

# Contemporary Analytic Thought: 1950–Present

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## Origins and characteristics

Philosophical reflection on religion is, of course, nothing new. Virtually every major figure in the history of philosophy has had something to say about religion. Contemporary analytic philosophy of religion, however, emerged in the mid-twentieth century as a distinctive subfield of the discipline. Why did it develop then? Three reasons can be identified. The first involves a philosophical view known as *logical positivism* (see POSITIVISM AND LOGICAL POSITIVISM), and its associated criterion of meaningfulness, the VERIFICATION PRINCIPLE. According to a standard (and sometimes triumphalist) narrative, just prior to the mid-twentieth century, the world of professional academic philosophy was in thrall to this view. It held that only two sorts of claims can be meaningful: (i) those that are true (or false) by definition; and (ii) those that can be empirically verified or falsified. Some positivists – notably A.J. Ayer (see AYER, ALFRED JULES) – held that many religious claims fail to meet both condition (i) and (ii), and so are neither true nor false, but rather meaningless gibberish (see RELIGIOUS LANGUAGE). Now, if indeed many religious claims are meaningless, it would be no surprise if philosophers passed them over in their investigations and reflections. According to the narrative, this criterion of meaningfulness fell out of fashion around the mid-twentieth century (or was decisively refuted), thus clearing a path for analytic philosophy of religion to develop, along with analytic metaphysics. (For a more detailed presentation of this story, see Harris 2002. For reservations about this narrative, see Oppy 2018.) A second factor was the development of modern logic, and especially modal logic, which enabled technically sophisticated work to flourish, particularly on arguments for and against God's existence, and on the divine attributes. A third factor was the seminal early contributions of major figures such as William Alston (see ALSTON, WILLIAM P.), Alvin Plantinga, Richard Swinburne, and Nicholas Wolterstorff. These thinkers were publishing from the 1960s onwards, and each had well-regarded work in areas other than philosophy of religion, which conferred legitimacy on their religiously oriented work. Each went on to train a new generation of graduate students, some of whom specialized in philosophy of religion and ultimately entered the professoriate.

Before proceeding, it will be worthwhile to briefly set out some purportedly characteristic features of *analytic* philosophy of religion. In the contemporary profession of philosophy, “analytic” philosophy is typically distinguished from “continental” philosophy. Both traditions are enormously difficult to define and demarcate, and many have said that the distinction is too problematic to be worthwhile. Still, contemporary philosophers who regard themselves as “analytic” in orientation

typically understand this term as signaling particular devotion to the following in their thinking and writing: careful conceptual and linguistic analysis, the precise definition and disambiguation of terms, the clear identification and presentation of premises, inferences, and conclusions in the arguments they consider (or devise), a commitment to setting out plainly and charitably how and why their arguments can be resisted, and an overall fealty to the idea that philosophical truth can best emerge from intellectual practices such as these, pursued in the spirit of openness and collaboration. Philosophers of religion who regard themselves as “analytic” typically endorse all of these. Of course, this does not mean that so-called “continental” philosophers cannot or do not exhibit these features in their writing and thinking, nor that “analytic” thinkers always live up to these ideals.

The second section lists the main venues in which analytic philosophy of religion appears, and recommends some other survey-style resources. The third section surveys a range of canonical topics discussed by analytic philosophers of religion. The fourth discusses two important new developments in the field, and the fifth considers some contemporary challenges for analytic philosophy of religion. Unfortunately, given space limitations, the discussion of all these topics will be relatively brief, and so some important and philosophically rich ideas will be omitted altogether. This entry merely aims to offer readers a nontechnical glimpse into this fascinating area of philosophy, while whetting the appetite for further reading and study.

### Venues and other survey-style resources

Contemporary analytic philosophy of religion appears in many venues. Articles sometimes appear in the most prominent “general-interest” philosophical journals. (For a ranking of such journals based on a survey of over 600 philosophers, see <https://leiterreports.typepad.com/blog/2018/11/best-general-journals-of-philosophy-2018.html>, accessed 8 June 2020.) The central “specialist” journals in the field are the *European Journal for Philosophy of Religion*, the *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion*, *Faith and Philosophy*, *Philosophia Christi*, *Religious Studies*, and *Sophia*, along with a quasi-journal: an annual edited collection called *Oxford Studies in Philosophy of Religion*. Major presses such as Oxford, Cambridge, and Routledge routinely publish monographs and edited collections in this area.

It is worth noting that there are now several excellent survey-style resources available in philosophy in general, and in analytic philosophy of religion in particular. The *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* and the *Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (both available freely online) contain articles on core topics in analytic philosophy of religion, often written by important, influential scholars. *Philosophy Compass* is a journal that exclusively publishes surveys of recent work, and it has a well-populated analytic philosophy of religion section. (For a list of *Philosophy Compass* articles on contemporary philosophy of religion, see: [https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/page/journal/17479991/homepage/philosophy\\_of\\_religion.htm](https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/page/journal/17479991/homepage/philosophy_of_religion.htm), accessed 30 June 2020.) *Oxford Bibliographies Online* is an internet resource that publishes annotated bibliographies in many academic fields, including several in analytic philosophy of

religion. (For a complete list of entries, see [https://www.oxfordbibliographies.com/browse?module\\_0=obo-9780195396577](https://www.oxfordbibliographies.com/browse?module_0=obo-9780195396577), accessed 8 June 2020.) A new monograph series, *Cambridge Elements in the Philosophy of Religion*, includes short introductory volumes on many of the main topics in this area. (For a list of volumes in this series, see <https://www.cambridge.org/core/series/elements-in-the-philosophy-of-religion/6DB49122CD407CF5E4CB65DE7BCC052E>, accessed 8 June 2020.) Finally, a 700-page annotated bibliography of works in analytic philosophy of religion appeared in 1998, covering the period from 1940 to 1996 (Wolf 1998). Interested readers are encouraged to consult all of these as (opinionated) guides before delving into the primary literature. Hereafter, this entry will not cite the survey pieces mentioned in this paragraph, but will instead cite important primary work.

## Central topics

This section surveys some of the most central topics that have been discussed by analytic philosophers of religion.

### *The divine attributes*

Anselm of Canterbury (1033–1109; see ANSELM, SAINT) famously held that God is *a being than which nothing greater can be conceived*. But perhaps there are inconceivable possibilities, or, at any rate, possibilities that are inconceivable to human beings. If possibility does outstrip human conceivability, then, in principle, there could be a possible being that is still greater than the greatest humanly conceivable being. Accordingly, if God is taken to be unsurpassable (in various respects, to be discussed below), then it would be better to say that God, if God exists, is the *greatest possible being*. Other common expressions for this idea include *maximal being* and *absolutely perfect being*, and philosophical reflection on such a being is sometimes called *PERFECT BEING THEOLOGY*. But what would such a being be like? Analytic philosophers of religion have devoted much thought to this question. In the remainder of this section, the attributes of God that have received significant attention are set out, without presupposing either that God exists or that God does not exist. These are typically taken to be *essential* attributes: characteristics that God must exhibit in order to be God. For each of these attributes, philosophers have sought to elucidate just what is meant by them, and there have been lively discussions about whether these accounts are intelligible and plausible. Due to space limitations, this subsection will not discuss IMMUTABILITY AND IMPASSIBILITY, INEFFABILITY, OMNIPRESENCE, simplicity (see DIVINE SIMPLICITY), or transcendence (see IMMANENCE AND TRANSCENDENCE).

- God is typically taken to be a *personal* being. Scriptural texts in JUDAISM, CHRISTIANITY, and ISLAM describe God as being capable of having personal relationships with other persons. God is thought to resemble human persons by having, for example, the capacity to know and to act. Yet God is taken to be

unlike human persons in virtue of being *immaterial*. (An important exception here is the distinctive Christian doctrine of the incarnation; see INCARNATION; JESUS OF NAZARETH.) While God has often been pictured in a masculine mode, it is generally held that an immaterial being has neither a sex nor a gender. (Feminist philosophers of religion, however, have maintained that traditional concepts of God nevertheless encode and valorize masculine-centric assumptions. See the section entitled Contemporary Challenges below.) Perhaps the most important aspect of God's personal nature, according to many thinkers, is the idea that God is *supremely loving*. The driving thought here, of course, is that a personal being who was unloving, or imperfectly loving, would be surpassable.

- Many contemporary analytic philosophers of religion hold that if God exists, God exists *necessarily* (see NECESSARY BEING). Some understand this to mean that God's existence is *metaphysically necessary*, while others take it to mean that God's existence is *logically necessary*. Common to both conceptions is the basic idea that God could not fail to exist. On either view, two related ideas support the notion that God exists necessarily. The first is that a being who could possibly fail to exist is, all else equal, surpassable. The second is that God is held to be radically different from things like human beings and ordinary objects, all of which can fail to exist.
- God is also held to be *self-existent*. Anselm suggested that something's existence is either to be explained by *something else*, or by *itself*, or by *nothing at all*. The PRINCIPLE OF SUFFICIENT REASON, while perennially controversial, has been endorsed by many philosophers of religion in one form or another, and is thought to rule out the third alternative. Meanwhile, it has generally been thought that a being whose existence is explained by something else cannot be the greatest possible being, since it would depend upon something else for its own existence. Accordingly, God has widely been thought to be self-existent. This does not mean that God is the *cause* of God's existence, for that would be incoherent. Instead, the reason for God's existence is thought to lie within God's self. But philosophers have complained that the notion of self-existence is ad hoc, incoherent, or unacceptably mysterious.
- God is widely thought to be the *creator and sustainer* of all that contingently exists (see CREATION AND CONSERVATION). Moreover, God is typically thought to be *free* with respect to the activities of creating and sustaining (see DIVINE FREEDOM). Creation has traditionally been understood to be *ex nihilo* – out of nothing. But questions immediately arise. What does it mean for God to *create*, and to *sustain* everything that contingently exists? In what sense is God *free*? (For example, would God be free to create a world replete with utterly pointless evil?) Can sense be made of the idea that God created physical objects out of nothing at all? What is the relationship between God and noncontingent existents, such as numbers? Various answers to these questions have been proposed and debated.
- God is held to be *omnipotent*, or all-powerful (see OMNIPOTENCE). René Descartes (1596–1650; see DESCARTES, RENÉ) notoriously took this notion

unrestrictedly: he thought that it includes the ability to perform logically impossible tasks, such as creating a square circle or making it the case that  $2+2=5$ . The overwhelming majority of contemporary analytic philosophers of religion, however, take the more restricted view that God cannot perform logically impossible tasks – and, moreover, hold that this inability does not count against God’s omnipotence. Suppose that this view is correct, and that omnipotence means that God has the power to perform all and only logically possible tasks. This has still been thought unduly broad. For example, it is logically possible for human beings to behave cruelly just for the fun of it, or to commit suicide – but most philosophers think that God cannot do such things. Relatedly, a classic conundrum for omnipotence is the *paradox of the stone*, which can be expressed as follows. Either God has, or God lacks, the power to create a stone so large that God cannot subsequently lift it. But either way, it seems, God lacks the ability to do something logically possible: create the stone or lift the stone. Lively debates have ensued about whether these inability to perform logically possible tasks count against the coherence of divine omnipotence, and ever more technical accounts of omnipotence have been proposed and discussed.

- God is also held to be *omniscient*, or all-knowing (see OMNISCIENCE). As with omnipotence, there have been various intricate attempts to understand what this attribute involves, and to respond to challenges to its coherence. Suppose that to be omniscient is to know all and only the true propositions. One objection holds that there are true propositions that even God cannot know, such as propositions that involve the first-person perspective of other agents. For example, perhaps a human being can know exactly what a favorite meal tastes like, or how a sunset looks, but it is difficult to see how God could share that perspectival knowledge. Another objection holds that there is no such thing as the set of all truths. (Any putatively maximal set would have a *power set* – the set of all proper and improper subsets of the original set – and this power set would have a larger cardinality than the original.) Various responses to these objections have been proposed and discussed.

Analytic philosophers have devoted even more attention to discussing divine *foreknowledge* (see DIVINE FOREKNOWLEDGE), and, in particular, the *problem of divine foreknowledge and human freedom*. God is traditionally taken to know the future. Consider an example of something about the future that God would know: suppose that God now knows that you will finish reading this entry tomorrow. Since a proposition can be *known* only if it is *true*, then it is now true that you will finish reading this entry tomorrow. But if it is now true that you will finish reading this entry tomorrow, it might seem that you are not free to refrain from so doing – at least if freedom requires the ability to do otherwise. Various ways of reconciling divine foreknowledge and human freedom have been proposed and debated. Some philosophers, however, have deemed the tension to be irresolvable, and have either denied that human beings are free (in the relevant sense), or that God has foreknowledge. (The latter move is a central claim of a much-discussed position called *OPEN THEISM*). Another significant

topic under the heading of omniscience concerns whether God has *middle knowledge* – roughly, knowledge of what free creatures *would* do in various non-actual-but-possible circumstances (see MOLINA AND MOLINISM). Defenders have sought to explain what such knowledge would be like, while critics have objected in various ways, the most important of which holds that nothing could possibly ground middle knowledge.

- God is thought to be *eternal* (see ETERNITY AND TIMELESSNESS OF GOD). Some analytic philosophers of religion have understood this to mean that God exists *at every moment in time*, but the majority have held that God exists *outside of time* – *timelessly*. One motivation for adopting the latter view is that it seems to sidestep the problem of divine foreknowledge and human freedom discussed above: after all, if God is timeless, God does not *foreknow* anything at all. And yet the latter view has also proven controversial. Philosophers have worried about whether a timeless being can properly be said to love, or to act, or to bring about effects that are temporal, and whether such a being can know tensed facts, such as what time it is *right now*. Philosophers have also worried about whether a timeless being could be properly *personal*, since many characteristics of ordinary persons seem to involve temporality. Various responses have been proposed and discussed.
- God is also held to be *perfectly good* (see OMNIBENEVOLENCE; GOODNESS). Most philosophical work on this attribute has focused on what it would mean for God to be *morally perfect*, although this need not exhaust what it is for God to be perfectly good. Moral perfection has been thought to include omnibenevolence, and has been thought to ground God’s worship-worthiness. Some discussions of perfect goodness connect to the discussions of omnipotence. For example, philosophers have wondered whether God has, or lacks, the power to act in morally imperfect ways. The majority view is that God lacks this power, and that his so lacking does not count against his omnipotence. Another perennial topic concerns the relationship of God to morality. Contemporary analytic philosophers of religion have continued to grapple with the Euthyphro Dilemma (see EUTHYPHRO’S DILEMMA): do the standards of morality depend upon God, or are they independent of God? The former answer threatens to make morality arbitrary, on the grounds that God might have willed morality to be otherwise than it is. Meanwhile, the latter threatens to compromise God’s sovereignty, on the grounds that morality is something entirely outside God’s control. Most contemporary analytic philosophers of religion have opted for the latter horn, while attempting to resist the worry about divine sovereignty. They typically hold that core moral truths or principles are necessary, like the laws of logic, and that, accordingly, they do not to pose undue constraints upon God.

For more on the DIVINE ATTRIBUTES, see Swinburne (1977), Wierenga (1989), and Oppy (2014).

### *Arguments for atheism*

Many arguments for atheism (see ATHEISM; ATHEOLOGY) have been discussed by contemporary analytic philosophers of religion. This subsection briefly surveys some that have received the most attention.

Some a priori arguments for atheism claim that a particular divine attribute is essential to God, and also that it is incoherent. For example, as noted above, it has been alleged that no being can be omniscient (since there is no set of all true propositions), and likewise that no being can be omnipotent (due to the Paradox of the Stone). Other a priori arguments for atheism claim that there is a logical incompatibility between two or more of the putative divine attributes. For example, as noted above, some take there to be a conflict between omnipotence and perfect goodness, on the grounds that an omnipotent being must have the power to act immorally, while a perfectly good being must lack that power. One way to resist arguments of the former type, of course, is to deny that the allegedly incoherent attribute should be ascribed to God. One way to resist arguments of the latter type, of course, is to deny that one or both of the allegedly incompatible attributes should be ascribed to God. But these are minority responses. The individual coherence and joint compossibility of these attributes is more typically defended, and sophisticated discussions have ensued.

Another a priori argument for atheism claims that there is a logical incompatibility between the idea that God is perfectly good and the idea that there is no best of all possible worlds. Consider the latter idea first. The dominant view in contemporary analytic philosophy of religion holds that for any world that there might be, a still better one is possible. Accordingly, there is an infinite hierarchy of increasingly better possible worlds. Now, a common way to understand God's creative activity is to say that God selects one of these possible worlds and *actualizes* it – makes it actual. But for any world that God might choose, given the ontological backdrop at issue, God might have chosen a better one. And it might seem that if it is possible, no matter what, that God brings about a better outcome, then it is possible, no matter what, that God performs a better action. But if, no matter what, God can perform a better action, then it might seem that God is surpassable.

A minority response to this argument holds that there is, after all, one unique best of all possible worlds – in which case the problem cannot arise. (But grave difficulties are thought to beset this response. Here are two. First, it has been argued that if there were a unique best of all possible worlds, then God would not be free to refrain from actualizing it – but, of course, God's choice in creation is supposed to be free. Second, and relatedly, many philosophers have held that it is clear that the actual world is *not* the best of all possible worlds.) Most responses, however, have sought to show, in various ways, that some worlds are *good enough* for God to actualize, even though better worlds were available for God to choose instead. For more on this argument, see Kraay (2010).

Other arguments for atheism claim that there is some sort of tension between one or more of the divine attributes, on the one hand, and some feature of the actual

world, on the other. Given the latter claim, of course, these are a posteriori arguments. The remainder of this subsection discusses three prominent examples: the *logical problem of evil*, the *evidential* or *inductive problem of evil*, and the *problem of divine hiddenness*. (On the former two, see EVIL AND SUFFERING; EVIL AS A PROBLEM FOR THEISM; on the latter, see DIVINE HIDDENNESS.)

The so-called *logical problem of evil* holds that there is a contradiction between omniscience, omnipotence, and perfect goodness, on the one hand, and the existence of evil on the other hand. The driving thought is that an omniscient being would know about the existence (or imminent existence) of evil; that an omnipotent being would be able to eliminate or prevent the evil; and that a perfectly good being would do so. But, since evil exists, the argument continues, we can deduce that God does not. One reply accepts that the contradiction is real, given all three of the attributes in question, and then eliminates the contradiction by eliminating (or significantly redescribing) one or more of the attributes from one's conception of God. Another strategy likewise accepts that the contradiction is real, but eases it by denying that evil exists. Neither of these responses has had much traction in analytic philosophy of religion. By far the most significant response seeks to show that God might have morally acceptable reasons for permitting some evil to occur. The most prominent version of this move is due to Alvin Plantinga (1932–), who argues that God had morally acceptable reasons for creating libertarian-free creatures, and that it might not have been possible for God to create such creatures who never do evil (see Plantinga 1974). This response remains controversial, although theistically inclined analytic philosophers of religion tend to regard it as decisive. (One point of controversy is whether human beings can properly be thought to have libertarian free will at all [see FREE WILL].)

Suppose that Plantinga is correct: if so, then the fact that libertarian-free creatures do evil does not establish the nonexistence of God. But there are other sources of evil. One might wonder whether the evil that is *not* caused by libertarian-free creatures (such as the suffering caused by volcanos, tsunamis, and the like) is compatible with God's existence. The dominant response has urged that, possibly, God could not have created the world governed by a stable set of natural laws without permitting the possibility of such events – and that God had adequate reason to create such a world. This suggestion, too, is controversial. It is helpful to note a bit of terminology here. Accounts of what God's reasons for permitting evil *might be* are called *defenses*, since they are devised in order to defend theism against charges of logical incompatibility with some features of the world. Accounts that purport to state what God's reasons *actually are* are called *theodicies* (see THEODICY; and for criticisms of this approach, see ANTI-THEODICY). Many accounts of both types have been devised and debated.

The *evidential* or *inductive problem of evil* holds, more modestly, that some fact about evil renders theism *improbable*. The most-discussed such argument is due to William Rowe (1931–2015; see ROWE, WILLIAM L.), who argues that many instances of suffering appear to be gratuitous: they serve no greater good. Accordingly, Rowe thinks, it is likely that gratuitous evil really does exist. But, Rowe continues, while an omniscient, omnipotent, perfectly good God might permit some evil to occur,



such a being would certainly not permit any *gratuitous evil* to occur. Accordingly, he concludes that the likely existence of gratuitous evil renders theism improbable. The dominant response to this argument seeks to show that for any given evil, we are not entitled to conclude that it likely is gratuitous. This response has been termed *SKEPTICAL THEISM*. It is skeptical of our ability to discern, of a given evil, that it is gratuitous, on the grounds that for all we know, God might have reasons beyond our ken for permitting this evil to occur. This response is enormously controversial, and has generated a large literature. Critics of skeptical theism have held that its skepticism metastasizes into other areas. For example, this skepticism is thought to undermine ordinary morality in the following way. Suppose that you are in a position to prevent or reduce some extreme suffering. It then occurs to you that, given skeptical theism, God might well have good reasons for permitting this suffering to occur. This realization, some think, undermines your antecedent moral reasons for preventing or reducing the suffering. A minority response to the evidential or inductive problem of evil urges that, contrary to what one might initially suppose, God might well permit gratuitous evils to occur. For more on the problem of evil, see McBrayer and Howard-Snyder (2013).

The *problem of divine hiddenness* holds that there is a tension between the idea that God is *perfectly loving*, on the one hand, and the idea that reasonable nonbelief in God occurs, on the other. The foremost defender of this type of argument is J.L. Schellenberg (1959–). Schellenberg argues that God would seek a personal relationship with all human beings who are capable of having such a relationship, given that (i) many theistic traditions posit that an explicit personal relationship with God is the greatest good that human beings can enjoy, and that (ii) a loving God would seek to bring about the greatest good for human beings. In order to make such a relationship possible, Schellenberg argues, God would ensure that each relationship-capable human being believes that God exists. After all, he says, one cannot be in a personal relationship without believing that the other party exists. But, Schellenberg continues, many people, both past and present, are entirely reasonable in failing to believe that God exists. This basic argument can be spelled out in deductive, inductive, or abductive ways. Various responses have been devised and debated. Some have argued that all nonbelief in God is unreasonable, while others have argued that one can indeed be in a personal relationship with a being who one does not believe exists. The most prominent responses, however, seek to identify a good for the sake of which God can plausibly be thought to hide (i.e. permit reasonable nonbelief). For example, some argue that God hides in order to safeguard human freedom. The underlying thought is that if God's existence were obvious to all (relationship-capable) human beings, this would coerce us to behaving morally – and God would wish to avoid this. Others argue that God hides in order that human beings may come to knowledge of God on their own. Still others argue that God might be justified in hiding, on certain occasions, in order to make possible a richer relationship at a later time. All of these responses, of course, are controversial. For more on the problem of divine hiddenness, see Schellenberg (2007).

### *Arguments for theism*

Many arguments for theism have been discussed by contemporary analytic philosophers of religion. This subsection briefly surveys some that have received the most attention.

Ontological arguments (see ONTOLOGICAL ARGUMENT) attempt to deduce, a priori, that God exists, by careful reflection on the concept of God. The *locus classicus* for such arguments is again Anselm, who famously argued that if God were to exist merely as an object of our thoughts, and not in reality as well, then God would be surpassable. A truly unsurpassable being, Anselm thought, would exist in reality as well as in our thoughts. In recent decades, this sort of reasoning has been transposed into the language of modal logic. Suppose that an essentially unsurpassable being is possible, i.e. that it exists in at least one possible world. Could a being be genuinely unsurpassable while failing to exist in some possible worlds? Defenders of contemporary ontological arguments think not, and thus argue that proper reflection on what it is to be an essentially unsurpassable being reveals that if such a being *possibly* exists (i.e. exists in one or more possible worlds), then it *necessarily* exists (i.e. exists in all possible worlds). This sort of argument remains enormously controversial. One important objection holds that there is no reason to think that an essentially unsurpassable being so much as *possibly* exists. Another objection attempts to reduce the argument to absurdity by showing that parallel reasoning can establish the necessary existence of all sorts of beings that are not seriously taken to exist.

*Cosmological arguments* (see COSMOLOGICAL ARGUMENT) are a posteriori in that they employ as a premise some claim about spatio-temporal reality. They are typically deductive. Some argue that an infinite regress of contingent spatio-temporal causes is impossible, and that, accordingly, there must be a first, uncaused cause of contingent spatio-temporal reality – and that this is God (see KALĀM COSMOLOGICAL ARGUMENT). Others argue that even if there is an infinite regress of causes, the fact that such a regress exists *itself* requires explanation, and they conclude that the best explanation for the existence of such a regress is a God. Both versions depend on the PRINCIPLE OF SUFFICIENT REASON. It is worth noting that these arguments, if sound, only establish that a being exists who exemplifies certain characteristics, such as being the first cause, or perhaps existing necessarily. By their nature, cosmological arguments cannot establish the other traditional divine attributes, and so their overall contribution to the case for the existence of God is limited, although they can play a role in a CUMULATIVE CASE ARGUMENT for theism. An important criticism of the former kind of cosmological argument holds that an infinite regress of causes is indeed possible. An important criticism of the latter type holds that it's false that the existence of the regress itself requires explanation, over and above an explanation of the existence of each item in the series. Important criticisms of both target the Principle of Sufficient Reason, and considerable discussion has involved how best to articulate, defend, and criticize this principle.

*Teleological arguments*, or *design arguments*, are a posteriori attempts to show that, probably, spatio-temporal reality was purposed or designed by God (see

TELEOLOGICAL ARGUMENT). Traditional attempts, such as that of William Paley (1743–1805; see PALEY, WILLIAM), argue that the universe as a whole is relevantly and sufficiently similar to artifacts we reasonably believe to be designed, and that, by analogy, it is reasonable to believe that the universe as a whole was designed. Contemporary design arguments are typically not analogical, but *abductive*: they seek to show that the best explanation of certain features of spatio-temporal reality is divine design. The most prominent such strategy appeals to the *biophilic* character of our universe: its capacity to produce and sustain life (see FINE-TUNING ARGUMENT). Many features of our universe are such that, if they had been ever so slightly different, life would not have been possible on earth. Contemporary design arguments urge that the best explanation of this fact is that an intelligent force (or forces) fine-tuned our universe in order to make life possible. It is worth noting that even if such arguments succeed, they only establish that there now exists (or perhaps once existed), some intelligent designer (or perhaps multiple such designers). Accordingly, such arguments' contribution to the case for the existence of God is limited, although they too can play a role in a cumulative case argument for theism. The most important contemporary criticism of these arguments takes its cue from the various multiverse theories currently discussed by cosmologists. The criticism holds that if there are vastly many universes which vary (perhaps randomly) with respect to the relevant parameters, then it should not come as a surprise that at least one universe is life-permitting.

### *The epistemology of religious belief and experience*

This subsection discusses the following four topics: reformed epistemology, the epistemology of religious experience, faith, and the epistemology of religious diversity and disagreement.

The enormous, ongoing debates about the probative force of arguments for and against theism might suggest that the epistemic propriety of belief in God fundamentally concerns *arguments*. But this has been forcefully denied. A movement called *REFORMED EPISTEMOLOGY* – named for the inspiration its originators found in John Calvin and other thinkers of the Protestant Reformation (see *REFORMED TRADITION, THE*) – has sought to show that belief in God can be rational even if it is not based on evidence (see, relatedly, *EVIDENTIALISM*). According to reformed epistemologists, it can be epistemically appropriate, in certain circumstances, to believe that God exists, even without any supporting evidence or argument. One line of support for this claim holds that the belief that God exists is (or at least can be) relevantly or sufficiently similar to other beliefs (such as the belief in other minds, or the belief that the external world exists) which are widely taken to be rationally acceptable in the absence of supporting evidence or argument. Another line of support is conditional: if God exists, it is held, it's reasonable to expect that God would have given us a *sensus divinitatis* that directly furnishes us with the belief that God exists, without supporting evidence or argument. The former seeks to show that such belief in God *is indeed* epistemically appropriate; the latter seeks to

show that belief in God *would be* epistemically appropriate if theism is true. Against the first line of support, critics have urged that belief in God is not relevantly or sufficiently similar to the beliefs in question. Against the second line of support, critics have urged, by way of *reductio*, that parallel reasoning can be constructed to license absurd beliefs, such as the belief that the Great Pumpkin will return every Halloween to visit the worthiest pumpkin patches.

A related research program in contemporary analytic philosophy of religion concerns the epistemology of religious experience (see RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE). Considerable effort has been expended to try to characterize what makes an experience *religious* in character, and to identify various types of such experiences. (Special attention has been given to *mystical religious experiences*; see MYSTICISM.) The central debate has concerned whether, and if so in what circumstances, religious experiences can be sources of justified religious beliefs, or even religious knowledge. One prominent model urges that (certain) religious experiences are relevantly and sufficiently similar to sensory perception – and since sensory perception is generally deemed to be a defeasible source of justification and knowledge, these religious experiences should be treated likewise (see Alston 1991). This move is supported by appeal to what is sometimes called the *Principle of Credulity*, which holds that when it epistemically seems that something is so, then it is reasonable to deem it to really be so, in the absence of defeaters. Some critics of the epistemic value of religious experiences have said that they are neither relevantly nor sufficiently similar to perceptual experiences. For example, it has been urged that while perceptual experiences are typically rich, detailed, well-integrated, and amenable to intersubjective verification and falsification, religious experiences are typically none of these things. Other critics have attempted to undermine the epistemic standing of religious experiences by appeal to findings from the COGNITIVE SCIENCE OF RELIGION, especially those which suggest that human beings' tendency to have such experiences is merely an unreliable byproduct of evolutionary processes, and, accordingly, should not be taken to have significant epistemic standing (see COGNITIVE SCIENCE AND DEBUNKING ARGUMENTS OF RELIGIOUS BELIEF).

*Faith* (see FAITH; KNOWLEDGE AND FAITH) is often considered to be a religious attitude – perhaps even *the* paradigmatically religious attitude – and analytic philosophers of religion have paid considerable attention to epistemological questions pertaining to it. Of course, the word “faith” is used in many different ways by philosophers and within many religious traditions. One important project, therefore, is to taxonomize different ways this term is used, and to discuss the relative merits and demerits of each. In ordinary parlance, faith is sometimes understood to mean “belief in the absence of evidence,” and it is sometimes thought that such faith is obviously irrational. As we have seen, it has been claimed that religious belief needn't be epistemically improper in the absence of evidence. But it has also been argued that faith needn't include belief at all. Faith is sometimes thought to involve an attitude like *trust*. Another nondoxastic understanding of faith takes it to centrally involve *hoping* that some religious proposition is true.

Considerable work has been done to flesh out and assess various models of faith, and to explore the perennial question of the relationship between faith and reason.

Evidently the world features tremendous religious diversity and disagreement. There is enormous variation in religious *practices* between (and within) the various religious traditions, past and present, and there is also significant variation with respect to *truth-claims* made. The latter form of diversity has drawn significant attention from contemporary analytic philosophers of religion. The following four positions can be understood as responses to this diversity (see also RELIGIOUS DISAGREEMENT).

- Perhaps the most prominent position espoused by religious believers has come to be called *exclusivism*. On this view, the truth-claims of one's own religion are true, and contrary truth-claims made by rival religions are false. Exclusivism has been alleged to be *epistemically* inappropriate in various ways (e.g. unjustified) and *morally* inappropriate in various ways (e.g. arrogant). An important response to these charges is due to Plantinga (1998). The discussion of the epistemic charge against exclusivism both prefigured and influenced the later debate in mainstream analytic epistemology about the epistemology of disagreement.
- A second position is *pluralism* (see RELIGIOUS PLURALISM), notably defended by John Hick (1922–2012; see HICK, JOHN). Hick draws on a distinction, due to Immanuel Kant (1724–1804; see KANT, IMMANUEL), between the ineffable *noumenal* realm (the realm of things-in-themselves) and the *phenomenal realm* (the realm of things-as-humanly-experienced). According to Hick, Ultimate Reality, or the Real, is to be found in the former, and the human perceptions and conceptions of religious experience are to be found in the latter. Importantly, according to Hick, different religious traditions have different perceptions and conceptions of the noumenal realm, which explains why they disagree – but Ultimate Reality is utterly inaccessible to human conceptions and perceptions. Hick says that although great religious traditions understand Ultimate Reality differently, they all call on their adherents to relate rightly to it, and, in so doing, to move from self-centeredness to Reality-centeredness. Hick takes this model to be the best explanation of religious diversity. This view is criticized in various ways. It has been said to be epistemically incoherent by attributing characteristics to the Real that the view itself does not permit. It has been charged with holding too simplistically that the essence of all major religious traditions is self-improvement. And critics have denied, in various ways, that it is the best explanation of religious diversity.
- A third position, *relativism*, has not been popular among analytic philosophers of religion. This view holds that it is a mistake to think that there are absolute, objective, religious truths. Rather, religious truth is relative to the frame of reference, or perhaps worldview, of religious groups.
- Finally, an important response to religious diversity and disagreement is *skepticism*. One version of skepticism is informed by the recent profusion of research

in the cognitive science of religion (see COGNITIVE SCIENCE OF RELIGION; COGNITIVE SCIENCE AND DEBUNKING ARGUMENTS OF RELIGIOUS BELIEF). Some cognitive scientists have postulated that human brains evolved with a suite of cognitive mechanisms that make us susceptible to religious beliefs. For example, our brains are thought to have a *hyper-active agency detection module*: we are far more likely to falsely posit agency where there is none than to falsely deny agency when it is present. This tendency confers an adaptive advantage, since there is a low cost to over-attributing agency and a high cost to under-attributing agency. Some cognitive scientists have postulated that many religious beliefs are merely the outputs of this module, and that, accordingly, their veracity should be doubted. These claims are enormously controversial. A completely different skeptical response to religious diversity is due to J.L. Schellenberg (forthcoming). Consider a particular religious belief, such as the claim that ultimate reality is a Trinitarian personal God. To affirm this claim is logically equivalent to denying a massive disjunction of rival religious claims. But, Schellenberg says, we should suspend judgment about this massive disjunction. For one thing, we don't know what all the disjuncts are, and for another, we don't have a clue what the probability of each one is. Accordingly, we should suspend judgment about the claim in question – and the same goes for any other such religious claim.

### ***Other canonical topics***

This subsection discusses four canonical topics that do not fit under previous sub-headings: miracles, the meaning of life, life after death, and heaven and hell.

Many religious traditions feature stories of MIRACLES. The most important text in the history of philosophy concerning miracles is chapter 10 of David Hume's (see HUME, DAVID) *Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding* (1748). Hume defines a miracle as *a transgression of a law of nature by a particular volition of the Deity*. First, Hume argues that the probative force of testimony in support of miracles, so defined, will (almost) always be inferior to the experiential evidence in support of the law of nature that the miracle supposedly violated. Second, Hume argues that the actual testimonial evidence in support of miracles is extremely poor. Hume's argument continues to receive considerable philosophical attention from analytic philosophers. Various interpretations and assessments have been proposed. More generally, philosophers have set out, defended, and criticized various accounts of "miracle" and "law of nature," and there continues to be a lively scholarly discussion about whether (and, if so, under what conditions) it can be reasonable to believe that a miracle has occurred.

There is a large contemporary literature on the meaning of life within analytic philosophy. Much of this literature involves the clarification, defense, and assessment of various proposals concerning what is necessary or sufficient for a life to be meaningful, or to lack meaning. Supernaturalist accounts suggest that a necessary condition for a life to be meaningful involves being in a certain sort of relationship

with a supernatural entity. *God-centered* supernaturalist accounts suggest that being in right relationship with God is this necessary condition, and this is often fleshed out by urging that a human life is meaningful to the extent that one fulfills (or at least attempts to fulfill) a divinely decreed purpose. Naturalist accounts, in contrast, hold that life can be meaningful in various ways without any appeal to supernatural beings. Some of these urge that there are objective standards for naturalistic meaning; others insist that the standards for meaning are subjective. Nihilist accounts, as the name suggests, hold that the conditions that would make a life meaningful either cannot or do not obtain. For more on this topic, see Seachris (2013).

Various religious traditions posit that, in one way or another, human beings can survive their own deaths as conscious persons. Some hold that this occurs through reincarnation (see REINCARNATION AND KARMA), others hold that we have immortal, immaterial souls (see SOUL) that survive the death of our bodies, and still others hold that persons can survive death through bodily RESURRECTION. All three views face the “problem of personal identity”: how can it be that the postmortem person is really the same person as the one who lived and died? Critics typically identify a necessary condition for personal identity that, they allege, cannot be met on these accounts; defenders respond either by rejecting the proffered condition or by arguing that it can indeed be met.

A related topic concerns exactly what happens to human beings in the afterlife, if there is such a thing (see AFTERLIFE; ESCHATOLOGY). Many religious traditions posit that, after their deaths, some human beings go to HEAVEN while others go to HELL. Heaven and hell are construed in various ways within different religious traditions. Contemporary philosophical reflection has sought to set out and analyze various conceptions of heaven and hell, especially within a theistic framework. There continues to be robust discussion about what exactly is required for entry to heaven. Relatedly, there is considerable discussion about whether only some, or all, persons go to heaven. *Universalism* is the thesis that all do. Proponents of universalism typically emphasize God’s love and mercy, whereas its detractors typically emphasize God’s justice. Discussions of hell concern whether and under what conditions it could be morally acceptable for God to consign anyone to hell – particularly if hell is construed as a place of eternal, conscious torment.

## Contemporary developments

The foregoing section surveyed a range of canonical topics in analytic philosophy of religion. This section will briefly describe two important contemporary developments, both of which seek, in their own way, to broaden the range of topics in this subfield.

Academic theology, especially as practiced by Christian theologians with appointments in Religious Studies departments and seminaries, has not seen much scholarly interaction with analytic philosophy of religion. Neither side has significantly influenced the other, and practitioners often regard those on the other side with suspicion or outright hostility. The typical charges are easy to state in admittedly cartoonish

form: theologians tend to regard analytic philosophy of religion as objectionably ahistorical, excessively focused on “logic-chopping,” and as unduly oriented towards defending an outmoded, conservative version of Christianity. Meanwhile, analytic philosophers of religion often disparage academic theologians as prone to rhetorical obscurantism, fawning intellectual hero-worship, and to devaluing reason and logic. This acrimony may seem surprising, since one would expect there to be many topics and approaches of mutual interest. But when academic theology draws on or engages with philosophy, it tends to be continental philosophy rather than analytic philosophy. (The reasons for this are too complex, and too controverted, to set out here.) In recent years, something of a movement has grown out of analytic philosophy of religion, that brands itself as “philosophical theology” or “analytic theology.” There is now a journal, *Analytic Theology*, and an annual conference, *Logos*, to showcase work in this area. Some of the canonical topics discussed above also appear under this heading, but other topics, pursued in the analytic style, are more characteristic of this new trend. For example, there is now a great deal of work done by philosophers on characteristically Christian theological topics such as the TRINITY, the incarnation, the ATONEMENT, and the SACRAMENTS. More broadly, there is work on ORIGINAL SIN, the authority of scripture, revelation (see REVELATION IN ABRAHAMIC FAITHS), PETITIONARY PRAYER, worship, liturgy, and on various methodological issues at the intersection of philosophy and theology. All of this currently flies under the banner “analytic theology.” Space does not permit even a cursory summary of the voluminous and interesting work done on these topics, but an excellent starting point for further reading in this area is William Wood’s (2009) review of five important volumes in analytic theology.

While some analytic philosophers of religion have sought to make inroads into theology, others have sought to broaden the range of topics in a different direction, by exploring nonmonotheistic versions of theism, and still other “isms.” The most-discussed examples of the former are *PANTHEISM* and *PANENTHEISM*. Roughly, pantheism holds that God is identical with nature, whereas panentheism holds that God includes, but is greater than and distinct from, nature. In recent years, lively discussions have emerged that seek to set out with greater precision what these views are, to identify variants of them, to connect these views to various traditional topics in the philosophy of religion, and to identify and critically evaluate objections to them. Meanwhile, J.L. Schellenberg (2009) has recommended that philosophers of religion pay more attention to a view he calls *ultimism*, which holds that there exists a reality that is ultimate in three respects: metaphysical, axiological, and soteriological. Clearly, traditional theism is a form of ultimism, but of course there can be many other such forms. Schellenberg himself counsels skepticism concerning the truth of ultimism, but thinks that careful attention to it can uncover other forms of religiosity. While many forms of religion involve reference to supernatural entities or a supernatural realm, other philosophers of religion have noted that religiosity can be naturalistic, and have recommended that these, too, be considered by analytic philosophers of religion. For more on these diverse approaches, see Diller and Kasher (2013) and Buckareff and Nagasawa (2016).



## Contemporary challenges

Analytic philosophy of religion faces several important challenges. It has been argued, on the one hand, that the range of topics considered is unduly narrow, and, on the other hand, that the standpoints inhabited and methods used by philosophers of religion are limited and limiting. Of course, these charges do not preclude each other. A common observation is that the field focuses excessively on the concerns and ideas of Western monotheism, especially Christianity, and most especially conservative Protestantism as currently practiced in the United States. Critics urge philosophers of religion to engage more, and more deeply, with other forms of religiosity, both supernaturalistic and naturalistic, both past and present, and both Western and Eastern. Relatedly, critics object that many debates in the field presuppose that the only two worldviews that merit serious philosophical exploration are monotheism and naturalism, and that, accordingly, arguments against one of these are perforce arguments for the other. Critics have also urged that philosophers of religion have devoted inadequate attention to religious issues that involve race, gender, sexual orientation, class, (dis)ability, and the plight of nonhuman animals (see *NATURE, ANIMALS, AND ECOLOGY*, and Timpe and Hereth 2020). Space does not permit discussing all of these, so the remainder of this section will briefly discuss feminist concerns, and a related demographic concern about the homogeneity of current practitioners in the field.

Feminist approaches (see *GENDER AND FEMINIST PERSPECTIVES*) have made trenchant criticisms of, and important contributions to, contemporary analytic philosophy of religion. Feminist philosophers of religion have long noted that many religious traditions – and especially the monotheistic traditions that have been a central focus of the subdiscipline – have exhibited misogyny in many ways. Moreover, feminist philosophers have urged, this tendency has been reflected within analytic philosophy of religion. Feminist philosophers have held that much philosophical analysis about God encodes and valorizes sexist, masculine-centered assumptions, and thereby enables and legitimizes forms of oppression of women. For example, attributes like omnipotence, transcendence, immutability, and aseity continue to be associated with stereotypically masculine ideals, and women continue to be understood in opposition to them. Feminist philosophers of religion have not only criticized these conceptions of God as limited and limiting, they have also proposed and defended rival conceptions of God that are more inclusive. Another important contribution has been to apply feminist-standpoint epistemology to the epistemology of religious belief. This involves acknowledging the socially situated character of claims to religious belief, justification, and knowledge, and interrogating through a feminist lens the (often gendered) assumptions concerning objectivity and rationality that “standard” epistemology presupposes. For more on feminist philosophy of religion, see Anderson (1998) and Jantzen (1999).

An important related set of criticisms of analytic philosophy of religion focuses on the homogeneity of its practitioners. The academic discipline of philosophy

is male-dominated, and preponderantly white, heterosexual, nondisabled, and middle-to-upper class. It is often thought that increasing the diversity of the practitioners of analytic philosophy of religion in various respects would improve the field in various ways.

Moreover, there appears to be a striking asymmetry between some of the beliefs held by trained philosophers (i.e. those who hold doctorates) in all subfields, and those trained philosophers who specialize in the philosophy of religion. Here are the responses given by the former group to a recent survey question about belief in God (for details, see <http://philpapers.org/surveys>, accessed 8 June 2020):

**Table 1** Philosophers' views about theism.

Accept: atheism	1041/1803 (57.7%)
Lean towards: atheism	216/1803 (12.0%)
Accept: theism	210/1803 (11.6%)
Agnostic/undecided	117/1803 (6.5%)
Lean towards: theism	85/1803 (4.7%)
The question is too unclear to answer	30/1803 (1.7%)
Accept another alternative	28/1803 (1.6%)
Reject both	26/1803 (1.4%)
Skip	14/1803 (0.8%)
Accept an intermediate view	14/1803 (0.8%)
There is no fact of the matter	11/1803 (0.6%)
Other	9/1803 (0.5%)
Accept both	1/1803 (0.1%)
Insufficiently familiar with the issue	1/1803 (0.1%)

As Table 1 shows, in this survey 1257 out of 1803 respondents (69.7%) accept or lean towards atheism, while 295/1803 (16.3%) accept or lean towards theism. But when the respondents are limited to philosophers of religion, however, the following results emerge:

**Table 2** The views of philosophers of religion about theism.

Accept: theism	63/101 (62.4%)
Accept: atheism	15/101 (14.9%)
Lean towards: theism	7/101 (6.9%)
Agnostic/undecided	5/101 (5.0%)
Lean towards: atheism	5/101 (5.0%)
Accept another alternative	3/101 (3.0%)
Reject both	3/101 (3.0%)

As Table 2 shows, within the subgroup of philosophers of religion, 70/101 respondents accept or lean towards theism, while 20/101 accept or lean towards atheism.

A similar asymmetry was found in a survey conducted by Helen de Cruz in 2011–2012. (For details, see [https://www.academia.edu/1438058/Results\\_of\\_my\\_survey\\_on\\_natural\\_theological\\_arguments](https://www.academia.edu/1438058/Results_of_my_survey_on_natural_theological_arguments), accessed 8 June 2020.) De Cruz had 802 respondents, most of whom were graduate students or PhD-holders in philosophy. The table below partitions the responses into those who have, and those who lack, an area of specialization (AOS) in the philosophy of religion (POR):

**Table 3** Philosophers' views about theism.

	<i>AOS in POR</i>	<i>No AOS in POR</i>
Theist	73.1%	23.9%
Atheist	17%	52.4%
Agnostic	10%	23.7%

As Table 3 shows, this survey suggests that the percentage of theists among philosophers of religion is triple the percentage of theists among trained philosophers more generally. Three important limitations of these surveys should be noted. First, in both surveys, respondents self-declared their level of training in philosophy and their areas of specialization. Second, neither survey specifically targeted *analytic* philosophers of religion. Third, neither survey defined “theism,” so it is entirely possible that respondents understood this important term in different ways.

Notwithstanding these limitations, there is a widespread sense that theists are significantly overrepresented in analytic philosophy of religion, relative to the field as a whole. This, together with the other forms of homogeneity noted earlier, has been thought to contribute to the narrowness of topic, standpoint, and method that critics have alleged to exist. An important recent paper (Draper and Nichols 2013) urges that work in philosophy of religion is too partisan, too polemical, too narrow, and too often evaluated by religious or theological criteria, and that its practitioners, given the homogeneity noted, are prone to cognitive bias and undue group influence in their philosophizing. The paper offers four recommendations for philosophers of religion: (i) it encourages them to avoid apologetics; (ii) to more carefully consider arguments *against* the religious beliefs they antecedently hold; (iii) to allow the voices of religious tradition and authority to grow dim, and instead follow the philosophical arguments where they lead; and (iv) to embrace risk by being prepared to abandon their cherished beliefs. For more on challenges to contemporary analytic philosophy of religion, see Trakakis (2008) and Draper and Schellenberg (2017).

**See also:** ATHEISM; ATHEOLOGY; DIVINE ATTRIBUTES; EVIL AS A PROBLEM FOR THEISM; PRINCIPLE OF SUFFICIENT REASON; VERIFICATION PRINCIPLE

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