



Philosophy of Religion: Does God Exist?

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As if the word “philosophy” is not daunting enough to the average college student, adding the word “religion” at the end makes it even more fearsome. What is philosophy of religion? To a modern reader the phrase ‘Philosophy of Religion’ might seem strange or even an apparent contradiction of terms. But let us try to simplify and classify to better understand the subject.

The word philosophy can be divided into two Greek terms: *philia*, which means love, and *sophia* which translates into wisdom. So at its core philosophy is a love of wisdom and truth. The Oxford dictionary defines philosophy as, “the use of reason and argument in seeking the truth and knowledge of reality, especially of the causes and nature of things and of the principles governing existence, the material universe, perception of physical phenomena, and human behavior.” Philosophy of religion is an attempt to use reason and analysis to understand the root and foundation of religion, holding it up to the light of truth to see through its many layers and seek to reveal its core. One of the central questions in the philosophy of religion is the relationship between religion and reason. Is religion blind and irrational? Is religion a sophisticated form of superstition? Is religion a human construct for social control? Is religion a psychological or emotional need? Is religion a projection of humanity’s highest ideals? Or is religion rooted in reality? Does religion lead us to truth—indeed, the deepest truths? Can reason lead to faith? All of these questions and more become the focal point and subject matter of philosophy of religion.

Religion is more difficult to simply define. The word “Religion” is rooted in the Latin words *re*—“again” and *ligare*—“to bind back,” as well as the Latin *religio* “respect for what is sacred, reverence for the gods.” In other words religion is being bound and committed in reverence and devotion to something, and in most cases that something is God or gods. Religion is not a simple word to pin down but rather a term that can be divided into several categories.

Modes of Religious-Mindedness

As a crystal exposes the color spectrum contained in white light as light passes through it - so too the lens of philosophy can help us to differentiate between the many shades or modes of religious mindedness when we hold the light of reason to religion. We will focus primarily on the western Christian tradition, although much of the following can be applied to all of the great theistic religious traditions of the world.

Fundamentalism

The first mode of religious-mindedness is religious fundamentalism. In its purest form fundamentalism is understood to entail an absolute, unquestioning loyalty to certain basics or “fundamentals” of a given faith tradition. Religious fundamentalism today is understood as relying on pure faith and a literal reading of sacred scriptures. Simply, religious fundamentalism is grounded on faith, feeling, and irrationality and is often categorized as rejecting many modern scientific findings. This form of religion is extremely skeptical of philosophy and science and relies solely on devotion to God and scripture. This understanding was best vocalized by the ancient church father Tertullian of Carthage. Tertullian lived at a time when many early Christians sought to use and reconcile ancient philosophy to the Christian worldview. He felt that philosophy would only pull the mind further away from God into heresies and that the truest

way to understand God was pure faith. Tertullian states, “Worldly wisdom culminates in philosophy with its rash interpretations of God’s nature and purpose...it is philosophy that supplies heresies with their equipment.”¹

Fundamentalism is more than just a rejection of reason and an extremely literal reading of scripture; it is also a psychological condition that desires to possess an ungrounded and unreasonable certainty. Fundamentalists are absolutely certain that their subjective position is the only objective reality. Every other belief, position, or understanding is misguided and false. When fundamentalists focus solely on the basic principles of their faith, often a form of legalistic religion emerges, where any lack of strict adherence to the practice condemns the violator as a sinner and someone in need of God’s punishment rather than love and forgiveness. This form of religion is very unaccepting of those who do not share their viewpoint. It is this form of extreme fundamentalism that is the cause of violence perpetrated in the name of God. From the standpoint of philosophy it is hard not to recognize that when people possess an extreme, polarizing position on any given subject they are likely to be vehemently dismissive of any contrary vantage point.

This explains the zealous rejection of science by many fundamental religious extremists and the rejection of religion by many scientific fundamentalist extremists. Scientific fundamentalist extremism is a viewpoint held by many modern scientists, like Richard Dawkins, who maintains that all religions and religious mindedness is inherently bad and the root of most of the world’s troubles and evils. This is a fundamentalism that states if something cannot be observed, examined, and studied through the senses and reason it cannot have any reality or claim to exist. Therefore any belief in God is inherently irrational and dangerous. This position is as intolerant of religion as extreme religious fundamentalism is of the sciences. The religious variances that comprise the rest of the spectrum of religious modes fall somewhere in the middle of these two extreme, opposite poles.

Mysticism

The Mystic tradition is another form of religious-mindedness. Mysticism is a submission of reason and the will to pure faith. The mystic recognizes that reason cannot understand God and so only faith can bridge the infinite gap between God and humanity. Unlike the fundamentalist who rejects reason as uncertain and attributes an irrational certainty to faith, the mystic recognizes the limits of reason and certainty and embraces faith as an indeterminate openness to God. The mystic often practices a detachment from earthly desires and concerns freeing oneself in action and meditative passivity to receive communion with the divine. The mystic experience transcends the world and reason in an ecstatic (outside oneself) experience of God.

Among those who follow this mode of the religious traditions is where we find many saints and religious heroes who submitted their lives to God and lived abundant lives of charity, love, and wisdom, transforming the world by their actions and words. There is something inspiring in dedicating one’s life to God through great acts of love and kindness. Mother Theresa is one such example: She lived her life caring for those sick and dying in Calcutta, India. She did not possess a deep rational understanding of God yet she was a living example of unwavering faith, absolute commitment and submission, and deep unconditional love. Considering examples like Mother Theresa it is plain to see that faith without a rational understanding is not inherently bad.

Apologetics

Apologetics, another mode of religion, is an attempt to defend and ground the belief in God through the use of reason and philosophy. Apologetics is derived from the Greek word *apologetikos* which means “defensible” This form of religious mindedness marries the tradition of philosophy to the tradition of religion in an attempt to explain rationally the doctrines, practices, and issues of the faith community.

This way of conceiving philosophy as a useful tool is apparent in the writings of the early church father Clement of Alexandria. He states, “Philosophy came into existence for the advantages reaped by us from knowledge...Accordingly before the advent of the Lord, philosophy was necessary to the Greeks for righteousness...Philosophy therefore was a preparation, paving the way for him who is perfected in Christ.” Clement tells us that philosophy is a kindred and useful tool of religion and not to be considered

detrimental or dangerous to the faithful.

St. Augustine, Bishop of Hippo, is one of the most prolific writers of late antiquity in the Christian apologetic tradition. He uses philosophy to examine the human condition, the nature of God, time, evil, love, the Trinity, government, and scripture. Augustine declares, “I believe in order that I may understand” (*Credo ut intelligam*). This statement demonstrates that faith is not the absence of reason but rather the prerequisite and root of reason. In his text on Christian Teaching Augustine states, “Any statements by those who are called philosophers, especially the Platonists, which happen to be true and consistent with our faith should not cause alarm, but be claimed for our own use.” Augustine views philosophy as a great assistant and useful discipline in bringing humanity to truth and suggests that faith adds a new depth to the understanding. It is Augustine’s seamless synthesis of Greek Neo-Platonic philosophy to Christianity that has drawn people into his teachings and religious understandings to this day. Augustine’s influence can be traced through later mathematicians and scientists like René Descartes and Sigmund Freud.

Arguments for the Existence of God

A major topic in apologetics is the existence of God. Remember that the apologetic thinkers accept God on faith and they recognize that God is known primarily in the heart, soul, and spirit of mankind. There is no real need to prove God’s existence for these believers for in their view there can be no doubt as to whether God exists. However, the apologetic thinkers were aware that many people held a contrary position and possessed a great skepticism towards God’s existence. In an attempt to dispel disbelief and convert this opposing viewpoint, apologetic thinkers like Anselm and Aquinas set out to rationally prove that God does exist.

In philosophy there are two schools of thought regarding how humans come to knowledge and understanding: rationalism and empiricism. Rationalism is the philosophical position that all knowledge comes to humans through reason alone (*a priori*—Latin meaning knowledge is prior to experience). This understanding holds that all knowledge is hidden in the recesses of our minds waiting to be explored and discovered. Rationalism and its pure logic is the basis for the science of mathematics.

Empiricism, on the other hand, is the position that all knowledge comes to humans through the senses and experience (*a posteriori*—Latin meaning knowledge comes from the posterior, outside world). Empiricists hold that if you wish to understand the world you must observe and look to nature and experience to enlighten our minds with knowledge. It is this position that grounds all of the natural sciences, for how else can we come to understand our natural world without taking in data through the five senses and then trying to understand the underlying similarities and patterns. The best arguments and proofs for truth, particularly with respect for God’s existence tend to be empirically-based or at least an amalgamation of both rationalism and empiricism.

The Ontological Argument

St. Anselm, Archbishop of Canterbury, also follows the Christian apologetic tradition. Like Augustine, he eloquently explains that the use of philosophy in religion is not to prove rationally that God exists as a pretext for faith but rather to believe in order to understand. Faith proceeds understanding. In Anselm’s own Latin: “*Fides quaerens intellectum*” which translates to, faith seeking understanding.² In other words, Anselm is full of faith and seeks to reason an indisputable argument for the existence of God. Anselm is best known for his ontological proof for the existence of God, so named because “ontos” in Greek means “being” and it is an argument on God’s being or existence. Anselm’s proof is an attempt to demonstrate that God must exist necessarily and rationally. Anselm tries to formulate a purely rational and impenetrable argument in support of God’s existence. Anselm’s argument is often criticized for not going deep enough. It is merely a logical rational syllogism (mathematical like rational arguments) based on pure reason rather than an argument from experience and observation.

The Cosmological Argument

St. Thomas Aquinas is another church father who is responsible for the promulgation of Christian apolo-

getics. Aquinas, like Augustine, was extremely prolific and married Greek philosophy to the Christian tradition. Aquinas integrates the teaching and writings of the ancient Greek philosopher Aristotle to Christianity. Aristotle is often credited as a founding father to the scientific community and method. The scientific method is the use of reason and observation to dissect, divide, classify, and understand the essential characteristics and causes of all natural phenomena, i.e. humans, animals, plants, elements, soul, God, etc. Thomas, like Aristotle, is an empiricist who looks to nature and reason to discover the truth. He borrows some of Aristotle's own arguments and baptizes them to present a very natural and rational argument in support of God's existence. Known as the "five ways," Aquinas' proofs attempt to demonstrate rationally from experience and nature that God must necessarily exist. Unlike Anselm who uses a purely rational argument to prove God's existence, Aquinas makes use of natural observation and grounded experience to rationally show that God logically must exist.

Aquinas' five ways can be divided into two main types of arguments: the cosmological argument and the teleological argument. Aquinas borrows the cosmological argument from Aristotle. This argument draws on the existence of the world and universe to conclude that God must necessarily exist as the first cause of everything. From nothing, nothing comes, or in Latin, *ex nihilo nihil fit*. Therefore, if there is a world—the word "cosmological" comes from the Greek word *cosmos* meaning "world" or "universe"—something must be responsible for its existence and that something is God.

The Teleological Argument

The teleological argument is one of the strongest experience-based arguments that seek to conclude the absolute reality of God's existence. Teleology is a word derived from the Greek word *telos*, "purpose" or "end." This proof is grounded on the observation that everything in nature possesses an inner purpose and is aimed at some objective end. All one needs to do is contemplate the miracle of human reproduction: how from a fertilized egg, to human infant, to an adult human being—nature possesses an ingrained order and rationale. Everything in the universe and nature follows an inherent, knowable, predictable, and rational path and where there is order and rationality there is an intelligent being. The seasons, the tides, day and night, the weather, astrological events, life cycles, food cycles, mathematics, genetics and chemistry are only a short list of the apparent examples of the world's apparent order. A world of observable intelligible order cannot be the product of chaos or chance, but rather a divine intelligent being/creator God. This argument—also known as the argument from design—is one of Thomas' greatest contributions to both philosophy and religion. The happy union of reason and religion bears witness to the coherence and compatibility of philosophy and religion. This tradition allows for an acceptance of empirical science rather than a rejection due to scripture or doctrine.

Arguments Against the Existence of God

In a world drunk with labels and polarizations religion is often classified by atheists ("atheism"—from Greek *a* "without" and *theos* "God"—is the philosophical position that God does not exist) as belonging to the realm of pure speculation and illusion. They claim it is an irrational otherworldly childish belief in imaginary beings that makes humanity feel better about the hardships of life, as well as an abandonment of reason and submission to religious authority. It is such authorities, the atheists might continue, that have terrorized the world with bitter hatred, pious rivalries, holy wars, inquisitions, and, in the present age jihads. Many people might point to the reality of global terrorism fueled by radical Islamic fundamentalism, as well as Christian fundamentalists who say that Jesus hates gays and a good Christian should bomb abortion clinics. The events of September 11, 2001 can testify to the atrocities humans have unleashed on each other in the name of God and religion. Under the impartial light of philosophy it is apparent that doubt and disbelief in God is a justified position and can be argued rationally.

So, we must ask ourselves: Is religion inherently bad? Does it tend toward violence and hatred? Has it only darkened the world we live in, or is there a great light of truth to religion illuminating the world? Is it purely irrational? Does God exist or is this merely a human hope and projection?

Religion as Projection

Throughout time humans have stood in awe and amazement of the world and universe. Awe is a state of mental bafflement—things that are beyond our ability to comprehend cause awe within us. An awe experience can be positive or negative (a beautiful sunset, child birth, or death) and leaves the observer in a state of confusion, anxiety, and insecurity. Without an understanding of the world and things around them, humans become overwhelmed with fear and anxiety. This state of fear and anxiety is not sustainable for the human psyche and demands an acceptable explanation and rationale for the things we encounter in existence. A deep anxiety of the mystery, the unknown and mortality fosters the innate human desire to understanding the world, our place in it, as well as our meaning and purpose. If the answer to our quest for meaning takes a leap of faith towards God, be it a rational or irrational faith we are on the path of religion. If, however, we examine this inner anxiety or trepid malaise from the vantage point of rationality, philosophically we discover our final mode of religious mindedness: religion as psychological projection.

The mode of religious mindedness known as a psychological projection is not a religious mindset at all. It is this mode of philosophy of religion that denies the existence of God as an objective, rational, existing being. This branch of philosophy of religion looks to the emotional roots: anxiety, fear, the desire for certainty and order, and the need for meaning as the rational cause of theism and religious traditions. In other words, God and religion are merely human constructions invented to help mankind overcome the anxieties and fears inherent in the world. Ludwig Feuerbach and Karl Marx are two such modern thinkers who understand religion as being rooted in the human psyche. Feuerbach explains that God is truly an outward projection of the inner ideals and truest desires of mankind. In this analysis God is not a supernatural being, not the source of existence, not to be worshipped, but rather humanity's greatest hopes and ideals elevated into the heavens, as an ever-present deity, reminding of us of our noblest and greatest possibilities.

Karl Marx accuses religion of being a fabrication to comfort mankind's pain and anxiety in the face of a meaningless, unfeeling, and heartless world. It is Marx's position that humanity creates illusions like God and heaven to assuage the hardships and heartaches of both life and death. Freud takes a similar approach to Marx in developing his psychological understanding of the origins of religion. He argues that fear of the harshness of the world that we inhabit and the inevitability of death leads human beings to create the illusion of a divine father figure who will ultimately make everything turn out alright in our lives. It is in lines of argument like these that many modern radical fundamental atheists such as Christopher Hitchens and Richard Dawkins find their rational justifications.

Religion and the Problem of Evil

The problem of evil—also known as theodicy—is one of the major stumbling blocks of for the belief in God. The problem of evil is centered on the question: If God is a good, all-powerful, and all-loving God, why is there evil in the world? Evil's existence implicitly demonstrates that God may not be good, loving, omnipotent, or real at all—for how can absolute love and goodness allow evil to flourish. Augustine understands evil as the privation of good—evil is merely the corruption of goodness—much like a cancer cell exists as a mutation or corruption of a healthy cell, so too evil cannot exist without the presence of healthy cells. According to Augustine, God did in fact create everything good; however, through free will mankind has corrupted its goodness and that is what has become evil. Despite Augustine's insightful explanation, the problem of evil is still a central issue for Christian apologetics and belief in God, highlighted in the writings of the Russian novelist Fyodor Dostoyevski.

Reflecting on philosophy of religion yields a rich human tradition of applying reason to help clarify, understand, and uncover the core of religion. Examining the spectrum of religion has revealed the polar extremes from fundamentalism and radical atheism; the skeptic's and atheist's rejection of belief to the mystic's leap beyond reason; and the middle hue of apologetics skillfully synthesizing religion and reason. It is the judgment of philosophy that religion is not inherently evil (bad), (though it may be used to this end), but rather a belief that has assisted humanity in edifying the individual, the community, and the world. Standing always as the highest human ideal to love, to forgive, to seek to reconcile, and to under-

stand others, religion has much truth to offer us in our insatiable quest for wisdom. Therefore, in the true spirit of philosophy (a love of wisdom) we should be excited and encouraged to examine for ourselves the rich writings on the history of the philosophy of religion to see what truth it may offer and uncover. In a modern world that is being shaped and affected by the radical beliefs of religious fundamentalists it is a moral imperative to rationally examine the core of religion to enlighten and judge for oneself its merits and faults. From American Christian fundamentalists trying to effect government policy, to radical Islamic extremists killing civilians in the name of God – there is a pressing need to understand the religious minded to resolve the modern conflicts that have arisen from such misguided positions. As conscientious ambassadors of truth and reason it is our duty to engage in a study of religion from the vantage point of philosophy.

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