



THIRD EDITION

PHILOSOPHY  
*of* RELIGION

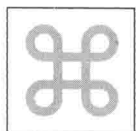
SELECTED READINGS

MICHAEL PETERSON · WILLIAM HASKER  
BRUCE REICHENBACH · DAVID BASINGER

# PHILOSOPHY OF RELIGION

Selected Readings

*Third Edition*



Edited by

**MICHAEL PETERSON**

*Asbury College*

**WILLIAM HASKER**

*Huntington University*

**BRUCE REICHENBACH**

*Augsburg College*

**DAVID BASINGER**

*Roberts Wesleyan College*

New York    Oxford  
OXFORD UNIVERSITY PRESS  
2007

Oxford University Press, Inc., publishes works that further Oxford University's objective of excellence in research, scholarship, and education.

Oxford New York  
Auckland Cape Town Dar es Salaam Hong Kong Karachi  
Kuala Lumpur Madrid Melbourne Mexico City Mumbai Nairobi  
New Delhi Shanghai Taipei Toronto

With offices in  
Argentina Austria Brazil Chile Czech Republic France Greece  
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Published by Oxford University Press, Inc.  
198 Madison Avenue, New York, New York, 10016  
<http://www.oup.com>

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#### **Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data**

Philosophy of religion : selected readings / by Michael Peterson—[et al.].—3rd ed.  
p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references.

ISBN-13: 978-0-19-518829-5 (pbk. : alk. paper)

ISBN-10: 0-19-518829-2 (pbk. : alk. paper)

1. Religion—Philosophy. I. Peterson, Michael L., 1950–

BL51.P545 2006

210—dc22

2005053913

9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2

Printed in the United States of America  
on acid-free paper

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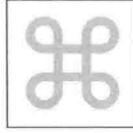
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# INTRODUCTION

## Exploring the Philosophy of Religion



### PHILOSOPHY ENGAGES RELIGION

Although philosophy is a sophisticated academic field, it reflects our fundamental human drive to understand. Academic philosophy, then, is important because it employs methods that aid our essential quest for understanding various aspects of our world. We could divide academic philosophy into a number of subdisciplines according to the dimension of life that they study: philosophy of science, philosophy of history, philosophy of art, and so forth. The subdiscipline known as philosophy of religion is the critical examination of religious concepts and beliefs.

It is worth stressing that philosophy of religion is clearly a branch of philosophy and should not be confused with religion itself or even with theology. While *religion* is notoriously difficult to define, it is, at the least, a set of beliefs, actions, and experiences, both individual and collective, organized around some idea of Ultimate Reality that is recognized as sacred and in relation to which persons enter into a transformative process. Ultimate Reality may be understood as a unity or a plurality, personal or nonpersonal, divine or not, differing from religion to religion. But every cultural phenomenon that we call a religion contains these important elements.

Theology is a discipline that occurs largely within religion. It is concerned with the conceptual development and systematization of the key beliefs and doctrines of some specific religious faith. As justification for its claims, theology typically appeals to such sources as holy writings and accredited teachings within its own tradition. We may call it “sacred theology,” since it is rooted in authoritative sources that contain sacred truths. Sometimes there is also an appeal to what all persons can know through observing the world and employing human reason in order to arrive at some truths of religion (a project that is often labeled “natural theology”).

Philosophy of religion, however, does not have to be viewed as having its proper home within some specific religious tradition. No doubt, certain religious traditions nurture and strongly support the life of the mind, in general, and the

philosophical investigation of their teachings, in particular, while a few religious traditions discourage or disparage rational probing. Nevertheless, philosophy of religion is a bona fide academic field that is as objective, rigorous, and systematic as possible. As such, it is not a dogmatic or parochial project but seeks to follow the best approaches to study religious concepts and beliefs. In this way, it seeks authentic intellectual engagement with religion in the arena of ideas.

The robust intellectual examination of religion involves a rich variety of philosophical activities: assessing the reasons that thoughtful people have offered for and against religious belief, logically investigating such concepts as God and faith, exploring the meaning of such theological terms as salvation and miracle, and even comparing elements across religious tradition for additional perspective. Whether religious believer or not, all are invited to meet, discuss, and debate in the wide-open space of philosophy of religion.

## THE RESURGENCE OF PHILOSOPHY OF RELIGION

For over a century, the dominant approach to philosophy in the English-speaking world has been what we may call analysis. The analytic approach, broadly conceived, is concerned with the meaning, consistency, coherence, reasonableness, justification, and truth of our beliefs. The emphasis throughout is on the content of crucial concepts, as well as on the structure and soundness of arguments. Moreover, the analytic approach often seeks to bring insights and findings from other areas of philosophy to bear on the issues that it treats. It is not uncommon, for example, for analytic philosophers to display keen interest in the proper grounds of our claims to knowledge and belief.

Unfortunately, during the first half of the twentieth century, philosophical interest in religion fell on hard times at the hands of analytic philosophers. These philosophers were committed to positivism, which was an early phase in the development of the analytic movement that was determined to shape philosophy after the intellectual methods of modern science. Positivism embraced a strict form of empiricism, an epistemological position that bases knowledge on sensory experience or what can be inferred from experience. Thus, the many nonempirical claims of religion could make no pretense to being knowledge. In addition, the positivists advanced a theory of language that was centered on the verifiability principle, a criterion that all cognitively meaningful language must be empirically verifiable. According to this criterion, religious language is not cognitively meaningful and must settle for something like emotive meaning. While the extremely influential positivist movement was in its heyday, it was difficult and even embarrassing for any self-respecting intellectual to take religious claims seriously.

In the second half of the twentieth century, however, things began to change. In the 1960s and 1970s, many philosophers became interested in the work of the later Ludwig Wittgenstein. They widely believed that Wittgenstein provided a way to break from positivism's intellectual imperialism by advancing sophisticated insights into the context, meaning, and function of language. And some philosophers who were interested in religion were able to draw from Wittgenstein's writ-

ings fresh insights into the nature of religious language and thus, at that level, to rehabilitate the respectability of discussing religion. About the only exceptions to these trends in the larger analytic movement were Catholic philosophers, who themselves had roots in more ancient ideas. These classical ideas—stemming from such thinkers as Aristotle, Augustine, and Aquinas—made them less susceptible to the impact of positivism, on the one hand, and less in need of the new Wittgenstein ideas, on the other hand.

During the past thirty years or so among professional philosophers, the status of philosophy of religion has been drastically changed. For one thing, philosophers now know well that the positivistic principle of verifiability was inadequate even for science, let alone for religion. For another thing, freedom from positivism paved the way for a lot of new, high-quality work in other areas of philosophy, such as logic, epistemology, and metaphysics. In the past few decades, this work has contributed to fresh investigations into religion that go well beyond the old questions of whether religious language has meaning. The situation has also changed because of the notable increase in the number of practicing philosophers who not only espouse some form of personal religious faith, but address issues of faith from within the discipline of philosophy. Even many nonbelievers and outright opponents of religious faith have come to respect its rational integrity and are joining in vigorous debate and discussion. All this brings an energy and vibrancy to philosophy of religion that is palpable. It is not surprising, then, that students' interest in academic philosophy of religion, at both the undergraduate and graduate levels, is at a measurable high.

These are exciting days in philosophy of religion. Academic publishing in the area has exploded. Over the past several decades, studies of eminent medieval philosophers have blossomed (e.g., on Augustine, Anselm, Boethius, Aquinas, and Ockham). Many good discussions of celebrated modern thinkers have been produced (e.g., on Locke, Leibniz, Hume, and Kant). And debates abound over the new and creative proposals that have been advanced by contemporary figures in philosophy (e.g., on Hick, Plantinga, Swinburne, and Mackie).

## THE FOCUS OF PHILOSOPHY OF RELIGION AND THE PROJECT OF THIS BOOK

Philosophy of religion has gone from a virtual outcast in analytic philosophy to one of the most active areas in scholarship today. This shift has tracked the shift in focus in how business is done in the field. Instead of being driven by inordinate concern with whether nonempirical concepts can have meaning according to a narrow criterion of meaning, philosophy, in general, and philosophy of religion, in particular, have returned somewhat to the more straightforward and more traditional considerations of truth, knowledge, reality, and values. We may say that second-order obsessions have given way to first-order questions—and that this is all to the good.

In this context, the renewed philosophical interest in religion has largely focused on classical theism. Classical theism is the belief that a transcendent spiritual being exists who is omnipotent, omniscient, and perfectly good and who is

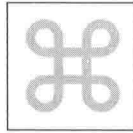
the personal creator and sustainer of the world. Although theism itself is not a living religion, it is part of the essential belief-framework of three major religions: Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. The discussion of classical theism leads naturally in a number of rich directions—to efforts that unfold and defend a theistic perspective, as well as to efforts to critique and refute it, to studies of how it is embedded within the larger ambit of full-blooded religious life, to proposals of alternative or modified versions of theism, and even to inquiries into nontheistic religious perspectives.

This book of readings is situated within the analytic tradition in the philosophy of religion and its strong interest in the beliefs, activities, and experiences that are tied to theistic religions. The selections presented here reflect the fact that the bulk of philosophical work in this tradition has dealt with specifically Christian theism. Yet, since it is inherent in the nature of analytic philosophy to be interested in all relevant concepts and arguments, the broad scope of this book seeks to bring ideas from other philosophical and religious traditions into the discussion. Contemporary life faces us with a wide diversity of people, cultures, and perspectives that provide important and stimulating material for philosophical analysis and reflection. New ideas, different methodologies, divergent worldviews, and challenging arguments must be taken into account. So, while remaining analytic in approach and theistic in central focus, the present anthology includes readings that represent continental, feminist, and Asian contributions.

The best primary works on the important themes in philosophy of religion today are included here. Since this anthology employs a comprehensive scheme of organization, it can be used as the sole text in a course or in conjunction with a secondary text. The reader will be interested to know that there is a particularly close fit between this book of primary source readings and our own secondary text, *Reason and Religious Belief* (Oxford University Press). Many courses use the two books together.

The structure of this anthology is straightforward. It consists of seventy-three selections that are arranged into fourteen thematic parts: the nature of religion, religious experience, faith and reason, the divine attributes, arguments about God's existence, knowing God without arguments, the problem of evil, divine action, religious language, miracles, life after death, religion and science, religious diversity, and religion and morality. To maximize its pedagogical value, this anthology includes an overall introduction to each of the fourteen major parts, as well as a brief synopsis of each individual selection. Study questions follow each selection, and suggested readings are included at the end of each major part.

Whether or not one has a religious point of view, the relevance of religion to human life is undeniable. To work through this anthology is to take a refreshing and worthwhile journey, a journey of the human intellect seeking philosophical understanding in religion. Thoughtful persons who explore the issues presented here will be rewarded by gaining deeper insights into an important dimension of human existence.



Religion plays a central role in both individual and communal life. As an academic discipline, the philosophy of religion takes religious beliefs and practices as prime material of study. Yet, it is interesting that behind the discussions and debates that normally occupy the philosophy of religion, there lurks a prior and important question: What is the nature of religion? The acceptance or rejection of religious faith must be interpreted, even implicitly, in terms of some idea about what religion is. Likewise, the philosophical analysis of such concepts as life after death or God or the rigorous scrutiny of arguments, say, for the existence of God or for miracles, assumes at least a general conception of the nature of religion.

The lack of consensus about the nature of religion further complicates the discussion of virtually all philosophical issues touching on religion. Most religious believers consider their beliefs to be about divine entities or sacred facts, and they think that their assertions refer to them. They link the truth or falsity, as well as the rationality or irrationality, of their beliefs to the objective existence or nonexistence of these entities or the occurrence of the relevant states of affairs. We might say that traditional philosophical and religious discussion invokes religious realism, which is the view that that the concepts, beliefs, assertions, and overall outlook of a religion pertain to (or correspond to) key religious entities or states of affairs in the real world.

Admitting that many aspects of religion are obviously human creations, realists contend that looking at religion solely this way overlooks the fact that religious beliefs can describe the way things really are with God and with the world. Although some persons and cultures have created God or gods in their own image, out of their own desires, needs, or imaginative projections, discussions of the existence of God and what properties God has are meant to refer to a real being with real properties. So, if such a being does not exist or have such properties, then beliefs affirming God's existence or God's possession of such properties are actually false.

To be sure, philosophically speaking, religious realism is only one of many kinds of realism. A person can be an ethical realist, holding that ethical terms and normative claims pertain to actual realities in the moral realm, to something in the very structure of the way things are. By contrast, subjectivist interpretations of ethics would be nonrealist: they clearly discount such thinking and instead maintain that ethics is ultimately an expression of one's private preference or feeling. Or, again, a person can be a realist about scientific terms and theories. The terms used in scientific statements are taken genuinely to refer to entities whose existence and function can be empirically studied. On the other side, there are scientific nonrealists. Instrumentalists, for example, argue that scientific terms for unobservable theoretical entities are nothing more than convenient constructs that enable a theory to predict testable results. The purpose of scientific theories, then, is not to describe reality, but to allow us to function more successfully in the world.

So, in a broad way, we may say that there are realist and nonrealist interpretations of virtually every field of human knowledge—ethics, science, aesthetics, and so on. Having summarized what religious or theological realism is, we are now in a position to explore briefly what nonrealism would be with respect to religion. Put negatively, a nonrealist position denies that religious beliefs and statements are about objectively existing entities. Put positively, such a position offers an alternative interpretation of what religion is. Religion is a human creation; persons have constructed language and sets of beliefs that enable them to function effectively in their environment, but that language and those beliefs are not about real spiritual beings or events that are beyond ordinary experience.

There is no shortage of nonrealist theories of the nature of religion. Friedrich Nietzsche stated that religion was developed as a kind of fiction in order to support morality, which, in turn, is aimed at suppressing the will to power in strong, creative persons. Sigmund Freud postulated that religion developed in response to neurotic feelings of helplessness in the face of a world that humans cannot control. For Freud, to think that religion is about the supernatural is to embrace an illusion. William James said that the truth or falsity of religious beliefs is found in the psychological health or ill health that they bring and are not to be gauged by correspondence to some transcendent reality. And, of course, there are many overtly evolutionary interpretations of religious belief and behavior that stress the evolved neurophysiological mechanisms and cognitive functions that mediate religious experience.

Nonrealists frequently ground religion either in subjective psychological experiences or in the structure and demands of society. Some nonrealist accounts of religion emphasize its psychological origin, holding that religious ideas result from personal interpretations of feelings or sentiments that, in turn, link us to other individuals. But other nonrealist accounts maintain that religion is essentially a social phenomenon. In this vein, Emile Durkheim articulated one of the most important views, arguing that religion lies at the heart of societies and has evolved as the societies have developed. For Durkheim, interpretations of religious feelings link us to social entities. Thus, societies are the basis of moral obligations because the group dictates to the individual the beliefs to be embraced, the rules to be followed, and the rites to be observed. Consequently, religion is not really about cosmic forces or metaphysical ideals but arises out of society's need for indi-

viduals to comply. Although religion engages in metaphysical speculation, the truth or usefulness of religion does not depend on any given metaphysical structure. Religion is a natural, not a supernatural, phenomenon. Religion is created by and for humans, and it must be studied as a social discipline.

The impact of the sociological interpretation is that religious beliefs and issues transmute into something other than what religious believers originally thought them to be. Questions about the rationality of religious belief and life, for example, are no longer questions about whether there really are divine beings. Rather, issues of rationality are about whether certain beliefs and behaviors make sense or serve a useful social function. Similarly, debates over the truth or falsity of theological beliefs may still be waged, but such debates are seen as based on assumptions by religious believers that they are talking about, or that they are somehow in relation to, higher powers. So, granting that believers affirm these things, a sociology of knowledge perspective explains why they would then seek to marshal logical arguments to justify their beliefs. Nonbelievers with respect to a given religion may likewise marshal arguments to show that such powers do not exist. But both sides of the dispute can be explained by shifting to a sociological or psychological perspective according to which the issues are not genuinely about reality.

Any philosophical discussion of how to understand the nature of religion would be incomplete without introducing the thinking of the later Wittgenstein and his intellectual followers. Wittgenstein's approach is often characterized as nonrealist because it so thoroughly criticizes what it takes to be the confusions of realism, although Wittgensteinians themselves deny that they are either realist or nonrealist. The general confusion of realism is that it takes belief to be a private mental state whose meaning lies in correspondences to an object. This would pertain equally to beliefs about mathematical theorems or beliefs about material things in the local environment or beliefs about the identity of some person. However, following Wittgenstein, Norman Malcolm, John Searle, D. Z. Phillips, and others urge us to look at the "grammar" of belief, which involves studying the dynamic, living context of its application. This includes all beliefs, not just religious beliefs. So, the meaning of religious belief is found in its use, rather than in relation to an external object. We may ask the question more concretely: How does a person live who has such-and-such a belief? What difference in his or her life does this belief make, not what picture does it correspond to?

As we begin our study of important issues in the philosophy of religion, it is fitting that we begin by considering this pressing prior question: What is the nature of religion? For how we think about this question will affect how we understand the role and significance of the issues that are addressed throughout this anthology.



# Religion as a Social Phenomenon

Emile Durkheim (1858–1917) contends that since religions are found only at the heart of societies and evolve with the societies that birth them, religion is wholly, or, for the most part, a sociological phenomenon. Religious ideas arise out of interpreting a particular kind of social, not personal, sentiment, namely, a sentiment in which individuals see themselves linked to society as a whole. Thus, personal religious beliefs arise out of social religion, which dictates the dogmas to be believed and rites to be practiced. Hence, as merely a form of custom, directing actions, ideas, and feelings, religion is to be studied as a social discipline, not for its metaphysics.



Hitherto people have only seen in religions the product of the individual imagination, and no causes have been ascribed to them other than the need to understand the world or the sentiment of the ideal. Accordingly, the marooned Robinson Crusoe could have had a religion all of his own. Religions have only been found at the heart of established societies; among such people who have been rigorously excluded from the rest of society by a physical accident (blindness allied to deafness), religious sentiment has never been found before the day it was communicated to them (see the cases of Laura Bridgmann and Julia Brace). Finally, history teaches us that religions have evolved and changed with the very societies which gave birth to them. Do not all these facts imply that religion is wholly, or for the most part, a sociological phenomenon? That in order to study it we must first take up a sociological position and that it is only after having viewed it sociologically that we shall be able to seek its psychological roots in the individual conscience? . . .

For [some], religion originates from a double source; first, the need to understand, and secondly, sociability. To begin with, we should like to call for a reversal of the order of the factors and for sociability to be made the determining cause of religious sentiment. Men did not start by imagining the gods; that they felt bound to them by social sentiments was not because they visualized the gods in a certain way. They began by attaching themselves to the things they used or suffered from, just as they attached themselves to each other, spontaneously, without thinking, without the least degree of speculation. The theory to explain and make sense of the habits which had been formed in this way came only later to these primitive *consciences*. As these sentiments were moderately similar to those which man observed in his relations with his fellows, he visualized the powers of nature as beings like himself; and at the same time he

W. S. F. Pickering, Selections from "Review 'Guyau—L'Irreligion de 'avenir, etude de Sociologie'" and "Suicide: A Study in Sociology," *Durkheim on Religion* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1975), pp. 21, 33–38, 93–96, 98 (edited).