The Routledge Handbook of Contemporary Philosophy of Religion

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Introduction

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INTRODUCTION

The invitation to contribute to this handbook began as follows:

This Handbook is conceived as a work that overviews new and emerging theories and trends in philosophy of religion, and that seeks to open new avenues of discussion and to push debate forwards in a philosophically rigorous way. The aim is to have chapters contributed by philosophers who are widely regarded as leaders and experts in the fields upon which they are invited to write, and to ask authors both to provide in-depth discussion of the current state of play and to make an original and cutting-edge contribution that significantly enhances debate.

It was no part of the conception of the Handbook to be comprehensive: this handbook is not a systematic introduction to every cutting-edge development in philosophy of religion. Nonetheless, it was part of the conception of the Handbook to also convey something of the breadth and depth of current work in philosophy of religion.

The structure of the work reflects some of the editor’s views about the ways in which the field of philosophy of religion is ideally conceived. However, those who provided the content of the work do not all share the views of the editor concerning ways in which the field of philosophy of religion is ideally conceived. I shall first say something about the structure of the work, and my own views concerning the ways in which philosophy of religion is ideally conceived; and then I shall say something about why these views are so evidently controversial.

First, there are many different and legitimate ways in which philosophy of religion can be theoretically conceived. While only a small sample of approaches is represented here, the sample at least gestures towards the range of ways in which philosophy of religion can be understood. Alongside the feminist, phenomenological, postmodern, new atheist, Wittgensteinian, and fundamentalist approaches canvassed, there might also have been chapters on – among others – analytic, process, Vedānta, Marxist, structuralist, Thomist, Freudian, existentialist, Calvinist, theosophist, and Hegelian takes on philosophy of religion. Moreover, for many of these labels, there might have been several chapters: there is, after all, considerable disagreement among, for example, analytic philosophers about how best to conceive of philosophy of religion.

Second, there are many different and legitimate ways of understanding central concepts in philosophy of religion from contrasting religious standpoints. We take the example of the
concept of divinity, considering what ‘the divine’ looks like from the standpoint of Chinese, Islamic, Hindu, and Christian thought. Of course, even in this one example, we can’t consider all of the ways in which ‘the divine’ has been conceived from these kinds of standpoints – and there are other religious standpoints to which we are unable to give any consideration: Jewish, Buddhist, Jain, Sikh, Shinto, and so on. Moreover, there are many other concepts that deserve the same kind of careful consideration from the standpoint of the diverse religions of the world: salvation, devotion, nature, fate, virtue, desert, and so forth.

Third, there are many epistemological questions that are raised by the religions of the world. The diversity of the religions of the world – and the many disagreements between them – raises interesting questions about the significance of disagreement, the analysis of superstition, the ways in which religious experience and religious faith support diverse religious beliefs, and the ways in which science is related to religion. Of course, there are many other epistemological questions that are raised by the religions of the world – e.g., questions about the rationality of religious belief, the justification of religious belief, the extent to which it is proper to speak of knowledge in connection with religious conviction, the extent to which religious belief requires evidential support, the extent to which rejection of religious belief relies upon more wide-ranging philosophical scepticism, and so forth – and that receive distinctively different answers in different religious and philosophical traditions.

Fourth, there are many metaphysical questions, and questions for philosophy of language, that are raised by the religions of the world. The sacred texts of the religions of the world raise many interesting questions. On the one hand, there are questions of interpretation: What should be taken literally, and what should be regarded as analogy or metaphor in those texts and, more broadly, in the doctrines that characterise those religions? On the other hand, there are questions of origins: What can we determine about the composition and compilation of the sacred texts of the religions of the world? Perhaps not entirely unrelatedly, the religions of the world also provoke fundamental metaphysical questions. Should we suppose that the fundamental claims of the religions of the world are factual – or should we suppose that these claims are properly to be given some kind of anti-realist construal? Should we suppose that we can subject the claims of the religions of the world to metaphysical assessment – or is there something antithetical to genuine religion in the impulse to carry out any such assessment? Naturally, there are many other metaphysical questions that are raised by the religions of the world, but that are not canvassed in the pages of this Handbook: e.g., questions about souls, reincarnation and immortality; questions about freedom and responsibility; and questions about material constitution and transcendence.

Fifth, there are many questions of political philosophy that are raised by the religions of the world. We take up a set of connected questions about religious violence, religious tolerance, religious pluralism, and the proper role of religion in public life. But, of course, consideration of these issues leaves untouched many significant questions that religion poses for political philosophy. Do people have rights in connection with religion? If so, how are those rights related to other (putative) rights, e.g., freedom of speech, freedom of association, and so forth? How are one person’s religious rights related to the fundamental secular rights of others? Do people have a right to religious belief? Do parents and guardians have a right to try to pass on their beliefs – and, in particular, their religious beliefs – to their own children and to other children in their care?

Sixth, there are many ethical questions that are raised by the religions of the world. There are normative questions, and meta-ethical questions. There are questions about meaning, and questions about suffering, and questions about flourishing. Is there an essential connection between religion and human flourishing? If so, is it religion or freedom from religion that is essential to human flourishing? Is religion a means – perhaps the sole, or sole significant,
means – to genuine alleviation of human suffering, or is religion an instrument – perhaps one of the principal instruments – of human suffering? Or is religion both a (significant) instrument of human suffering and a (principal) means for the alleviation of human suffering? Is religion a significant cause of violence? Are religions essentially markers and perpetuators of difference? Can those who have no religion lead (ultimately) meaningful lives? Can those who have religion lead (ultimately) meaningful lives?

Seventh, there are many questions belonging to philosophy of science (broadly conceived). What do recent developments in cognitive science – in particular, in cognitive anthropology – tell us about religion and religious belief? Is there an essential conflict between religion and science? Is there an essential conflict between religion and metaphysical naturalism? Are pantheism and panentheism in conflict with science? Are pantheism and panentheism in conflict with metaphysical naturalism? Is religious belief at odds with scientific reasoning?

While we canvas intersections between philosophy of religion and, respectively, epistemology, philosophy of language, metaphysics, political philosophy, ethics, and philosophy of science, there are intersections between philosophy of religion and many other sub-disciplines of philosophy. There is, for example, much of interest to be said about intersections between philosophy of religion and logic, theory of argument, rhetoric, decision theory, philosophy of probability, philosophy of mathematics, philosophy of physics, philosophy of biology, philosophy of mind, philosophy of law, philosophy of education, aesthetics and philosophy of art. So the *Handbook* is comprehensive neither in its coverage of the various subdomains of philosophy that intersect with philosophy of religion, nor in its coverage of the intersections with philosophy of religion of those particular subdomains of philosophy that do receive some coverage: epistemology, philosophy of language, metaphysics, political philosophy, ethics, and philosophy of science.

As the discussion to this point makes clear, I take the primary subject matter of philosophy of religion to be philosophy of religion. In my view, philosophy of religion pursues philosophical questions that are prompted by the collective religions of the world. While I do not mean to deny that there are philosophical questions that arise in connection with particular religions, I want to say that the philosophies of those particular religions are specialised sub-disciplines of a broader discipline. Moreover, I want to say that there are significant parts of philosophy of religion – including, in particular, those parts of philosophy of religion that compare and assess the worldviews that belong to the various religions of the world – that also require serious consideration and examination of non-religious and anti-religious attitudes, behaviours, activities, and organisations. Apart from questions about the relationship between philosophy of religion and philosophies of particular religions, there are also questions about the relationship between philosophy of religions and religious philosophies. At least as a first approximation, we can think of religious philosophies as attempts to cast the whole of philosophy from a particular religious standpoint; and we can think of non-religious philosophies – e.g. naturalistic philosophies – as attempts to cast the whole of philosophy from a non-religious standpoint. While philosophy of religion may sometimes be required to attend to religious philosophies, it seems to me that we should not think of religious philosophies as sub-disciplines of philosophy of religion.

Of course, the views expressed in the last couple of paragraphs are controversial. There is much in the behaviour of contemporary philosophers of religion which suggests that a great many of them think of philosophy of religion as religious philosophy from the standpoint of the one true religion or worldview (whatever they take the one true religion or worldview to be). By the lights of many contemporary philosophers of religion, philosophy of religion just is Christian Philosophy, or Islamic Philosophy, or Jewish Philosophy, or Buddhist Philosophy, or...
Hindu Philosophy, or Confucian Philosophy, or Daoist Philosophy, or Shinto Philosophy, or Jain Philosophy, or Sikh Philosophy, or Naturalist Philosophy, or Atheist Philosophy, or Secular Philosophy, or Humanist Philosophy, or whatever. However, while it seems to me that to take this kind of view is simply to confuse subject matter with theoretical orientation, I certainly did not make it a requirement for contributing to this handbook that one agree with me on this point.

I have many debts to acknowledge. Tristan Palmer proposed that I edit a work of this kind some years before Acumen Publishing was taken over by Taylor & Francis, and he helped me to get a contract with Acumen to produce this work. Nick Trakakis discussed the content of the work with me prior to the issuing of the first round of invitations to contributors, not too long after we finally polished off our *History of Western Philosophy of Religion*. People who were themselves unable to accept invitations to contribute offered suggestions about who else might be invited to contribute. Monash University generously allowed me a sabbatical year in 2013, during which I managed to knock the manuscript into shape. Karen Gillen provided invaluable assistance by preparing the index. And all of the contributors not only provided excellent chapters, but also displayed great patience during the time that it took to get the manuscript to the press. To everyone involved, my heartfelt thanks.