a kind that generates experience relevant to its critical appreciation and attracts the attention that is given to it in its own right. (Savile 1982, pp. 11–12)

Savile outlines the conditions for appropriate interpretation in his text. How much of his analysis may be applied to religions? You may also wish to consider the extent that his analysis of beauty and depth may be applied to religious traditions and practices.

(6) Can one truly know a religion without at some time having believed and practiced it? Putting the matter differently, can a skeptic truly understand what it is like to be a religious believer? In *The Concept of Mind*, Gilbert Ryle distinguished two forms of knowing, what he called *knowledge how* and *knowledge that*. Apparently, one may well know how to do certain things like tell a joke but without knowing that jokes are to be told in such and such a way. An interesting project would be to employ Ryle's categories in an analysis of what may be involved in knowing a religion (e.g. compare knowing how to be religious with knowing that a religion involves certain beliefs and practices).

(7) There is a considerable literature on subjects reporting "out-of-the-body experiences," in which traumatized persons appear to leave their bodies for a time. This sometimes occurs in clinical settings during a period when a patient's heart stops. Chapter 4 in this book cites some of the literature and some of the ways these cases have been critically assessed. Compare the credibility of reported "out-of-the-body experiences" with what may be called

"out of tradition experiences," the experience someone may have in leaving their religious tradition and either adopting an alternative religion or remaining without a religion. A useful review of the nature of out-of-the-body experiences and the ways they have been critically assessed is the entry "Out-Of-The-Body-Experience" in *The Oxford Companion to the Mind*.

(8) Critically assess Collingwood's approach to history and philosophy. Here is a key passage from "History as Re-enactment of Past Experience".

> Suppose, for example, he [a student of history] is reading the Theodosian Code, and has before him a certain edict of an emperor. Merely reading the words and being able to translate them does not amount to knowing their historical significance. In order to do that he must envisage the situation with which the emperor was trying to deal, and he must envisage it as that emperor envisaged it. Then he must see for himself, just as if the emperor's situation were his own, how such a situation might be dealt with; he must see the possible alternatives, and the reasons for choosing one rather than another; and thus he must go through the process which the emperor went through in deciding on this particular course. Thus he is re-enacting in his own mind the experience of the emperor; and only in so far as he does this has he any historical knowledge, as distinct from a merely philological knowledge, of the meaning of the edict.
>
> Or again, suppose he is reading a passage of an ancient philosopher. Once more, he must know the language in a philological sense and be able to construe; but by doing that he has not yet understood the passage as an historian of philosophy must understand it. In order to do that, he must see what the philosophical problem was, of which his author is here stating his solution. He must think that problem out for himself, see what possible solutions of it might be offered, and see why this particular philosopher chose that solution instead of another. This means re-thinking for himself the thought of his author, and nothing short of that will make him the historian of that author's philosophy. (Collingwood 1946, p. 238)

Collingwood's account of history has been criticized on a number of grounds. It has been objected that his view of history only works for certain histories (biography not economics). It has also been objected that it is impossible to re-create the thought-world of earlier periods and that the explanation for some historical events involve natural causes that are contingent upon neither psychology nor society. Assess whether such objections expose any weaknesses in Collingwood's account of history. Do these or other objections apply against using Collingwood's methods in the course of a philosophical examination of religion? For an introductory critical overview of Collingwood's work see W. H. Walsh's *Philosophy of History*, chapter 3.

(9) Does the reliance upon thought experiments in philosophical inquiry about religion or about other areas of philosophy require a fully developed theory of their precise nature? In developing a theory, some of the following questions are relevant: When one conceives of a state of affairs must this involve forming images? If so, where are they? Can we conceive (in the sense that this does not essentially involve images) of more than we can imagine (or picture)? What is the status of the possible ways the world might be that are described in thought experiments? How can one individuate thought experiments? Contrast, for example, a thought experiment in which one imagines a very powerful being, able to do almost anything whatever, with imagining a being that has no limits to its power. A study of the power and limitations of thought experiments may benefit from an analysis of a particular case. Assess Richard Swinburne's theistic thought experiment in *The Coherence of Theism* (1977, p. 105). Peter van Inwagen reproduces Swinburne's work and criticizes it in *God, Knowledge, and Mystery* (1995, pp. 19–21). How might Swinburne's view be defended, if at all?

(10) Some highly critical observers treat religious traditions on a par with ruins. This analogy may be worthy of an essay in which one links aesthetics and intellectual history. In the philosophy of architecture there is a considerable literature on ruins. Donald Crawford distinguishes the classical and romantic account of ruins as follows:

> On the classical theory, the ruin embodies the past by presenting a fragment of a missing whole, which we then imaginatively reconstruct. The aesthetic enjoyment is said to be in the imaginative apprehension of the past aesthetic unity . . . On the romantic conception, the ruin stirs the perceiver's sense of the past and awakens associations of mystery. We are thrilled as we "glimpse the unknown" and as we imaginatively live for a moment in the irretrievable past while simultaneously aware of the power of time to negate the present. (Crawford 1992, p. 604)

Assuming, if only for the sake of argument, that the great world religions are indeed the equivalent of intellectual ruins, you may wish to explore the respects in which they might still serve an important role, aesthetic and intellectual. (See Crawford's essay for further reference on ruins and the role of time in the life of an art work.)

A different essay may be of interest that draws on architecture. One may examine the ways in which different religions have promoted alternative philosophies of architecture (the form and function of buildings).

Further Reading and Considerations

From *A Companion to Philosophy of Religion*, the following entries are relevant to material in this chapter and contain valuable bibliographies: "Hinduism," "Buddhism," "Confucianism and Taoism," "African Religions," "Judaism," "Christianity," and "Islam." For a general survey of world religions, see *Our Religions* edited by Arvind Sharma. For single-authored books on world religions discussed here, the following are especially useful: *A Survey of Hinduism* by Klaus Klostermaier; *The Vision of Buddhism: The Space Under the Tree* by Roger Corless; *God in Search of Man: A Philosophy of Judaism* by Abraham Heschel; *Judaism in Modern Times* by Jacob Neusner; *Christian Theology* by Alister McGrath; *Jesus Through the Centuries: His Place in the History of Culture* by Jaroslav Pelikan; *The Islamic Tradition* by V. Danner; *The Islamic Middle East* by Charles Lindholm; *Shi'ite Islam* by Yann Richard; and *Concepts of God in Africa* by John Mbiti. As a general resource, it is difficult to surpass the magisterial *Encyclopedia of Religion* edited by Mircea Eliade (New York, 1987). Additional texts on world religions are suggested in other chapters.

For a defense of thought experiments, see Sorensen's *Thought Experiments*. For criticism see Wilkes' *Real People: Personal Identity Without Thought Experiments*. An artful, interesting use of thought experiments is developed by Søren Kierkegaard in *Philosophical Fragments* (see especially the first chapter, "Thought-Project"). I defend the legitimacy of appealing to thought experiments in *Consciousness and the Mind of God*. The imagination and the use of thought experiments has a checkered history in philosophy and theology. At times the imagination is credited with being the root of error and at other times a vital faculty whereby we may come to know of God and the world. The imagination may well serve either purpose depending on its use. For a superb treatment of the history of the concept and use of the imagination in philosophy see Eva Brann's *The World of the Imagination*. Richard Kearney's *The Wake of Imagination: Toward A Postmodern Culture* is also recommended. An interesting theological analysis of the imagination is *The Analogical Imagination* by David Tracy. There is some reason to think that our cognitive development is essentially dependent upon the use of imagination and thought experiments. A good textbook introduction on the use of imagination in cognitive development is *Understanding Children* (1990) by K. Hansen and P. D. Forsyth; see especially chapter 6.