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4. Philosophical Approaches

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Introduction

Philosophical approaches to the study of religion are presently going through a crisis of identity. Two questions make the nature of this crisis clearer. First, *where* is a philosophical approach to the study of religion to be found? The question is important because in answering it we are forced to think about where we can find people who are undertaking this kind of approach; and knowing where they can be found might give us a clue in understanding what it is they are doing. However, the question appears to have no straightforward answer. We can find people adopting philosophical approaches to the study of religion in philosophy departments, religious studies departments, theology departments, and in humanities departments. So it would seem that philosophical approaches have no single home; and the fact that they are undertaken in a number of different contexts contributes to their crisis of identity.

The second question points to why the having of many different homes or contexts makes the crisis one of identity. *What* is it that people who are adopting philosophical approaches to the study of religion are doing? Again, it should be no surprise that there seems to be no single answer forthcoming or in relation to which agreement can even be reached. There is a kind of 'horses for courses' acceptance that we are dealing with a vast area of interest about which there will naturally be disagreement and often division.

Seldom examined are the reasons behind the variety and range of responses this question evokes. As a person who is interested in philosophical approaches to the study of religion, what do *you*, the

reader, think you are doing? What activity or set of activities are you engaged in doing? What is your interest in this chapter? (If you like, take some time before reading on to pause and think about this. Write your answers on a sheet of paper.) Answers to this question show the importance of the context in which a person undertakes a philosophical study of religion.

For example, if you are a student of philosophy, the approach to the study of religion likely to be taken will focus on the problems of coherence and consistency involved in holding a concept of 'God', and be concerned with the grounds which support religious belief, and the justification of religious claims to say anything of meaning about persons, the world, and God.¹ If you are a student in a religious studies programme, the philosophical approach to the study of religion is more likely to focus on the 'intellectual dimension of religion'.² The phrase is intended to indicate that reason and rationality form only one aspect of the phenomenon of religion, and that any study of religion must be primarily concerned with describing and understanding the beliefs and practices held by members of a religious tradition. Indeed, the method often used in religious studies to study religion is sometimes called a 'phenomenological approach',³ where the emphasis is on uncovering and understanding the phenomenon of religion rather than on assessing the evidence and evaluating the truth of what a religion claims (see Chapter 3).⁴ If you are a student in a theology programme, the philosophical approach to the study of religion is likely to be investigative and exploratory, focusing on how ideas and concepts in the history of philosophy enable us to have a better understanding of doctrine or grasp more accurately the insights of theologians.⁵ Philosophical tools and techniques are used to explore theological issues, and to enable students to be able to do theology better; indeed, the approach is sometimes referred to as 'philosophical theology'.⁶

So two points begin to emerge. First, it is not possible to speak of *the* philosophical approach to religion: there are many philosophical approaches, and care must be taken to identify at the outset exactly what kind of approach is being taken. (Indeed, you might like to ask yourself what approach is being taken in this chapter!) Second, the approach taken will depend on the context in which the person is working. That context will to a large degree determine what a person understands him or herself to be doing. And it is important that anyone who adopts a distinctively philosophical approach to the study of religion is aware both of what their context is, and consequently what they are trying to achieve.

But here we arrive at the heart of the problem; what is a 'distinctively' philosophical approach? The problem can be summed up in the phrase found in nearly all course programmes and introductory books on the subject – 'philosophy of religion'. Stated simply, the problem is that in so far as what is being dealt with is *philosophy*, the question always remains: what does it have to do with religion? In so far as what is being dealt with is *religion*, the question always remains: what does it have to do with philosophy? Students of philosophy may often find themselves wondering why they have to bother with religion at all; and students of religious studies or theology might wonder just what relevance philosophy has for their studies.⁷ In each case, the relationship between contexts is at best implicit and vague, and at worst it leaves people feeling somewhat suspicious and dismissive of the philosophical enterprise – a kind of 'tried that: no use' attitude.

This attitude is best captured in a famous question posed by Tertullian: 'What indeed has Athens to do with Jerusalem? What has the Academy to do with the Church? What have heretics to do with Christians?'⁸ Tertullian's question is posed in terms of setting Athens and Jerusalem in contrast or conflict with each other. He saw Athens as the home of philosophy (the Academy); and he saw Jerusalem as the home of religion (the Christian church). What he does is accuse philosophy of heresy; he views the philosophical enterprise as being heretical. But why?

The answer appears to focus on the nature of faith. Christianity is a matter of revelation; God reveals himself through the prophets, becomes incarnate in Jesus Christ, who is raised from the dead for the salvation of persons. God's message of salvation, the 'good news' of the gospel, is recorded in the Bible, which is God's 'word' to the human race. And if we look to the Bible, we can clearly see that it contains no philosophy. The prophets do not engage in lengthy debates about the nature and existence of God; Jesus and the disciples do not feel any burning need to speculate about the possibility of miracles and the problem of evil! Salvation is a matter of faith; the message of salvation found in the Bible is in words written in faith to those who have faith, or are seeking faith.

It is important to note the way in which the answer has been outlined. Although the case appears to be built on the nature of faith, there is actually nothing in the previous paragraph to lead a person to accuse philosophy of being heretical. *If* there is no philosophy in the Bible, then that is all there is to say. There is no reason to go further and

brand philosophy as a heretical enterprise. The fact that Tertullian does make this move suggests there are other reasons at work. These suspicions are confirmed if we take a closer look at Tertullian's thinking. Heresies, he claims, are 'instigated' by philosophy.

Heretics and philosophers handle the same subject matter. . . . Wretched Aristotle! who taught them dialectic, that art of building up and demolishing, so protean in statement, so far-fetched in conjecture, so unyielding in controversy, so productive of disputes; self-stultifying, since it is ever handling questions but never settling anything.⁹

So the real reason for Tertullian's rejection of philosophy is not because of the nature of faith argument outlined above, but because of a nature of philosophy argument. His accusation against philosophy is based on what he conceives the philosophical enterprise to be about; his rejection is in fact built on his conception of what philosophy is.

Indeed, here we encounter a first common conception of the nature of philosophy. The conception takes three forms. In the first form, it takes the charge of irrelevance. Philosophical disputes and debates have no bearing on reality: they are more concerned with arguments – stating a position, finding fault in that position, trying to restate the position, finding fault in the restatement, and so on *ad nauseam*. Further, these arguments result from what are seen as being silly questions. Tertullian's fury is vented against the Stoics and the Platonists – the 'yapping dogs' whose 'ever restless curiosity' has 'infected the brethren' in discussions over the nature of human beings, the existence of the soul, and the goodness of God.¹⁰ Modern philosophy uses 'thought experiments' to try and think about various issues; for example, if I cut my brain in half, and put half in one room, and half in another room, where am I?¹¹ These kinds of question, and the debates they foster, are endless disputes which have no point. This is part of Tertullian's case: and certainly many students find themselves saying similar things.

In the second form, the issue of relevance becomes tied to the issue of use. Of what use is philosophy? Philosophy deals with all sorts of questions, and yet never seems to arrive at any answers or conclusions. If this is the case we have to wonder what point there is spending time and effort in doing something which provides no results. Further, in some people's minds, the question of use is tied inseparably to the issue of proof. The point of philosophy, so the argument goes, is to prove or disprove certain positions – for example, in deciding the issue of the

existence of God. By advancing certain arguments, for example, about the design and structure of the world, it should be possible to prove that God exists. Or, by pointing to the scale of evil and human suffering, it should be possible to prove that God does not exist.

The third form follows from what we have already said. In the light of philosophy's perceived inability to provide firm conclusions, people often voice the view that philosophy is nothing more than a matter of opinion – and, after all, everyone is entitled to their opinions. In other words, philosophy is essentially a private matter of personally held beliefs and opinions which are beyond challenge, they do not have to be justified to other people.

A second common perception is that philosophy has a reputation for being 'difficult', in the sense of being 'intellectual'. One of the great conversation-stoppers at a party is to admit to being a philosopher! Such an admission usually guarantees a stunned silence, with a polite moving on to other things. The very idea of philosophy carries connotations of an atmosphere which is intensely intellectual. This is confirmed by images of the philosopher bowed in thought, hand pressed across a furrowed forehead, the problems of existence, life, and the universe troubling the ever inquisitive mind. The impression is created that philosophy is an intellectual discipline which can be performed only by skilled intellectuals. And this is what some philosophers would have us believe. The task of deep thought is for the elite few who are specially trained to undertake such an arduous discipline.

A third common perception can be seen when people refer to 'popular' philosophy. Philosophy is 'popular' in the sense of being a system of simple anecdotes by which people live their lives. People talk about their 'philosophy of life': for example, 'always look on the bright side of life'; 'Do unto others and then scarper before they can do it unto you'. You hear football players talking about the philosophy of a game: in American football, 'our philosophy was to contain the quarterback in the pocket, and blitz the corner backs'; in English football, 'our philosophy was to knock it around the back three, try and catch the opposition on the break with the long ball forward to the striker'. Everyone, it seems, is in the business of producing philosophies, or taking philosophical approaches.

These are some of the common conceptions of what philosophy is. By and large they are also misconceptions; and if we are to show how philosophical approaches to religion become important, we must begin by briefly making an initial response to them. With regard to the first

charge of irrelevance it is difficult to know how to respond, primarily because the focus of the charge is ambiguous. 'Relevance' is a conveniently slippery term; who decides what is and what is not relevant? What criteria are being used to make the distinction?

Tertullian's outburst against philosophy seems to point to the essential unrelatedness of philosophy and religion; and his concern is that, when the two are brought together, philosophy distorts and destroys what lies at the heart of religion. Even if philosophy and religion are not unrelated, they must be kept apart. In response, Dalferth argues that when we come to study religion, it is impossible to avoid doing philosophy. A philosophical approach to religion 'reflects on questions arising in pre-theological religious experience and the discourse of faith'.¹² In other words, the task of philosophy is to look at problems which surround human experience, the factors that can make human experience 'religious', and to examine the language believers use in talking about their faith. For Dalferth, it is 'the rationality of its reflective labour in the process of faith seeking understanding which inseparably links it with philosophy'. In struggling to make itself understood, both internally in the sense of a religious tradition's attempt to explore the nature and meaning of its faith, and externally in the sense of trying to explain and articulate that meaning to those who do not stand within the tradition, religion becomes inseparably linked with philosophy.

The link between them focuses on rationality; a philosophical approach to religion, we can argue, is a rational process. By this we mean two things. First, we are pointing to the fact that reason has a fundamental part to play in a religious tradition's reflection on its experiences and beliefs. Part of the process of reflection involves looking closely at the language, doctrine, symbols, models, and myths the tradition has and uses. Second, we are pointing to the fact that in expounding its faith, a religious tradition must be able to use reason in producing logical arguments and making justifiable claims.¹³ It cannot be a matter of presenting a set of claims about which there can be no debate or discussion; part of the credibility of a religious tradition is its ability to enter into reasoned and reasonable dialogue with other religious traditions and the community in which it stands.

Further, the business of reflection and reasoning is a process which requires continual effort and attention. This fact needs to be asserted against the charge that philosophy is of no use, or is simply a matter of opinion. If by 'use' what is being referred to is the inability of

philosophical approaches to provide a firm set of answers and conclusions which might amount to some kind of 'proof', then perhaps we need to say two things.

First, we need to understand that 'philosophy is primarily an *activity*, something to be *done* by the individual'.¹⁴ Recognition of this fact leads us to argue that philosophical approaches are themselves an ongoing process of interaction and engagement. The nature of this activity means there is no expectation that we will always arrive at firm 'answers' or 'solutions', or even that arriving at answers and solutions is the point of doing philosophy in the first place. Students who do philosophy in the expectation of arriving at certain answers will be disappointed.

As an activity, philosophy is something undertaken by the individual; it is a gradual, life-long process of working through ideas, arguments, thoughts, experiences. These are necessarily personal, in the sense that they are about the interests and concerns which that person finds to be important. Thus there is no room for philosophy to be a copying, imitating or parroting of other people's ideas. One of the reasons philosophy is often unpopular in the sphere of religion is that it challenges notions of authority – people or books who supposedly have or provide 'answers'. The fact that some person is an 'authority' or that a particular text has been in existence for thousands of years is no guarantee that the views expressed are correct. Part of the philosophical enterprise is that the person doing it is working these things out for him or herself, arriving at conclusions that are tentative and provisional. This is not something that can be done for them by anyone else, no matter how great an 'authority' they may be.¹⁵

On this basis alone we can reject the charge that philosophy is simply a matter of opinion. It may be said that everyone is entitled to their opinions; the problem is, very few people think about them. What, for example, do we make of a 12-year-old boy who stands up in class and says: 'Hitler had the right idea of what to do with the Jews'?¹⁶ Is he really entitled to his opinion? And how do we distinguish 'holding an opinion' from bigotry and prejudice? In the case of the young boy, surely we would challenge him: *why* do you say this? What *arguments* do you have to support what you are saying? What *reasons* can you give to back up your position? If no answer is forthcoming, we would reject what he says as being worthless – 'just' an opinion. In fact, I suspect we would actually challenge him further; we would give arguments and reasons which would try to show why he should *not* hold this opinion or why his opinion was *false*.

In taking this standpoint we are led to the second thing we can say about philosophical approaches: that part of the activity of philosophy is learning how to think – a process which involves producing reasons and arguments. The production of reasons and arguments shows we are thinking about what we are saying or what it is we believe; we are trying to find a way of supporting and justifying our claims. In this respect, philosophy challenges things we usually take for granted; it forces us to think about beliefs we may never have questioned. Why do we hold them? What grounds do we have for holding them?¹⁷ Challenging these kinds of belief and assumption safeguards against prejudice and bigotry, and makes sure we know what we believe, and why we believe it. It is sometimes referred to as 'the examined life'.¹⁸

However, producing arguments is not the same thing as producing proofs. People who believe philosophy should be in the business of producing proofs usually mean that philosophy should be in the business of *persuasion*. Its usefulness is equated with how far we can use philosophy to persuade people of the truth of a certain position. Antony Flew summarizes the argument in the following way: 'the effect of confounding the notion of proof with that of persuasion is to suggest that no proof can be valid unless it is possible to persuade all comers of its validity'. As this is usually impossible, philosophy is judged to be of no use or worth.¹⁹

But again, such an argument shows a misconception of what philosophy is. It is not about teaching, preaching, converting, or indoctrinating. As an activity a philosophical approach 'will demand that you read closely and think carefully, that you articulate your thoughts clearly and that you be willing to see your own ideas laid out upon the table for rational and critical scrutiny'.²⁰ In other words, it understands 'proof' to be strategies of argument which can be put forward for public scrutiny and in relation to which reasons can be given for supporting and justifying that argument. Thus our conclusions are never settled, but always open to future exploration and reflection. This is why it is wrong to think about 'proof' as a once-for-all knock-down argument. Anyone who believes this is what they have has become closed to the possibility of thinking further about their position; and in most cases this can be dangerously dogmatic.

Responses to the claim that philosophical approaches are 'intellectual' are more quickly defended. If by 'intellectual' is meant 'difficult', then we must agree. The philosophical approach is a careful, methodical, thoughtful, evaluative, and critical process that certainly takes time

and effort. There are no easy answers or short cuts in the kind of thinking required. Philosophy can be made difficult by philosophers who write badly – who use technical and complex jargon – but this only means they are poor writers, not that philosophy is 'difficult'. Thomas Nagel argues that 'the centre of philosophy lies in certain questions which the reflective human mind finds naturally puzzling'.²¹ Why am I here? Why is there a world? What happens when I die? As soon as these questions are asked, the philosophical approach begins. Everyone is a natural philosopher. The philosophy we do in our colleges and universities is a refined version of the basic instinct to question and reflect which is in all of us. The aim of this 'academic' form of philosophizing 'is to question and understand very common ideas that all of us use every day without thinking about them'. It tries to 'push our understanding of the world and of ourselves a bit deeper'.²² The philosophical approach is a challenge to all of us to reflect a little more carefully about our experiences, our beliefs, and our assumptions.

We have spent a long time thinking about what philosophy is not, and trying to clear up misconceptions about what philosophical approaches are trying to do. Our initial responses give some insights about philosophy and a philosophical approach. It is easy to say, negatively, what philosophy is not, but harder to try and spell out more positively what philosophy is, and what philosophical approaches to the study of religion look like.

The historical development of philosophical approaches

Courses and introductory books on the subject tend to take what we can call a definitional approach. The strategy adopted is to try and focus on clarifying the nature of religion, closely followed by the attempt to try and focus on clarifying the nature of philosophy. The question is then inevitably posed: 'if this is what religion is, and if that is what philosophy is, what can we say about the philosophy of religion?' The idea is that if we can get a definition of one, and then the other, we can try and put together a definition of what the two together will look like.²³

The difficulty with taking such an approach is clear. Even if it is possible to get a rough outline idea of what people mean when they talk about 'religion', such a definition is likely to be vague and non-specific. If we try and define 'philosophy', the problem is just as acute. The

origins of philosophy go back to Greece; the term *philosophia* can be traced to the fifth century BCE to two Greek words, *philia* 'love', and *sophia* 'wisdom'. Philosophy is 'the love of wisdom'. But apart from possibly inspiring a dreamy romantic vision, what does this actually tell us about the nature of philosophy? The philosopher is the lover of wisdom; this chapter is the result of the process of loving wisdom! What does this mean? 'Wisdom' can refer to a variety of things; it can refer to 'knowledge' – the philosopher is a person who is knowledgeable about certain things. It can refer to 'life experience' – the philosopher's wisdom is the accumulation of a lifetime of experience and learning. It can also refer to 'insight' or 'discernment' – the philosopher is a person who can make intelligent, perceptive decisions and choices.²⁴

If we look at the definitions provided by two of the earliest lovers of wisdom – Plato and Aristotle – we can begin to see how these possibilities might make sense. Plato describes the philosopher as a person 'who is ready to taste every form of knowledge, is glad to learn and never satisfied'.²⁵ Aristotle provides a further definition of philosophy as 'the knowledge of the truth'.²⁶ To these we can add a third definition provided by Sextus Empiricus: philosophy is 'an activity which secures the happy life by means of discussion and argument'.²⁷ So the key ingredients which make up the love of wisdom are a willingness to keep an open mind, a readiness to read widely and consider all areas of thought, and a concern with truth. These are part of an activity or process in which dialogue, discussion, and the putting forward of arguments and ideas are central. These ingredients come together in the work of Plato. Plato's *method* of doing philosophy was through dialogue, by talking with another person (usually Socrates) or group of people. The idea was that we can use dialogue to search for the truth about something. By putting up an idea, and someone responding to it, and then refining the idea in the light of that response, and hearing another response, we gradually progress towards the truth of whatever it is we are talking about in gradual stages and steps. Plato's dialogues rarely reach a firm conclusion, but this is not a problem, because it tells us something interesting about philosophy. It tells us that 'it is concerned with giving a *rational* account . . . of the nature of things, as opposed to one accepted . . . purely on the basis of authority or faith, or tradition'.²⁸

In other words, this 'love of wisdom' is a commitment, a willingness to pursue an argument, or a line of thought, or an idea, to its conclusion; but each step of the way is always open to challenge – it is always open to being refuted. Any conclusions reached are provisional and tentative.

Brenda Almond argues that this is actually a twofold commitment. First, it demonstrates that you are showing a commitment to truth: we only get steamed up and tell someone they are speaking rubbish if we think they are telling us something that is wrong. We would not bother otherwise. Arguing with someone is a method of trying to discover the truth of what is being talked about. Second, we are showing we accept the value of this method: that the process of dialogue is going to get us somewhere. But dialogue works only on the basis of honesty (otherwise there is no point in having a conversation), openness (because we have to have the willingness and inquisitiveness to explore what is being talked about), and the most difficult one of all, impartiality (even when we hold something passionately).²⁹

From this approach we gain a clue about the origins of what philosophy has become. Today, philosophy is seen as discipline which trains people in the art of thinking; and by the 'art of thinking' what we mean is the acquisition of a set of skills which let a certain kind of thinking take place. This kind of thinking is referred to as argumentative or critical thinking: it concerns the putting forward of an argument, examining it for weaknesses, defending it against objections, and developing it in a coherent and logical manner. This is how students are taught to write essays. It is like having a dialogue with yourself or a dialogue with an imaginary opponent.

In relation to religion, philosophical approaches have been many and varied. Again, we need to trace the origins of philosophical approaches back to ancient Greece; but we need to understand that in Europe philosophical thought did not originate either in response to religion or as part of a religious quest to understand the world. Some of the most prominent early Greek philosophers – Socrates, Plato, Aristotle – did their philosophy without feeling any need to integrate religion or religious thinking. One reason for this was that Greek culture was polytheistic, bound up with many gods who were just as much a part of the cosmos, and governed by the same impersonal laws and principles which operate in the cosmos, as human beings. A second reason for this was that early philosophers began to dispense with the myths and unsupported stories about the world, using a critical rationality to interpret the world in order to gain knowledge. They hoped to arrive at truth by replacing the ancient myths, stories, and traditions with more reasoned and reflective accounts of human life and experience.³⁰ These more reasoned accounts became the basis of philosophical activity.³¹

In the later development of the Judaeo-Christian tradition, focus on

philosophical approaches to religion becomes an issue for the first time. Three reasons for this can be given.³² First, Christianity refused to be a local cult or state religion, and demanded complete allegiance from everyone. Second, it rejected the polytheistic myths by insisting on a monotheistic and universal God whose offer of salvation is exclusive to the person of Jesus Christ. Third, this God is the personal creator and ruler of the universe, who offers the promise of resurrection and everlasting life for those who have faith in Christ. The emphasis on the primacy and necessity of faith made Christianity a non-philosophical religion; faith did not need the use or support of reason, and the Hellenistic culture of Greek philosophy offered nothing of importance to Christian believers.

However, the hostile contexts in which Christianity found itself soon necessitated the use of philosophical reasoning to defend itself against criticism, explain the nature of Christian faith, distinguish Christianity from other religions, and reject heretical versions of Christian teaching. Thus the early relationship between philosophy and Christianity was highly paradoxical: on the one hand, Christianity affirmed a strong commitment to faith as opposed to reason as the means by which a person attains knowledge of God and salvation; on the other hand, it found itself having to use philosophy in its defence, exposition, and apologetics. The paradox brings us back to Tertullian's outburst: what has Athens to do with Jerusalem? What has philosophy to do with religion? And in many respects, the history of philosophical approaches to the study of religion has been the history of wrestling with precisely this question.

In particular, we can identify four main positions dealing with the relationship between philosophy and religion as emerging throughout the history of the debate. These four positions are: (1) philosophy as religion; (2) philosophy as the handmaid of religion; (3) philosophy as making room for faith; and (4) philosophy as an analytic tool of religion.³³ To these we can add (5) philosophy as the study of the reasoning used in religious thought.³⁴

The first position, philosophy as religion, can include, in the West, thinkers such as Plato, Plotinus, Porphyry, Spinoza, Iris Murdoch, and process thought – particularly, Hartshorne and Griffen. At the heart of this kind of approach lies the idea that by reflecting on the nature of ultimate reality – the Good, God, the divine – we can discover insights into the way things really are in human experience and the world; reflection gives us a true picture of how things are. This kind of

metaphysical vision points us to what is highest and ultimate, as well as providing us with a system of values for the living of daily life.

The second position, philosophy as the handmaid of religion, can include thinkers such as Aquinas, John Locke, Basil Mitchell, and Richard Swinburne. Reflection provides partial knowledge of God or some other kind of spiritual ultimate; it can demonstrate the rationality of believing God exists, discuss the attributes of such a God, and, in the Judaeo-Christian tradition, construct arguments which show God's activity in history and providential control of the world. The exercise of this kind of reflection is known as natural theology. But what it cannot do is give a person saving faith; natural theology requires God's revelation if people are to respond in faith and receive the grace of salvation. For Aquinas, revelation is God's communication of truths which unaided human reason cannot grasp for itself; human reason is a 'preamble' to faith. John Locke develops this by arguing that reason establishes a standard of truth against which revealed knowledge is tested for authenticity; such truths cannot contradict these standards.³⁵ And this position is developed in the recent work of Richard Swinburne.³⁶

The third position, philosophy as making room for faith, can include thinkers such as William of Ockham, Immanuel Kant, Karl Barth and Alvin Plantinga. Reflection at best can only show its own inadequacy in making judgements about religion; by showing its limitations, it leaves open the possibility of religion and clears the way for human dependence on revelation as the means by which we come to have knowledge of God.

The fourth position, philosophy as the analytic study of religion, is probably the most familiar position and can include thinkers such as Antony Flew, Paul van Buren, R.B. Braithwaite and D.Z. Phillips. It is the most familiar because it is the dominant way of doing philosophy of religion in the English-speaking world. Its aim is to analyse and clarify the nature and function of religious language, discover how it works, and the meaning it carries (if any). It wants to know how believers are using language to talk about the divine, on what grounds their claims can be supported, and how these are connected with the way believers live.

The fifth position, philosophy as the study of the reasoning used in religious thought, is a modern development, and can include thinkers such as David Pailin, Maurice Wiles and John Hick. The conviction behind this approach to religion is 'that believers are human beings and

hence both the structure of their thought and the particular cultures in which they find themselves condition what they believe'.³⁷ The aim is to try and look closely at the various contexts in which the believer lives his or her life, identify the factors operating in these contexts which might influence or affect that person's belief, and see how these become expressed in doctrine and practice. The emphasis is on culture as a formative factor and influence in religious belief, and a number of tools are utilized – historical, scientific, hermeneutic. Pailin reports that this kind of approach has received a hostile response – 'and shows the present need for theological education about the findings of this form of philosophy of religion'.³⁸ With this, we must agree. Our task now is to try and identify the characteristics which lie at the heart of philosophical approaches to religion.

Principal characteristics of philosophical approaches

John Hick argues that philosophical thinking about religion is not a branch of theology or religious studies, but a branch of philosophy. As such, it is a 'second-order activity' which applies the tools of philosophy to religion and religious thinking.³⁹ Hick's claim gives us an interesting way into examining what the characteristic features of a philosophical approach are. Generally speaking, we can say that a philosophical approach has four branches.⁴⁰

One branch is *logic*. Stemming from the Greek *logos*, logic literally means 'thought' or 'reason'; it is the art of rational and coherent argument. As we have seen, we all get into arguments; we all get steamed up when someone challenges something we believe or say, and give all sorts of reasons to justify our position. Logic takes that whole process of arguing with someone, tightens it up, and refines the process.

All arguments have a starting-point: they need an opening statement to get them started. In logic, this opening statement is called the premise: the premise is what starts the argument going. One of the most famous premises in the philosophy of religion is that provided by Anselm; God is 'that thing than which nothing greater can be thought'.⁴¹ When dealing with an argument, a philosopher will look at the premise to see whether it is true or false, and whether it is coherent – because if the premise is false, no argument can be built from it.

From the premise, the argument develops in a series of stages until

we reach a conclusion. Anselm's argument⁴² develops in the following way:

- Step 1: 'it is one thing to have something in the understanding, but quite another to understand that it actually exists'.
- Step 2: 'if [something] exists only in the understanding, it is possible to think of it existing also in reality, and that is greater'.
- Step 3: 'if that than which nothing greater can be thought exists in the understanding alone, then this thing than which nothing greater can be thought is something than which a greater can be thought'.
- Step 4: 'this is clearly impossible'.
- Conclusion: 'there can be no doubt at all that something than which a greater cannot be thought exists both in the understanding and in reality'.⁴³

A philosopher will examine each of these successive stages – they are known as 'logical steps' – to see if they logically follow from each other. Finally, the philosopher will look at the conclusion to see if it is consistent with the premise and the logical stages.

So a logician – someone who specializes in the branch of philosophy called logic – will take whatever anyone says and break it down into a simple step-by-step form. When arguing with someone, try and work out what premise they are starting from, how they develop that argument, and how they arrive at their conclusion. This applies to any kind of argument: and in relation to religion, a philosophical approach carefully examines all aspects of the arguments a religious believer advances. The advantage of this process is twofold: on the one hand, it can diffuse friction that might occur between people involved in an argument; it shows you are not interested in making personal comments but are concerned only with the strength of what has been said. On the other hand, all arguments must stand or fall because they have good reasoning behind them. This process allows us to see exactly what kind of reasoning is involved in any particular argument. The ability to argue in this way is a skill gradually acquired through practice; and it is worth practising boiling down what a person says into its various parts.

A second branch of philosophical activity is *metaphysics*.⁴⁴ This term was first used in 60 BCE by the Greek philosopher Andronicus; metaphysics deals with the most basic, fundamental questions of life, existence, and the very nature of being itself – literally, life, the universe, and everything. It asks questions about *what* I am as a person:

am I a material body, a brain, which will cease to exist at death? Or am I a soul, an incorporeal entity which will survive the dissolution of the body? Or is the truth somewhere in between? It asks questions about *who* I am as a person: what is it that makes me me? Am I the same person I was five, ten, fifteen years ago? Will I be the same person when I'm 40, 50, 60? What is it that makes me the same person? Is it a matter of memory – in which case, what happens if I lose my memory? Or is it a matter of my physical make-up – that to be me, I must always have a physical body? It asks questions about existence: what does it mean to exist? Do I exist? Does Daffy Duck exist? Does Daffy Duck exist in exactly the same sense that I exist? Does God exist? In what sense does God exist?

This aspect of philosophical activity points to a concern with comprehensiveness.⁴⁵ There is nothing which falls outside the scope of philosophical interest; everything is important to the philosopher's task. This protects against taking a 'blinkered' or biased view on certain matters; the philosopher must be aware of everything that is or might be significant to the case at hand. And this applies to a philosophical approach to religion, which finds itself dealing, for example, with questions of ontology (the study of being or existence, including the existence of God), questions of cosmology (arguments dealing with the origins and purpose of the world, including the impact of science), and questions of humanity (the nature and status of human beings and human community, including the nature of subjectivity).

Combined with logic and metaphysics is a third branch of philosophical activity – *epistemology*. Epistemology is interested in what we can know, and how we can know it. It is interested in knowledge and how we acquire knowledge. Plato, for example, thought it was impossible to acquire knowledge, and he used what he called 'Meno's paradox' to show why: 'a man cannot inquire either about that which he knows, or about that which he does not know: for assuming he knows he has no need to inquire; nor can he inquire about that which he does not know, for he does not know about that which he has to inquire'.⁴⁶

The point Plato is making is that, when it comes to knowledge, we never begin from scratch. All the questions we ask, all the things we set out to know, have a whole host of presuppositions and pre-existing beliefs. All that we do and know is set within a wide context of often unquestioned presuppositions and beliefs. Nothing ever starts from a clean slate. Everything is always built on something else. What it also shows is that the inquiry and search for knowledge never stops; the

answers to our questions become the basis for the next set of questions – and so on. For Plato, knowledge is a matter of recollection or remembering things learnt in a previous life; for us today, it is a matter or process of inquiry and discovery. This process only stops if we arbitrarily and artificially bring it to a stop.⁴⁷ That is why the conclusions we reach can only be tentative and provisional.

The task of epistemology is to discover how knowledge differs from belief and opinion. Are knowledge and belief essentially different? If I say 'I *believe* she is lying to me' that is a much weaker claim than if I say 'I *know* she is lying to me'. Now look at this claim in a different context. Believers say: 'I *believe* God exists'; is this the same thing as saying 'I *know* God exists'? To say 'I believe God exists' and to say 'I know God exists' seems to be saying two different things: what makes something a belief is different from what makes something a piece of knowledge. Some believers do claim to *know* that God exists – but what is it that they know? In other words, when can we claim to know something? And where does the issue of the truth of what we know arise? Are the beliefs we hold capable of being true or false? Or is this precisely what makes them beliefs – that we cannot show them to be true or false – just likely and unlikely, more probable or less probable?

A fourth branch in philosophical activity is *ethics*. It literally means the study of manners, or the study and exploration of values – the values by which we live, which govern the way we live with each other, in local communities, as a national community, and as an international global community. It is interested in questions about duty, justice, love, virtue. And within ethics as a general concern, there has arisen a focus on particular practices within the community – so we get special concerns with business ethics, medical ethics, work ethics, political ethics, etc. These are sometimes called issues in applied ethics: in other words, they apply general ethical ideas, theories, principles to specific and particular areas of human living and working.

In relation to the study of religion, ethics looks closely at the 'religious life' – the rules and principles which inform the religious way of living. What is the source and origin of these rules? What is the source and origin of morality? Some believers claim that God is the source of morality and that the principles they follow in living their lives are good because God declares them to be good. But what if God declares murder to be good? What if God directs a person to kill someone – or sacrifice their child? Would that be good? In response, believers have often said that God would not command the killing of

another person: but in saying this, they show that God is also subject to a moral code and therefore God is not the source of morality. But if God is not the author of morality, who is? Do you have to be religious to live a moral life? Are atheists moral? What is the connection between morality and religion?

Broadly speaking, here are four areas which go to make up the activity of philosophy as an academic discipline, and the ways in which philosophical activity approach the study of religion. This is the form of philosophical activity most people will come across in the West. And in this form, certain characteristic issues and debates arise.

Issues and debates

Most courses and introductory textbooks which deal with philosophical approaches to the study of religion cover a range of common areas. These include arguments for and against the existence of God, the problem of evil, the relationship between faith and reason, religious language, world religions and the problem of competing truth claims, life after death, religion and morality, providence, prayer and miracle, and the relationship between religion and science. Greater emphasis is put on one or more of these areas; and it is interesting to look at introductory texts because that will give a fair indication of where the major debates and issues have taken or are taking place.

We cannot hope to cover all of these areas in this chapter. But what we can do by way of conclusion is point to three areas where a lot of interest and research are presently being generated. The first area falls within the study of religious language, and can be called the 'cultural-linguistic' understanding of religion. The second area falls within the problem of evil, and focuses on the nature of theodicy in relation to suffering and pain. The third area can be generally called the problem of God's action in the world, a short-hand way of referring to a number of more specific problems and issues.

The first area uses cultural and linguistic insights in approaching the study of religion. Drawing on aspects of the philosophy of Wittgenstein, sociology, anthropology, history, and biology, its chief proponents are George Lindbeck, Stanley Hauerwas, Gordon Kaufman, and Don Cupitt.⁴⁸ Religion is understood as being 'a comprehensive interpretive scheme' which is intimately tied to culture and society, and shapes the believer's experience both of him or herself and the world.⁴⁹

As an interpretive scheme, this framework is *a priori*, in the sense that it exists prior to the act of interpreting experience and the world; as a cultural and linguistic framework, such interpretation draws on the language and culture in which the believer lives.

Religious experience is possible only within the context of this framework. The language we learn to use influences and shapes the kinds of experience we have; language can be said to create experience. As human beings we are born into, and grow up within, a social or cultural language-speaking context. We did not produce this context: it existed before we were born, it is something into which we are born, and within which we grow up. If we are to be effective members of society, we have to learn how language works to be able to interact with other people. To be religious means learning and becoming skilled in the language that religion uses. To be religious is to learn the rules as to how to use religious language. So to become a Christian means learning the story of Israel, the story of Jesus, the language of incarnation, resurrection, sin and salvation well enough to be able to interpret and experience yourself and the world in terms of that story, or in terms of that language. Believers learn how to think, to feel, to act in relation to the language of their religious tradition.

A cultural understanding of language points to other important insights. First, it points to the people who speak and use language. Drawing on biology and anthropology, we are led to an understanding of human beings who are the product of a long and gradual process of evolution; as persons, our sense of identity emerges over the course of a life lived in time, prone to sickness and ill-health, and knowing that death awaits us in the end. Thus we have no vantage-point by means of which we can gain or form absolute truths about the world or ourselves. We are unable to escape the immanence imposed by our condition; and so there can never be absolute truth or absolute truths.⁵⁰

Second, this understanding points to the context in which people live and speak. Language, it is argued, is the only means we have for understanding and living in the world. Language comes into existence with human beings, as the creation of human culture and community. Drawing on the insights of sociology, this leads us to see that human life has its context within the history of a nation, a race, a culture, a society, and a community. All these things influence and determine a person's identity. We cannot speak about people 'in general'; and we cannot presume there is such a thing as a 'common humanity'. People must be understood in terms of their nation, race and culture; and human

thought and experience is consequently grounded within and starts from these specific and particular contexts.⁵¹

Third, morality is the product and result of a person's physical identity and cultural context. Human beings, individuals, come to be within a particular community, which is rooted in a particular culture. They learn and adopt the values and morality of their social group, and these values emerge out of the history of that group. Values are the product of human community, reflecting the need for stable and cohesive inter-personal relationships. By implication, therefore, morality has no divine or transcendent origin; it emerges and develops within human social community.⁵²

Thus for the study of religion, any approach must include the study of the contexts in which that religion has emerged, and the nature and role it has in the believing community today. In Christianity, for example, God is a symbol of meaning.⁵³ God is the ultimate symbol and the ultimate goal in the quest to create meaning in the human context. The concepts, images, pictures, and models of God Christians have reflect a fundamental need to find meaning and purpose. But these pictures and images are specific to a community, and a culture. So God is not absolute, or rather there are no absolute truths about God. God does not exist as an absolute reality who is the same for all people, for all times. The pictures of God, the images and concepts of God that Christians have are, therefore, socially, culturally, and sometimes nationally specific. God symbolizes meaning; God is the sum of a community's values.

A second area where there has recently been renewed interest and research is that of the problem of evil. Now in one sense, theodicy is an age-old problem, and the various positions and arguments are certainly becoming well worn. No significant advances have been made in the three main theodical positions – Augustinian theodicy, free will theodicy, and the various 'educative' theodicies (Hick and Swinburne) – to suggest new directions that might be developed. However, new ground is presently being forged in the area of what theodicy understands itself to be doing. In particular there is a questioning of the nature and purpose of producing theodicies, along with a movement away from the enterprise of producing theodicies – that is, a movement away from trying to defend either the *existence* of God in the face of evil, or the *nature* and *character* of God that we can believe in, given the reality and presence of evil in the world and in people's lives.⁵⁴

This move, championed by an American thinker, Terrence Tilley, in

a book entitled *The Evils of Theodicy*,⁵⁵ and by an English thinker, Kenneth Surin, in a book entitled *Theology and the Problem of Evil*,⁵⁶ stems from the recognition that the very task of defending God or trying to justify the existence of God in the face of evil is itself an evil. The idea is that in trying to get God 'off the hook', the explanations produced ride roughshod over the hurt and anguish people are going through. These explanations deal with evil in general, and do not concern themselves with the plight or the feelings of the individual.

An example of what is being referred to can be found in the work of Austin Farrer. Farrer writes: 'If what we say is neither comforting nor tactful, we need not mind. Our business is to say, if we can, what is true.' Now what can this mean? There seems to be the hint that what someone suffers and what is true are not one and the same thing. Farrer admits this; he says, 'so far from beginning with the sufferer and his personal distress, we will attempt to get the issue into perspective'.⁵⁷ Again, what can this mean? The idea seems to be that when the sufferer's personal distress is put 'into perspective' then it will be seen for what it 'really' is, i.e. not suffering, or at least, not as 'dark' an episode in the person's life as it initially appears. Perhaps we can make the point in the following way. If you go up to a friend who is suffering and say 'come on, pull your finger out and try and get this into perspective', then you are not much of a friend! The end result is that the person feels ignored, their suffering trivialized, and their voice unheard; and that in itself only serves to intensify the feelings of isolation that often accompany a person's suffering, as well as undermine our concern and care for them.

Whilst this movement towards rejecting theodicy has undoubted benefits and advantages, it does mean, however, that we should not try to speak of the 'meaning' or 'reason', if there is any meaning, or if there are any reasons, for evil. What we should take this movement in theodicy as doing is sounding the cautious note that *if* we are going to get involved in producing explanations, then it is wise to have a clear idea of *what* is being aimed at, and *to whom* it is being aimed. In other words, we ought to pay close attention to the context in which the words of explanation are going to be heard. It is frighteningly easy to sit and 'do' theodicy in a context removed from and which pays little heed to the voices of those who suffer. Such explanations have a habit of sounding either alien or crassly insensitive when applied in the context of the sufferer.

It may be the case that people are too close to their pain, or their

experience of suffering is so immediate, so direct and overbearing, that it is difficult to see beyond it. That is where an explanation might help provide some measure of objectivity or distance from their circumstances, and might help them cope a little better. But when such explanations swamp the voice of the sufferer or assert themselves over against the reality of a person's pain, we must question both their usefulness and the agenda which led to their formulation.

A third area of present interest can be classified under the heading of God's action in the world. Indeed, the question of whether God acts and how God acts now stands at the forefront of recent philosophical reflection on religion. In one sense this is not a new problem: rather it represents the recognition of, and explicit focusing on, issues that are implicit in all areas and aspects of religious study. Religious discussion tends to assume some conception of God's relation to, and activity within, the world. And the question of just how we are to understand that action in the spheres of history, nature, social and individual life, is of crucial importance.⁵⁸

Christian faith has always affirmed that God is actively engaged in bringing about the divine will and purpose for the world as well as the salvation of persons. The Christian community has drawn motivation for its social and missionary enterprises from the conviction that God loves and is interested in each and every individual. This is supported by the language used in the Bible and by Christian believers: God acts, creates, sustains, elects, judges, guides, reveals, inspires, and saves. In short, the whole conception of God necessarily seems to involve the idea of a personal agent who acts in relation to the world, and human persons. But far too frequently, the question of exactly what it means to use the language of personal agency and action in relation to God is assumed, and the problem of how God acts is ignored. God 'just' acts.⁵⁹

Yet there are problems and difficulties with the idea of a God who is active in relation to the world. These problems and difficulties tend to cluster around four important themes. First, there is the problem of how we are to conceive of God's agency and action. This aspect of the problem draws on work in the areas of philosophy of action and philosophy of personal identity – the mind/brain problem. How can God act? At the human level, we have physical bodies which we can use to interact with our physical environment. But God would appear to have no such physical body through which to act in the world. God, traditionally conceived, is disembodied; so not only is there a problem

of actually conceiving how God acts, there is a more fundamental problem of what sense we can make of the idea of God as agent at all.⁶⁰

Second, there is the problem of God's action in history. In Christianity, God acts to create, sustain, elect, become incarnate, and save. Yet how are we to understand these events? What is the relationship between publicly observable historical events, faith's interpretation of these events, and God's action? In other words, where are we to locate God's action? In the event itself, or in the interpretation of the event offered by faith? What makes an event a divine act? And what are the implications for historical study? Further, does God control and guide all events in the universe? How does God carry out the divine will and purpose in history? And how does God's action relate to human action, and the established processes of the world?

Third, there is the problem of God's action in nature, which has implications for the relationship between science and religious belief. This area has perhaps generated and highlighted the problem of God's action in its sharpest form.⁶¹ The development and advances in the natural and social sciences have increased our ability to interpret physical events in terms of a system of causal laws and effects, and human events in terms of a system of psychological and social factors. This has led to doubts about the reality and even the possibility of God's acting in the world. What is the relation between divine and human activity? Does God act 'into' or 'within' established social structures or social relationships? Is God active in all human activity? Is it possible to say of an act both that I brought it about *and* God brought it about?

Fourth, there are problems associated with what is sometimes known as 'special providence', particular divine acts in the world. How are we to understand providence? What is prayer? What are we doing when we pray? Does God respond to prayer? What are miracles? What is a 'divine miraculous intervention'? Should miracles occur? If they occur, why does God not act more frequently? These are specific issues within the wider theme of God's providential activity. They ask the question: is it possible for believers today to have a truly meaningful ongoing personal relationship with God? Is it possible to believe that things have happened and do happen in the world that would otherwise not have occurred without God's action?

Tentative conclusion

Students often think I am joking when I tell them that I will be proud if, at the end of doing a course in philosophy and religion, I have managed to reduce them to the status of 4-year-olds! After all, I say, 4-year-olds ask the best questions! The aim of any philosophical approach to the study of religion is to give you the tools to think things out for yourself, and in conversation with other people. You do philosophy just by asking questions, trying out ideas, wondering where a line of thought might go. A philosophical approach to religion need be no different. It is experimental. So dabble; play; try it out; don't be scared of it. And above all, enjoy it!

NOTES

1. See Terence Penelhum (1995) *Reason and Religious Faith*, Boulder, CO, Westview Press, for a more detailed account of this particular approach.
2. The phrase comes from M. Peterson, W. Hasker, B. Reichenbach and D. Basinger (eds) (1991) *Reason and Religious Belief: An Introduction to the Philosophy of Religion*, Oxford, Oxford University Press. The book is an excellent example of this kind of approach.
3. Phenomenology was developed by the philosopher Edmund Husserl at the beginning of the twentieth century, and has been the motivating influence behind a long tradition of European philosophy which includes the work of Martin Heidegger, Jean-Paul Sartre, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Paul Ricoeur and Jacques Derrida. It aims to give us access to the 'things themselves' in our everyday lived experience.
4. To see how phenomenology has been developed within the academic discipline of the study of religions, see Ninian Smart (1973) *The Phenomenon of Religion*, London, Macmillan.
5. Diogenes Allen outlines this kind of approach in (1985) *Philosophy for Understanding Theology*, London, SCM Press Ltd. Allen also points to some of the problems in the use of philosophy within traditional theology courses.
6. A recent exercise has been carried out by Vincent Brümmer (1992) *Speaking of a Personal God: An Essay in Philosophical Theology*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press.
7. See Allen, *Philosophy for Understanding Theology*, p. iii.
8. Quintus Septimius Florens Tertullianus (Tertullian), *De Praescriptione Haereticorum*, para. 7 (literally translated: 'A demurrer to the heretics' plea'). A good selection of Tertullian's texts can be found in *A New Eusebius*, ed. J. Stevenson, and *The Early Christian Fathers*, ed. and tr. by Henry Bettenson, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1969.
9. *De Praescriptione Haereticorum*, para. 7.
10. See his *Against Marcion*, I. 27, II. 5, III. 8, in *A New Eusebius*, ed. by J. Stevenson.
11. This question is proposed by Richard Swinburne as a way of considering the existence of the soul. See his (1986) *The Evolution of the Soul*, Oxford, Clarendon Press.
12. Ingolf Dalferth (1988) *Theology and Philosophy*, Signposts in Theology, Oxford, Basil Blackwell, p. vii.
13. Maurice Wiles explores this aspect of a philosophical approach to religion in his essay 'The reasonableness of Christianity', in William J Abraham and Steven W Holtzer (eds) (1987) *The Rationality of Religious Belief*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, pp. 39–51.
14. This case is advanced by Fred Westphal in (1969) *The Activity of Philosophy: A Concise Introduction*, Englewood Cliffs, NJ, Prentice-Hall, p. 3. Westphal has an excellent chapter on what to expect and not to expect when doing philosophy; some of the following points are drawn from him.
15. *Ibid.*, p. 6.
16. Unfortunately, an actual example!
17. Nigel Warburton emphasizes this aspect of the philosophical enterprise in his (1995) *Philosophy: The Basics*, 2nd edn, London, Routledge, ch. 1.
18. *Ibid.*, p. 4.
19. Flew examines this position in more depth in the Introduction to his (1971) *An Introduction to Western Philosophy: Ideas and Argument from Plato to Sartre*, London, Thames & Hudson, pp. 21–2.
20. B.R. Tilghman (1994) *An Introduction to the Philosophy of Religion*, Oxford, Basil Blackwell, p. 8. Tilghman carefully explains what to expect from conceiving of philosophy as an activity.
21. See Nagel's superb introductory book (1987) *What Does It All Mean? A Very Short Introduction to Philosophy*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, p. 4.
22. *Ibid.*, p. 5.
23. This approach is illustrated by the opening chapters of Peterson *et al.* (eds) *Reason and Religious Belief*, and David Pailin (1986) *Groundwork of Philosophy of Religion*, London, Epworth Press.
24. See F.W. Garforth's highly readable survey of possible approaches to discovering the 'meaning' of philosophy in his (1971) *The Scope of Philosophy*, London, Longman.
25. Plato, *Republic* 475c–e, tr. and ed. H.D.P. Lee (Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1955), pp. 237–8.

26. Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, 993b 19, tr. and ed. J. Warrington (1956) London, Dent, p. 362.
27. *Adversus Mathematicos*, xi, p. 169 (cited in Garforth, *Scope of Philosophy*, p. 2).
28. See Roy Bhaskar (1994) *Plato Etc. & The Problems of Philosophy and their Resolution*, London, Verso, p. 7. Bhaskar's text is very complex and not suitable as an introduction to the subject.
29. See Brenda Almond (1995) *Exploring Philosophy: The Philosophical Quest*, Oxford, Basil Blackwell, ch.1. Almond uses an interesting and provocative mixture of text and letters to explore central themes in philosophy.
30. For a good account of the various processes at work in this early period see J. Barnes (1982) *The Presocratic Philosophers*, 2nd edn, London, Routledge.
31. The same pattern can be found in ancient India around the time of the Upanishads and the Buddha, except that there philosophy never became really independent of the quest for spiritual salvation.
32. See Dalferth, *Theology and Philosophy*, ch. 3. In the summary that follows, I shall be following Dalferth's clear and succinct exposition.
33. These approaches have been noted by a number of writers. The first systematic survey appears in M.J. Charlesworth (1972) *Philosophy of Religion: The Historic Approaches*, London, Macmillan. Indeed, the four terms used to describe these positions are his. These are listed and developed further by David Pailin in *Groundwork of Philosophy of Religion*; and they are reflected in W.J. Abraham (1985) *An Introduction to the Philosophy of Religion*, Englewood Cliffs, NJ, Prentice-Hall, ch. 1.
34. This is David Pailin's distinctive development to the debate. I am deeply indebted in the following summary to Pailin's excellent exposition of these five positions.
35. See John Locke, *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, book 4.
36. See Swinburne (1995) *Revelation*, Oxford, Clarendon Press.
37. Pailin, *Groundwork*, p. 31. See also John Hick (1973) *God and the Universe of Faiths*, London, Macmillan and (1989) *An Interpretation of Religion*, London, Macmillan; and Maurice Wiles (1974) *The Remaking of Christian Doctrine*, London, SCM Press and (1982) *Faith and the Mystery of God*, London, SCM Press.
38. Pailin, *Groundwork*, p. 31.
39. See John Hick (1983) *Philosophy of Religion*, 3rd edn, Englewood Cliffs, NJ, Prentice-Hall, Introduction.
40. A good overview and introduction of the various areas of philosophical thinking can be found in Jenny Teichman and Katherine Evans (1995) *Philosophy: A Beginner's Guide*, 2nd edn, Oxford, Blackwell. Teichman and Evans also speak of 'branches' of philosophy.
41. *The Prayers and Meditations of St Anselm*, tr. and ed. B. Ward, Harmondsworth, Penguin Books, p. 244.
42. We must remember, however, that this 'argument' is couched in the form of a prayer!
43. Ibid., pp. 244–5. This summary represents only the First Form of Anselm's argument.
44. There are two good introductory texts dealing with metaphysics. An older but wide-ranging text is Richard Taylor (1963) *Metaphysics*, Englewood Cliffs, NJ, Prentice-Hall. A more recent text is Quentin Smith and Nathan Oaklander (1995) *Time, Change, and Freedom: An Introduction to Metaphysics*, London, Routledge.
45. See Garforth, *Scope of Philosophy*, pp. 11–15.
46. See Bhaskar, *Plato Etc.*, p. 7.
47. These two points are well made by Bhaskar, *Plato Etc.*, pp. 7–8.
48. This approach is also referred to as the 'postliberal' approach. For an overview and assessment of its impact on theology, see William Placher, 'Postliberal Theology', in David Ford (ed.) (1989) *The Modern Theologians: An Introduction to Christian theology in the Twentieth Century*, 2 vols, Oxford, Basil Blackwell, vol. 2, pp. 115–28.
49. This definition is provided by George Lindbeck (1984) *The Nature of Doctrine*, London, SPCK, p. 33.
50. See in particular Don Cupitt (1992) *The Time Being*, London, SCM Press. Ch. 3 outlines what he calls 'The Six Truths' characteristic of this philosophical approach.
51. See Daniel Liechty (1990) *Theology in Postliberal Perspective*, London, SCM Press, ch. 1. I am deeply indebted to Liechty's excellent summary.
52. Again, I am indebted to Liechty's clear and lucid exposition for the structure of this point.
53. Both Liechty and Cupitt make this point. See Don Cupitt (1980) *Taking Leave of God*, London, SCM Press, pp. 96–7; Liechty, *Theology in Postliberal Perspective*, p. 23.
54. See also A.L. Herman's thought-provoking (1976) *The Problem of Evil in Indian Thought*, Delhi, Motilal Banarsidass, which looks at theodicy from a different perspective.
55. T.W. Tilley (1991) *The Evils of Theodicy*, Washington DC, Georgetown University Press.
56. K. Surin (1986) *Theology and the Problem of Evil*, Signposts in Theology, Oxford, Basil Blackwell.
57. A. Farrer (1966) *Love Almighty and Ills Unlimited*, London, Fontana, p. 7.
58. Maurice Wiles (1986) *God's Action in the World*, London, SCM Press, is an excellent introduction, as well as being the catalyst for further discussion. Keith Ward (1990) *Divine Action*, London, Collins, and Richard Sturch

- (1990) *The New Deism*, Bristol, Bristol Press, are both direct reactions to Wiles's work.
59. Two good collections of papers discussing a variety of themes can be found in O.C. Thomas (ed) (1983) *God's Activity in the World: The Contemporary Problem*, New York, Scholars Press; and Thomas Tracy (ed.) (1994) *The God Who Acts: Philosophical and Theological Explorations*, University Park, Pennsylvania State University Press.
 60. See, for example, T.F. Tracy (1984) *God, Action and Embodiment*, Grand Rapids, Michigan, Eerdmans.
 61. See, for example, J. Polkinghorne (1989) *Science and Providence*, London, SPCK.

FURTHER READING

Allen, D. (1985) *Philosophy for Understanding Theology*, London, SCM Press.

A rare example of a book which demonstrates clearly and precisely the influence and impact of philosophers and philosophical movements on theological and religious thinking. Sections covered include Plato, Aristotle, Aquinas, humanism, rationalism, empiricism, Kant, Hegel, existentialism, and phenomenology. An important text, which shows the philosophical underpinnings of theological and religious studies.

Hick, J. (1983) *Philosophy of Religion*, 3rd edn, Englewood Cliffs, NJ, Prentice-Hall.

One of the 'classic' texts on the philosophy of religion, dealing with the Judaeo-Christian concept of God, arguments for and against belief in God, the problem of evil, revelation and faith, religious language, conflicting truth claims between religious traditions, life after death, karma and reincarnation. This is a clear, concise introduction to the main themes and issues in the philosophy of religion. The treatment of themes is brief, and students will need to use this in relation to other texts if they are to gain any depth of understanding about a particular issue. A good starting-point.

Morton, A. (1996) *Philosophy in Practice: An Introduction to the Main Questions*, Oxford, Blackwell.

A new kind of textbook which contains lots of 'stop-and-think' exercises. This is a very good introduction to how philosophers think and the methods of philosophy. It quickly and easily teaches the art of good thinking whilst covering important areas in philosophy – reason, certainty, morality, and relativism.

Nagel, T. (1987) *What Does it all Mean? A Very Short Introduction to Philosophy*, Oxford, Oxford University Press.

Brief but highly readable and stimulating introduction to knowledge, other minds, personal identity, free will, right and wrong, justice, death, and the

meaning of life. Written in a clear, simple style. Key issues are quickly covered in an understandable and accessible manner.

Pailin, D.A. (1986) *Groundwork of Philosophy of Religion*, London, Epworth Press.

An ageing but nevertheless unique introduction to the philosophy of religion written by a process philosopher. Chief among the book's many strengths is the concern to keep the issue of the relationship between faith and reason to the front of discussion. There are discussions of faith, religion, and philosophy; faith, theology and reason; faith, culture and doctrine; faith, hermeneutics and the Bible; faith, history and revelation; faith, God, and the natural world; the attributes of God; the arguments for the existence of God; life after death. Each section has an excellent summary of key arguments and counter-arguments – and the process perspective is often brought in to discussions.

Peterson, M., W. Hasker, B. Reichenbach and D. Basinger (eds) (1991) *Reason and Religious Belief: An Introduction to the Philosophy of Religion*, Oxford, Oxford University Press.

This is a readable and clearly structured introductory text which goes into considerable depth and detail on issues concerning religious experience, faith and reason, the divine attributes, arguments for the existence of God, the problem of evil, religious language, miracles, life after death, religious pluralism, ethics, and Christian doctrine. Each discussion has a clear presentation of the central issues and arguments, along with lines of possible criticism. Discussions include a wide range of religious traditions.

Peterson, M., W. Hasker, B. Reichenbach and D. Basinger (eds) (1996) *Philosophy of Religion: Selected Readings*, Oxford, Oxford University Press.

A companion volume to *Reason and Religious Belief*. It contains a good range of extracts and readings drawn from writers both ancient and modern. Some of the articles are for more advanced students who are already familiar with some key debates. Nevertheless, a very useful collection of first-hand source material.

Teichman, J. and K.C. Evans (1996) *Philosophy: A Beginner's Guide*, 2nd edn, Oxford, Blackwell.

A good, clearly written introduction to key philosophical themes, including the problems which arise in the fields of metaphysics (God, personal identity, free will, evil), ethics (morality, egoism, altruism, life and death), politics (authority, anarchy, liberty, equality), logic, and the philosophy of life. Structured discussion shows the philosophical context of key debates. A valuable text.

Vardy, P. (1990) *The Puzzle of God*, London, Collins, Flame.

A popular, readable and very simple introduction to the philosophy of religion. Themes covered include the nature of truth, realist and non-realist approaches to the study of religious issues, arguments for the existence of

God, the attributes of God, God's action in the world, prayer, miracles and eternal life. The danger of simple introductions is twofold. First, they do not encourage students to think in a sustained or engaged manner about issues; second, the process of simplification can lead important distinctions to become blurred. This is useful for the 'first time' student of philosophy of religion – but not a text which should be used beyond the first term of study.

Warburton, N. (1995) *Philosophy: The Basics*, 2nd edn, London, Routledge.

Excellent introduction to philosophy and philosophical issues. Clear and well structured sections dealing with God, right and wrong, politics, the external world, mind, and science. Clear overview of all the main arguments, along with directed critiques of the weaknesses in each position. An invaluable guide for beginners to philosophical thinking.