



**A DICTIONARY OF
PHILOSOPHY
OF RELIGION**

Edited by
Charles Taliaferro and Elsa J. Marty

A Dictionary of Philosophy of Religion

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continuum

NEW YORK • LONDON

2010

The Continuum International Publishing Group
80 Maiden Lane, New York, NY 10038
The Tower Building, 11 York Road, London SE1 7NX

www.continuumbooks.com

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

A catalog record for this book is available from the Library of Congress.

ISBN: 978-1-4411-1238-5 (hardback)
978-1-4411-1197-5 (paperback)

Typeset by Newgen Imaging Systems Pvt Ltd, Chennai, India
Printed in the United States of America by Sheridan Books, Inc

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Acknowledgments

To our editor, Haaris Naqvi, our many thanks for his guidance and encouragement. Thanks also go to Tricia Little, Sarah Bruce, Kelsie Brust, Valerie Deal, Elizabeth Duel, Elisabeth Granquist, Michael Smeltzer, Cody Venzke, and Jacob Zillhardt for assistance in preparing the manuscript. We are the joint authors of all entries with the exception of those scholars we invited to make special contributions. We thank Pamela Sue Anderson, Oxford University (Feminist Philosophy of Religion, Lacan, Lyotard, Ricoeur); Benjamin Carter, University of Durham (Florentine Academy, Glanvill, History, Lessing's Ditch, Mendelssohn); Robin Collins, Messiah College (Fine-Tuning Argument); Brian Davies, O.P., Fordham University (Divine Simplicity); Paul R. Draper, Purdue University (Bayes' Theorem); Kevin Flannery, S. J., Gregorian University, Rome (Aquinas, Aristotle); Ian Gerdon, University of Notre Dame (Pelagianism, Roman Catholicism, Transubstantiation); John J. Giannini, Baylor University (Analogy); Paul J. Griffiths, Duke Divinity School (Augustine, Lying, Reading); Harriet Harris, Oxford University (Evangelicalism, Evangelism, Fundamentalism, Prayer); Victoria Harrison, University of Glasgow (Holiness, von Balthasar); William Hasker, Huntington College (Intelligent Design, Molinism, Open Theism); Douglas Hedley, Cambridge University (Neoplatonism, Plotinus, Sacrifice); James N. Hoke, University of Chicago Divinity School (Basil, Chrysostom, Dion Chrysostom, Gregory Nazianzus, Gregory of Nyssa, Paul); Dale Jacqueline, University of Bern, Switzerland (Schopenhauer); Mark Linville, Clayton State University (Moral Arguments for Theism); Robert MacSwain, The School of Theology, University of the South (Farrer, Lewis); Elizabeth Palmer, University of Chicago Divinity School (Luther); David L. O'Hara, Augustana College (Bishop, Heraclitus, Maimonides, Parmenides, Peirce, Pneuma, Providence, Ptolemaic, Reality, Sacrament, Satan, Separation of Church and State, Suspicion, Symbol, Syncretism, Thales, Transcendentalism, Zeno of Citium); Stephen R. Palmquist, Hong Kong Baptist University (Kant); Paul Reasoner, Bethel University (Bodhisattva, Reincarnation, Sincerity, Transfer of Merit); Dan N. Robinson, Oxford University (Reid); Lad Sessions, Washington and Lee University (Honor); Michael Swartzentruber, University of

Acknowledgments

Chicago Divinity School (Hermeneutics, Liberal Theology, Schleiermacher); David Vessey, Grand Valley State University (Gadamer, Husserl, James, Levinas, Maritain, Pragmatism); Jerry Walls, University of Notre Dame, Center for Philosophy of Religion (Eschatology, Heaven, Hell, Purgatory, Resurrection, Salvation, Universalism); and Matthew Lon Weaver, Independent Scholar (H. Richard Niebuhr, Reinhold Niebuhr).

We are especially grateful for colleagues at St. Olaf College: Calista Anderson (Duns Scotus, Primum Mobile), Charles Biskupic (Idol/Idolatry, St. Francis of Assisi, Irony), Hilary Bouxsein (Angels, Pseudo-Dionysius), Katherine Chatelaine (Anti-Theodicy), Samuel Dunn (Chaos Theory), Elizabeth Duel (Animals, Buddha, Dalai Lama, Heaven (Non-Christian Conceptions), Hell (Non-Christian Conceptions), Icons/Iconoclasm, Karma, Native American Traditions, Sorcery, Teilhard de Chardin, Wicca), Katie Duwell (Derrida, Postmodernity/Postmodernism), Bob Entenmann (Cheng Hao, Cheng Yi, Confucianism/Confucius, Huainanzi, Huayan School, Laozi, Mencius, Neo-Confucianism, Qi, Shintoism, Xiong Shili, Xuanzang, Xunzi, Zhang Dongsun, Zhang Zai, Zhu Xi, Zhuangzi), Jeanine Grenberg (Humility), Katherine Hagen (Gandhi, Vedas), Paul Hamilton (Berlin, Radhakrishnan), Eric Larson (Dominicans, Justice), Linnea Logas (Calvinism, Transmigration), Thomas Marti (Atomism, Time), Erik Olson (Averroes, Diogenes Laertius, Diogenes of Sinope, Spinoza), Anthony Rudd (Fichte, Schelling, Schiller), Jamie Schillinger (Falsafa, Jihad), Jason Smith (Julian of Norwich, Rahner, Soteriology), Alexander Sommer (Durkheim, Tillich), Jamie Turnbull (Kierkegaard), Sirvydas Vebra (Einstein, Socrates), Jacob Zillhardt (Hell (Non-Christian Conceptions)).

Finally, we thank our families and friends for their continued support and encouragement.

Preface

Some of the earliest recorded philosophy in the West and East concerns matters that are of central religious significance: the existence of God or gods, the holy, the soul, good and evil, the afterlife, the meaning and nature of birth, growth and maturity, the relationship of the individual to the family or tribe or community, sacrifice, guilt, mercy, and so on. And from the beginning philosophers have expressed a passionate commitment to understanding the meaning of the words we use in exploring such terrain. So, Confucius gave central importance to what he is said to have referred to as the “rectification of names.” And the earliest recordings we have of Socrates show him engaged in a vigorous inquiry into whether his fellow Athenians know what they are talking about when they appeal to such concepts as holiness, duty to the gods, justice, courage, goodness, friendship, beauty, art, and so on.

This dictionary is in this old tradition of seeking to attain clarity and understanding through attention to words, names, and titles. One thing we re-discovered in the course of our work is the importance of community and conversation in the practice of philosophy of religion (historically and today). Sometimes scholarship can be a solitary affair, but while some solitude can provide some enviable time for creative reflection, scholarship is most vibrant when it is a shared activity. We are reminded of the story of the explorer Sir Henry Morton Stanley who took on his disastrous journey to the Belgian Congo a host of great books such as the complete collection of Shakespeare. But with no African conversation partners to discuss such books (and partly this was his fault), the bare existence of the books became a pointless burden. In fact, he had to leave all of them except Shakespeare which some Africans insisted he actually burn as they had become concerned it had become an ill totem of sorts. Without conversation and community, the best of books can be dull companions (unless you happen to be Robinson Crusoe).

We began this dictionary in conversation about the meaning of some terms in contemporary philosophy of religion. It was more of an argument than a conversation, but it led us to join forces in the broader, constructive enterprise of working together

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on this systematic, ambitious project. As noted in the acknowledgments, this undertaking involved others as well. We highlight the importance of conversation and exchange in this preface, as it is our earnest desire that this book might function as something of a companion or an assistant in cultivating or helping inform conversations among our readers. Our hope is to enrich dialogue rather than to substitute for it in any way, for these definitions are only the beginning of philosophical exploration.

Introduction

Philosophy of religion is the philosophical examination of the central themes and concepts involved in religious traditions. It involves all the main areas of philosophy: metaphysics, epistemology, logic, ethics and value theory, the philosophy of language, philosophy of science, law, sociology, politics, history, and so on. Philosophy of religion also includes an investigation into the religious significance of historical events (e.g., the Holocaust) and general features of the cosmos (e.g., laws of nature, the emergence of conscious life, and the widespread testimony of religious significance). In this introduction we offer an overview of the field and its significance, with subsequent sections on the concept of God, arguments for the existence of God, the problem of evil, the challenge of logical positivism, and religious and philosophical pluralism. At the outset, we address philosophy of religion as chiefly studied primarily in so-called analytic departments of philosophy and religious studies in English speaking countries, but we conclude with observations about so-called continental philosophy of religion. The qualification of “so-called” is added because the distinction between analytic and continental is controversial.

The Field and its Significance

The philosophical exploration of religious beliefs and practices is evident in the earliest recorded philosophy, east and west. In the West, throughout Greco-Roman philosophy and the medieval era, philosophical reflection on God or gods, reason and faith, the soul, afterlife, and so on were not considered to be a sub-discipline called “philosophy of religion.” The philosophy of God was simply one component among many interwoven philosophical projects. This intermingling of philosophical inquiry with religious themes and the broader enterprises of philosophy (e.g., political theory, epistemology, and so on) is apparent among many early modern philosophers such as John Locke and George Berkeley. Only gradually do we find texts devoted exclusively

to religious themes. The first use of the term “philosophy of religion” in English occurs in the seventeenth-century work of Ralph Cudworth. He and his Cambridge University colleague Henry Moore produced philosophical work with a specific focus on religion and so, if one insisted on dating the beginning of philosophy of religion as a field, there are good reasons for claiming that it began (gradually) in the mid-seventeenth century.

Today philosophy of religion is a robust, intensely active area of philosophy. The importance of philosophy of religion is chiefly due to subject matter: alternative beliefs about God, Brahman, and the sacred, the varieties of religious experience, the interplay between science and religion, the challenge of non-religious philosophies, the nature and scope of good and evil, religious treatments of birth, history, and death, and other substantial terrain. A philosophical exploration of these topics involves fundamental questions about our place in the cosmos and about our relationship to what may transcend the cosmos. It requires an investigation into the nature and limit of human thought and explores embedded social and personal practices. A vast majority of the world population is either aligned with religion or affected by religion, making philosophy of religion not simply a matter of abstract theory but also highly relevant to practical concerns. Religious traditions are so comprehensive and all-encompassing in their claims that almost every domain of philosophy may be drawn upon in the philosophical investigation of their coherence, justification, and value.

Philosophy of religion also makes important contributions to religious studies and theology. Historically, theology has been influenced by, or has drawn upon, philosophy. Platonism and Aristotelianism have had a major influence on the articulation of classical Christian doctrine, and in the modern era theologians frequently have drawn on work by philosophers (from Hegel to Heidegger and Derrida). Philosophy strives to clarify, evaluate, and compare religious beliefs. The evaluation has at times been highly critical and dismissive, but there are abundant periods in the history of ideas when philosophy has positively contributed to the flourishing of religious life. This constructive interplay is not limited to the West. The impact of philosophy on distinctive Buddhist views of knowledge and the self has been of great importance. Just as philosophical ideas have fueled theological work, the great themes of theology involving God’s transcendence, the divine attributes, providence, and so on, have made substantial impacts on important philosophical projects.

At the beginning of the twenty-first century, a more general rationale for philosophy of religion should be cited: it can enhance cross-cultural dialogue. Philosophers of religion now often seek out common as well as distinguishing features of religious belief and practice. This study can enhance communication between traditions, and between religions and secular institutions.

The Concept of God

Most philosophy of religion in the West has focused on different versions of theism. Ancient philosophy of religion wrestled with the credibility of monotheism and polytheism in opposition to skepticism and very primitive naturalistic schemes. For example, Plato argued that the view that God is singularly good should be preferred to the portrait of the gods that was articulated in Greek poetic tradition, according to which there are many gods, often imperfect and subject to vice and ignorance. The emergence and development of the Abrahamic faiths (Judaism, Christianity and Islam) on a global scale secured the centrality of theism for philosophical inquiry, but the relevance of a philosophical exploration of theism is not limited to those interested in these religions and the cultures in which they flourish. While theism has generally flourished in religious traditions amid religious practices, one may be a theist without adopting any religion whatever, and one may find theistic elements (however piecemeal) in Confucianism, Hinduism, some versions of Mahayana Buddhism, and other traditions. The debate over theism also has currency for secular humanism and religious forms of atheism as in Theravada Buddhist philosophy.

Traditionally, theists have maintained that God is maximally excellent, necessarily existent, incorporeal, omniscient, omnipotent, omnipresent, eternal or everlasting, and essentially good. Theists have differed over whether they regard God as impassable (not subject to passion) or passable. There is not space to address these issues in detail here; however, the nature of these divine attributes and their relationship to one another have been the subject of much reflection within philosophy of religion.

Two concerns arise when articulating the concept of God and the divine attributes. First, some argue that there is a tension between the God of philosophy and the God of revelation. If scripture definitively portrays God as loving and just, then scriptural narratives in which God appears neither loving nor just must either be interpreted as reflecting a projection of fallible human lovelessness and injustice, or theologians need to show how the God of revelation is nevertheless consistently loving and just. Those adopting the first approach invoke the concept of *progressive revelation*, whereby God has been increasingly revealed over time. Precepts in Hebrew scripture that allow slavery, for example, are judged to be primitive, merely-human projections that eventually give way to the purity and nobility of ethical monotheism as evidenced in prophets such as Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Amos. Other philosophers respond by using the biblical understanding of God to shape the philosophy of God. Thus, while some traditional theists have believed God to be eternal, changeless, and impassable, other philosophers use biblical texts to defend the idea that God is in time, subject to change and God has passions (e.g., love of the good). Again, some traditionalists have held that

God is not subject to passive states and thus God is not subject to a love that involves suffering. Others ask why suffering love has to be seen as a passive state of being subject to creation. Perhaps love (whether it is sorrowing or joyful) can be understood as supreme action, perhaps even a reflection of a supreme, great-making excellence. This new discussion opens opportunities for the scriptural portrait of God to inform the philosophy of God, bringing a more affective dimension to the philosophy of God.

A second issue arising from philosophical reflection on the concept of God concerns the extent to which human thought and language can form an intelligible concept of God. God is beyond both insofar as God (the reality) is not a human thought or term; if God exists, God pre-exists all human and any other created life. In this sense, God's thoughts are (literally) different from any human thought. Theists seek to balance positive claims about God (technically referenced to as cataphatic theology) with an acknowledgment of the importance of negation or negative claims (apophatic theology). Defenders of a strict, apophatic philosophy of God sometimes assume that conceptual and linguistic limitations are in some sense religiously confining or subjugating. But without concepts or some language, deep religious practices like loving or worshiping God would be impossible. To love *X*, you have to have some concept or idea of *X*. How would you know whether you were or were not worshiping *X* if you had no idea whatsoever about *X*? At least in theistic traditions, some language and concept of God seems essential. Also, there is a difference between claiming that God is more than or greater than our best terms and concepts and the claim that God is not less than our best terms and concepts. So, one may assert that God is omniscient and analyze this in terms of God knowing all that can possibly be known. One may well grant that, and yet go on to claim that how God possess this knowledge and what it would be like to be omniscient surpasses the best possible human imagination.

A significant amount of work on the meaningfulness of religious language was carried out in the medieval period, with major contributions made by Maimonides (1135–1204), Thomas of Aquinas (1225–1274), Duns Scotus (1266–1308), and William of Ockham (1285–1347). This work built on the even earlier work on religious language by Philo (20 BCE–50 CE), Clement (150–215) and Origen (185–259) of Alexandria. In the modern era, the greatest concentration on religious language has taken place in response to logical positivism and to the latter work of Wittgenstein (1889–1951).

The Challenge of Logical Positivism

Logical positivism promoted an empiricist principle of meaning which asserted that for a propositional claim (statement) to be meaningful it must either be about the bare formal relations between ideas such as those enshrined in mathematics and analytic

definitions (“A is A,” “triangles are three-sided”) or there must in principle be perceptual experience providing evidence of whether the claim is true or false. This delimited meaningful discourse about the world and meant that ostensibly factual claims that have no implications for our empirical experience are empty of content. In line with this form of positivism, A. J. Ayer (1910–1989) and others claimed that religious beliefs were meaningless.

Empiricist challenges to the meaningfulness of religious belief are still raised, but are now deemed less impressive than they once were. In the history of the debate over positivism, the most radical charge was that positivism is self-refuting. The empiricist criterion of meaning itself does not seem to be a statement that expresses the formal relation of ideas, nor does it appear to be empirically verifiable. How might one empirically verify the principle? At best, the principle of verification seems to be a recommendation as to how to describe those statements that positivists are prepared to accept as meaningful. But then, how might a dispute about which other statements are meaningful be settled in a non-arbitrary fashion? To religious believers for whom talk of “Brahman” and “God” is at the center stage of meaningful discourse, the use of the principle of empirical verification will seem arbitrary and question-begging. If the positivist principle is tightened up too far, it seems to threaten various propositions that at least appear to be highly respectable, such as scientific claims about physical processes and events that are not publicly observable. For example, what are we to think of states of the universe prior to all observation of physical strata of the cosmos that cannot be observed directly or indirectly but only inferred as part of an overriding scientific theory? Or what about the mental states of other persons, which may ordinarily be reliably judged, but which, some argue, are under-determined by external, public observation? A person’s subjective states—how one feels—can be profoundly elusive to external observers and even to the person him or herself. Can you empirically observe another person’s sense of happiness? Arguably, the conscious, subjective states of persons resist airtight verification and the evidence of such states does not meet positivism’s standards.

The strict empiricist account of meaning was also charged as meaningless on the grounds that there is no coherent, clear, basic level of experience with which to test propositional claims. The experiential “given” is simply too malleable (this has been called “the myth of the given”), often reflecting prior conceptual judgments and, once one appreciates the open-textured character of experience, it may be proposed that virtually any experience can verify or provide some evidence for anything. Not every philosopher has embraced such an epistemological anarchy, but the retreat of positivism has made philosophers more cautious about identifying a sensory foundation for testing all claims to meaningful language.

One of the most sustained lessons from the encounter between positivism and the philosophy of religion is the importance of assessing the meaning of individual beliefs in comprehensive terms. The meaning of ostensible propositional claims must take into account larger theoretical frameworks. Religious claims could not be ruled out at the start but should be allowed a hearing with competing views of cognitive significance.

Arguments for and against the Existence of God

One of the main issues in philosophy of religion concerns arguments for and against the existence of God. Naturalists argue that the cosmos itself, or nature, is all that exists. Strict naturalists, or eliminativists, believe that reality consists only of what is described and explained by the ideal natural sciences, especially physics, and therefore they deny the reality of subjective experiences or consciousness, ideas, emotions, morality, and the mental life in general. Broad naturalists affirm the possibility or plausibility of the mental life and ethical truths, but reject the existence of God. Appealing to Ockham's razor, the thesis that one should not posit entities beyond necessity, strict and broad naturalists argue that atheism ought to be the presumption of choice.

Theists respond by appealing to four significant, interconnected arguments for the existence of God: the ontological, cosmological, and teleological arguments, and an argument from religious experience. The ontological argument contends that reflections on the idea and possibility of God's existence provides a reason for thinking God actually exists. The cosmological argument contends that it is reasonable to think that our contingent cosmos must be accounted for, in part, by the causal creativity of a necessarily-existing being. Teleological arguments contend that our ordered, complex cosmos is better explained by theism rather than naturalism. And the argument from religious experience argues that the widespread reports by persons across time and culture who experience a transcendent, divine reality provide grounds for thinking there is such a reality. Some theists also make arguments based on miracles and morality. These arguments are considered mutually reinforcing, so that, for example, the cosmological argument may be complemented by a teleological argument, thereby providing reasons for thinking the necessarily-existing being is also purposive. Few philosophers today advance a single argument as a proof. It is increasingly common to see philosophies—scientific naturalism or theism—advanced with cumulative arguments, a whole range of considerations, and not with a supposed knock-down, single proof.

One reason why the case for and against major, comprehensive philosophies are mostly cumulative is because of discontent in what is often called foundationalism. In one classical form of foundationalism, one secures first and foremost a basis of beliefs which one may see to be true with certainty. The base may be cast as indubitable or infallible. One then slowly builds up the justification for one's other, more extensive beliefs about oneself and the world. Many (but not all) philosophers now see justification as more complex and interwoven; the proper object of philosophical inquiry is overall coherence, not a series of distinguishable building operations beginning with a foundation.

One way of carrying out philosophy of religion along non-foundationalist lines has been to build a case for the comparative rationality of a religious view of the world. It has been argued that the intellectual integrity of a religious world view can be secured if it can be shown to be no less rational than the available alternatives. It need only achieve intellectual parity.

The Problem of Evil

The problem of evil is the most widely considered objection to theism in both Western and Eastern philosophy. If there is a God who is omnipotent, omniscient, and completely good, why is there evil? There are two general versions of the problem: the deductive or logical version, which asserts that the existence of any evil at all (regardless of its role in producing good) is incompatible with God's existence; and the probabilistic version, which asserts that given the quantity and severity of evil that actually exists, it is unlikely that God exists. The deductive problem is currently less commonly debated because it is widely acknowledged that a thoroughly good being might allow or inflict some harm under certain morally compelling conditions (such as causing a child pain when removing a splinter). More intense debate concerns the likelihood (or even possibility) that there is a completely good God given the vast amount of evil in the cosmos. Consider human and animal suffering caused by death, predation, birth defects, ravaging diseases, virtually unchecked human wickedness, torture, rape, oppression, and "natural disasters." Consider how often those who suffer are innocent. Why should there be so much gratuitous, apparently pointless evil?

In the face of the problem of evil, some philosophers and theologians deny that God is all-powerful and all-knowing. John Stuart Mill took this line, and pantheist theologians today also question the traditional treatments of Divine power. According to pantheism, God is immanent in the world, suffering with the oppressed and working to bring good out of evil, although in spite of God's efforts, evil will invariably

mar the created order. Another response is to think of God as being very different from a moral agent. Brian Davies and others have contended that what it means for God to be good is different from what it means for an agent to be morally good. A more desperate strategy is to deny the existence of evil, but it is difficult to reconcile traditional monotheism with moral skepticism. Also, insofar as we believe there to be a God worthy of worship and a fitting object of human love, the appeal to moral skepticism will carry little weight. The idea that evil is a privation of the good, a twisting of something good, may have some currency in thinking through the problem of evil, but it is difficult to see how it alone could go very far to vindicate belief in God's goodness. Searing pain and endless suffering seem altogether real even if they are analyzed as being philosophically parasitic on something valuable.

In part, the magnitude one takes the problem of evil to pose for theism will depend upon one's commitments in other areas of philosophy, especially ethics, epistemology and metaphysics. If in ethics you hold that there should be no preventable suffering for any reason, no matter what the cause or consequence, then the problem of evil will conflict with accepting traditional theism. Moreover, if you hold that any solution to the problem of evil should be evident to all persons, then again traditional theism is in jeopardy, for clearly the "solution" is not evident to all. Debate has largely centered over the legitimacy of adopting some position in the middle: a theory of values that would preserve a clear assessment of the profound evil in the cosmos as well as some understanding of how this might be compatible with the existence of an all-powerful, completely good Creator. Could there be reasons why God would permit cosmic ills? If we do not know what those reasons might be, are we in a position to conclude that there are none or that there could not be any? Exploring different possibilities will be shaped by one's metaphysics. For example, if you do not believe there is free will, then you will not be moved by any appeal to the positive value of free will and its role in bringing about good as offsetting its role in bringing about evil.

Theistic responses to the problem of evil distinguish between a defense and a theodicy. A defense seeks to establish that rational belief that God exists is still possible (when the defense is employed against the logical version of the problem of evil) and that the existence of evil does not make it improbable that God exists (when used against the probabilistic version). Some have adopted the defense strategy while arguing that we are in a position to have rational beliefs in the existence of evil and in a completely good God who hates this evil, even though we may be unable to see how these two beliefs are compatible. A theodicy is more ambitious, and is typically part of a broader project, arguing that it is reasonable to believe that God exists on the basis of the good as well as the evident evil of the cosmos. In a theodicy, the project is not to account for each and every evil, but to provide an overarching framework within

which to understand at least roughly how the evil that occurs is part of some overall good — for instance, the overcoming of evil is itself a great good. In practice, a defense and a theodicy often appeal to similar factors, such as the Greater Good Defense, which contends that that evil can be understood as either a necessary accompaniment to bringing about greater goods or an integral part of these goods.

Some portraits of an afterlife seem to have little bearing on our response to the magnitude of evil here and now. Does it help to understand why God allows evil if all victims will receive happiness later? But it is difficult to treat the possibility of an afterlife as entirely irrelevant. Is death the annihilation of persons or an event involving a transfiguration to a higher state? If you do not think that it matters whether persons continue to exist after death, then such speculation is of little consequence. But suppose that the afterlife is understood as being morally intertwined with this life, with opportunity for moral and spiritual reformation, transfiguration of the wicked, rejuvenation and occasions for new life, perhaps even reconciliation and communion between oppressors seeking forgiveness and their victims. Then these considerations might help to defend against arguments based on the existence of evil. Insofar as one cannot rule out the possibility of an afterlife morally tied to our life, one cannot rule out the possibility that God brings some good out of cosmic ills.

Religious Pluralism

In contemporary philosophy of religion, there has been a steady, growing representation of non-monotheistic traditions, involving fresh translations of philosophical and religious texts from India, China, Southeast Asia, and Africa. Exceptional figures from non-Western traditions have an increased role in cross-cultural philosophy of religion and religious dialogue. There are now extensive treatments of pantheism and student-friendly guides to diverse religious conceptions of the cosmos.

The expanded interest in religious pluralism has led to extensive reflection on the compatibilities and possible synthesis of religions. John Hick is the preeminent synthesizer of religious traditions. Moving from a broadly based theistic view of God to what he calls “the Real,” a noumenal sacred reality, Hick claims that different religions provide us with a glimpse or partial access to the Real. He sees religious traditions as different meeting points in which a person might transcend ego-driven, selfish desires and be in relation to the same reality or the Real. While Hick is reluctant to attribute positive properties to the Real in itself (he leaves undetermined whether the Real is personal or impersonal), he holds that all persons will evolve or develop into a saving relationship with the Real after death. One advantage of Hick’s position is that