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Philosophical approaches

Philosophy (*philia*—love + *sophia*—wisdom) is the love or pursuit of wisdom. In the West, this pursuit has centered on the use of logical reasoning as its method, and the scholarly discipline of philosophy in many Western academic institutions still generally tends to favor rational thought as the most (and for some philosophers the only) acceptable technique for the acquisition of wisdom. However, in Eastern philosophical traditions, as well as in the past in the West, wisdom is and was generally regarded as deriving from the full compass of human abilities. Thus its methods, together with the application of logical thinking, include self-discipline, the cultivation of moral virtues, the use of the senses (i.e. empirical data), and the development of intuitive understanding. Some of these latter methods, such as attaining profound intuitive insights, are believed to grant superior access to wisdom than is granted by rational thought alone.

Nowadays, in the West, some of these non-logic-centered techniques are often considered to belong to a religious lifestyle. However, the separation of religion from philosophy is a phenomenon that gained momentum in the West during the

period of the Enlightenment (eighteenth century). The Enlightenment was a post-Renaissance movement that promoted the use of reason and the scientific method to critique the large assortment of beliefs and practices that had dominated the Western world, in large measure through the dominance of Christianity and its worldview. People actually believed (and were pressured to believe) that the Earth was the center of the universe, which itself was created in six days by God, because such ideas were then forcefully promoted in the Christian worldview or articulated in its scriptures. The Renaissance (i.e. rebirth) brought about an intellectual and artistic awakening in Europe and the rest of Western culture. It began to free people from the bondage of obligatory beliefs and practices. New continents were discovered, and technologies developed through which one could observe, measure, and reason about the movement of the planets and stars, or the species of animal and plant life on Earth. The worldviews that were emerging through the application of reason and the scientific method differed dramatically from the vision that had been put forward by Christianity. Thus philosophy and the sciences broke sharply off from what was then designated as “religion,” which was the previously held dominant worldview of people in the West. In some measure, “religion” came to represent all of the disproved, unproven, and unprovable assumptions and beliefs about reality that were left behind after science and rationality had extracted their understanding of the world. In other words, for many thinkers, religion was regarded pejoratively as the constellation of nonsensical beliefs and superstitions, which endured despite the advances of science and philosophy. Furthermore, in the West, it is still common for people (professional philosophers and scientists included) to mistakenly think of religion or the religious worldview as singular, namely, the Christian one, forgetting to take account of the plurality and diversity of religious worldviews in the West, and often completely ignoring the wide assortment of Eastern “religious” perspectives.

Eastern cultures, for the most part, avoided such a dramatic split. For instance, in Sanskrit, the ancient classical language that is central to many major Eastern religions including Hinduism, Buddhism, and Jainism, there are no distinct words for religion or philosophy. A term commonly used is *darshana*, which conjoins them. *Darshana* may most closely be translated as viewpoint, perspective, or worldview. A person’s *darshana* is therefore his or her most comprehensive understanding of reality. It is also the way in which one approaches the acquisition of understanding and how one seeks to gain wisdom about oneself and the world. The term encompasses what, in the West, one might designate as a religious or philosophical approach. Thus major religious traditions, such as Buddhism and Jainism, are regarded as *darshanas*, but so are philosophical approaches such as logic and scientific speculation. So although the East may not have been officially engaging in “philosophy” as it is currently defined by the Western academic philosophical tradition, people in the East were just as passionately engaged in the acquisition of wisdom. For instance, it would not be incorrect to say that the core thrust of Buddhist teachings is the acquisition of wisdom.

It is instructive to recognize again that designations such as religion or philosophy are intellectual constructions created by scholars as an effective means of cordoning

off their objects of study. It is also useful to note that people in the East and West have reflected on the nature of existence, who they are, and the meaning of life, certainly for as long as those capacities for wonder have been part of our species. Thus the philosophical approach to the study of religion, that is, the love and pursuit of wisdom, has been present in all human cultures throughout history. If this section emphasizes the history of Western approaches, it is primarily because there has been insufficient work on collating the history of Eastern reflections on the human religious impulse. And while in the modern West it seems reasonable for the “discipline” of philosophy to study the “phenomenon” of religion, it is a messier business for the perspective (*darshana*) of philosophy/religion to study the perspective (*darshana*) of philosophy/religion. Although messier, it has most certainly been done, for people in the East have abundantly ruminated on the nature of knowledge or truth, what obfuscates it, and how best to acquire it. It is akin to philosophy in the West turning its gaze on the discipline itself and on the act of philosophizing, on its assumptions, methods, and so on. This is indeed part of the Western philosophical tradition as well, for to pursue wisdom lovingly is to wonder about what wisdom truly is, how it may be acquired, and why we seek and desire it at all. Thus the story of philosophizing about religion in both the East and the West has ancient roots, a few traces of which we shall examine here.

Early Greek thinkers

In the great Western epics, the *Odyssey* and the *Iliad*, attributed to Homer (c. 700s BCE), we find enduring myths of gods and heroes, and indirect speculations on their nature and characters. In the works of the poet Hesiod (c. 700s BCE) one finds elaborations of the “five races or ages” of humanity, beginning with a golden age, in which the gods who dwell on Mount Olympus created a race of mortal men who lived in peace and harmony with their creators and without effort gained sustenance from the natural bounty from the earth. In Hesiod’s scheme, there is a progressive decline in the subsequent created races/ages ending with what he terms the current iron age, marked by a degeneration of moral values and respect for the elderly, by warfare, strife within families, and so on. Interestingly, Eastern philosophers also articulated similar ideas in the concept of the *yugas*, cycles of time in which the quality of life and morals progressively deteriorate. We are currently regarded as dwelling within the Kali Yuga, the last and most degenerate of these eons. In *Theogony*, attributed to Hesiod, we find an attempt to systematize the then existing beliefs in the gods, their origins, relationships, and generations, and how they gained dominion over the cosmos. Thus Gaia, the Earth, developed after Chaos, and Gaia produced Ouranus/Uranus, the Heavens. In the more ancient Hindu Vedas, one finds hymns of wonder and praise to the gods, many of whom are personified powers of the natural world such as fire and wind. Some of the gods share names and attributes with their Greek counterparts, suggesting similar origins. For instance, the name of the Vedic god Varuna, who was also associated with the sky, is cognate with

Uranus. Contemporary scholars of comparative religions have found parallels between these Greek and Indian myths and the early myths recorded on stone tablets of the Babylonians and Hittites dating to about 1400 BCE.

The Greek philosopher Anaximander (c. 610–546 BCE) introduced the concept of a single, formless essence, known as the *apeiron*, the undifferentiated or limitless. From this ineffable source, which is beyond description and attributes, all things emerge as dualities or opposites, such as hot and cold, wet and dry, and so on, which interact with each other to generate the fullness of the creation. Ultimately these return to the ultimate, uncaused cause, the *apeiron*, which is equated with the Divine (i.e. God). In a similar vein, at around the same time, Indian philosophers in texts known as the Upanishads were articulating analogous ideas. They called the vast, expansive, and singular power from which all things emerged Brahman, and it too was thought of as beyond attributes and equated with ultimate divinity. Around the same time period, early Daoist philosophers in China were presenting the conception of the Dao, an ineffable mystery from which the all dualities (i.e. Yin and Yang) emerged and to which they returned.

The Greek philosopher Xenophanes (c. 580–490 BCE) was critical of the polytheistic ideas that abounded, also favoring the concept of a single overarching power. He pointed out how people make their gods in their own image, and so the gods of the Thracians had blue eyes and red hair, while those of the Ethiopians were black and snub-nosed. The Greek historian Herodotus described the religious beliefs of other cultures. Despite numerous errors and fabrications in his work, he noted how some Greek beliefs, deities, and rituals were derived from earlier Egyptian cults. These works of Xenophanes and Herodotus serve as early examples of speculations on the origins of myths and religion, and on the transformations of religious beliefs and practices over time as they spread to different regions and blended with local religious outlooks. Aristotle (384–322 BCE), the renowned student of Plato (c. 427–347 BCE), remarked how tyrants should pretend to be pious and uncommonly dedicated to religion, for in so doing they might treat their subjects poorly without them rebelling as quickly as they otherwise would. In such comments (humorous, cynical, or surprisingly discerning as they may sound to some), we note early theorizing on the relationship between religion and politics.

It is through Aristotle that we get the term metaphysics. The works which Aristotle designated as “first philosophy” accompanied his work *Physics* in the famous Library of Alexandria, and were thus filed and named metaphysics (i.e. after or beyond *Physics*). Aristotle’s “first philosophy” or “metaphysics” included these components: ontology, which is the study of being or existence; theology, which is the study of God, the gods, or the divine; and universal science, which is the study of first principles, primary or axiomatic (i.e. assumed, presumed, and unproven) ideas about the world, or how we acquire knowledge or wisdom, such as the principle of non-contradiction. The principle of non-contradiction, for instance, would assert that a thing cannot be red and not-red at the same time, under the same conditions and contexts. We cannot prove this kind of assumption, but it underlies all of our

thinking, for it is present in all of our efforts to think logically. Thus it is a first principle. Evidently, the study of being and divinity were of fundamental importance to Aristotle, as was an examination of our assumed truths and how we acquire truth. These days, metaphysics is generally used for ruminations on ultimate questions about existence or being (ontology), on the nature of reality/the universe (cosmology), and on the nature of the self, or god. It also includes reflection on the how one acquires truth (epistemology). Interest in metaphysics is sometimes gauged to be on the decline in departments of philosophy in Western universities.

Early Greek thinkers

Homer (c. 700s BCE): Greek poet to whom the major Western epics, the *Odyssey* and the *Iliad*, are attributed.

Hesiod (c. 700s BCE): Greek poet to whom the authorship of *Works and Days* and the *Theogony* are attributed. The *Theogony* deals with the origins of the cosmos and the genealogy of the deities, while *Works and Days* is concerned with living a moral and ethical lifestyle.

Anaximander (c. 610–546 BCE): Pre-Socratic philosopher known for his contributions in science and geometry; known also for his notion of the *apeiron*, a single, infinite, and boundless essence that is the source of all creation.

Xenophanes (c. 580–490 BCE): philosopher and poet known for his critique of polytheism; noted for his observation that human beings imagine their gods in forms that resemble themselves.

Heraclitus (c. 540–480 BCE): metaphysical philosopher known for his philosophy of constant change, summed up in the dictum, “one cannot step into the same river twice.” His ideas are sometimes set in contrast with static notions of reality that emphasize “Being” over “Becoming,” and he is thus considered one of the patriarchs of process philosophies.

Herodotus (c. 484–425 BCE): author of the *Histories*, an account of Greek struggles with the Persian invasions, and sometimes regarded as the father of history; his work laid a foundation for the discipline of history, narrative accounts of past events that strive for objectivity and point to their sources for verification.

Socrates (c. 469–399 BCE): philosopher known for his teaching method of questioning students; teacher of Plato; accused and convicted of corrupting the local youth, he chose a death sentence by drinking the poison hemlock, rather than give up his right to express his ideas freely.

Plato (c. 427–347 BCE): Tremendously influential philosopher; student of Socrates; thought contained in various texts known as dialogues, such as the *Republic* and

the *Timaeus*; founder of a school for higher learning in Athens, known as the Academy, which is regarded as the first university.

Aristotle (384–322 BCE): Enormously influential and prolific philosopher; student of Plato and teacher of Alexander the Great; made contributions in numerous areas, particularly logic, psychology, natural science, ethics, and poetics.

Euclid (c. 325–270 BCE): mathematician, whose influential work *Elements* still forms the basis of classical (Euclidean) geometry.

Western philosophy through the Middle Ages

In the West, the heritage bequeathed by Plato, Aristotle, and the Greek philosophers in general, continued to co-exist, interact, and meld with the religious traditions of the Western world. The Western philosophical tradition had come under the sway of worldviews shaped by the Abrahamic religions (i.e. Judaism, Christianity, and Islam), traditions that claimed the prophet Abraham as a founding father. These traditions were grounded in a worldview shaped by the teachings of influential prophets after Abraham who claimed to receive further authoritative teachings from the same supreme power known variously as Yahweh, Allah, or simply, God. The prophets were elect individuals who were graced with these revelations from an otherwise hidden deity, to whose reality and message others did not have direct access. Thus, unquestioning faith in the claims by these prophets and the revealed teachings (i.e. scripture) formed the cornerstone of these traditions. Among the shared teachings of the scriptures of these traditions is that there is only one god. Hence if and when written, although there are restrictions on writing it, it is often rendered with a capital G, God. These religions are designated as theistic, because they include belief in a god, and they are monotheistic because of their belief in a single, supreme god. A unique feature of Christianity, which differentiates it from Judaism and Islam, is the belief that Jesus of Nazareth, the founder of the faith, is the son of God, an only son, and through a mysterious transfiguration, God himself. Christianity and Islam are missionary in nature, requiring their followers actively to spread their beliefs to unbelievers. The zeal to spread the teachings (i.e. to proselytize) is grounded in their belief that to join the community of the faithful saves one from eternal damnation in a painful, hellish condition at the end of time. Such teachings in various religions that deal with being saved are known as their soteriologies, while their teachings on the end-times are known as their eschatologies.

For more than a millennium and a half in the West, we encounter influential writings by thinkers striving to reconcile the demands of their faith-based religious traditions with the rational inquiring spirit of the Greek philosophical tradition embodied by Aristotle. Philo Judeaus (early first century CE) of Alexandria is a choice

example of a thinker struggling to reconcile the teachings of his tradition with the Greek philosophical orientation. Philo is associated with the “allegorical method,” an approach to reading scripture. In this method he points out that those contents of texts such as the Hebrew Bible (i.e. the Tanak, which is roughly the same as the Old Testament of the Christian Bible) that appeared to be unreasonable, should not be taken literally. In certain cases the language is symbolic, the tales allegorical, and thus efforts should be made to understand or interpret these portions in a manner that is congruent with common sense, natural law, and evident explanations about the world. Similarly, the Christian bishop Augustine of Hippo (354–430 CE) is also renowned for his efforts to discredit literal readings of the Bible in cases where certain assertions contradict the findings of natural law or the application of reason.

Although most modern believers in most religious traditions (East and West) use some sort of allegorical interpretive approach when engaging their religious literature, there are substantial numbers who choose to read scripture literally, even today. These types of believers are often known as literalists. Religious fundamentalism is often built upon literalist readings of scriptures, as well as efforts to return to what are thought to be the original, core, or basic beliefs and practices (i.e. the fundamentals). Literalists believe in such teachings as their scripture’s cosmological explanations of the origins of the world, of heavenly and hellish realms populated by various divine and semi-divine beings such as angels and demons, of the miraculous deeds of their god(s) and prophets, of journeys to heaven, and of the dead returning to life. They are also offended by assertions that their scriptures are symbolic, allegorical, deriving from a culture with different values, or from a period in the past where there were evident human errors in our understanding of the world. Literalists might reject even more strongly the idea that the scriptures have been tampered with or composed by human authors, or that they are anything but absolute truth revealed by God and thus to be regarded as unimpeachable truth. Nevertheless, what the senses (i.e. empirical evidence) and reason tell us about the world often contrasts dramatically with the claims of scripture, and for more than a millennium and a half prior to the Enlightenment, the exploration of this tension formed the basis of most philosophy of religion in the West. However, as in the cases of Philo and Augustine mentioned above, most of it was from within the faith-based worldview and could thus be categorized as a sort of philosophical theology or apologetics.

Among the many intellectuals who made seminal contributions to philosophical theology we might include Moses Maimonides (also known as Rambam; 1135–1204), a prolific Jewish rabbi who authored the “Thirteen Principles” of faith, a Jewish creed. A creed is an officially sanctioned, succinct summation of the cardinal tenets of belief of a particular religious group, and it is often recited by the community in public gatherings or at initiation rites. In books such as the *Guide to the Perplexed*, Maimonides demonstrates the influence that Aristotle and various Muslim philosophers had on his thought. Among these Muslim scholars was the brilliant Ibn Sina or Avicenna (980–1037), credited with authoring over 450 treatises, mostly on philosophy and medicine. Maimonides’ work influenced Christian theologians such as Thomas

Aquinas and John Duns Scotus (1266–1308). Thomas Aquinas (1225–1274) is arguably Catholicism’s most influential theologian, particularly renowned for his *Summa Theologica*, a collection of rational reflections on virtually every issue in the Catholic faith. Aquinas exemplifies the scholastic tradition, a movement whose beginnings are placed as early as the ninth century, and which attempted to reconcile the Aristotelian philosophical tradition with theology. Although the term scholasticism primarily originates within a Christian context, Maimonides and Ibn Sina could also be regarded as Jewish and Muslim scholastics respectively. Scholasticism ended with the rise of modern Western philosophy.

Modern Western philosophy

Modern Western philosophy is often traced to the work of René Descartes (1596–1650), the French philosopher whose contributions include Cartesian or analytic geometry. Descartes is famously linked with his assertion *Cogito ergo sum* (“I think, therefore I am”), which places thought and thinking as the foundation of personal existence and the analysis of reality. Descartes asserted the proof of his own existence in the recognition that he was thinking, and then proceeded to use systematic thinking to describe and develop an understanding of the world. Among many other useful contributions, he eventually applied his method to offer (mostly unconvincing) proofs for the existence of God. This technique of utilizing rational thought as the primary instrument for uncovering Truth became a cornerstone of the modern Western philosophical tradition. However, it was not long before the tensions between faith and reason, which to Descartes were still not distinct contemplative approaches, came to a head. A cardinal voice for the limits of knowledge was the German philosopher Immanuel Kant (1724–1804). Kant argued that whatever reality may actually be, our understanding of it, even our perceptions of it, are shaped and restricted by our consciousness. The human mind filters all our sensory experiences of the world and thus limits our capacity to know what might actually be true. Although there is no evidence that Christian theologian-philosophers (i.e. scholastics) ever debated the question of how many angels could dance on the point of a needle, they did ponder questions about whether spiritual entities could occupy material space. This kind of philosophizing led Kant to point out that since metaphysical claims about spirits, god, and so on (that is, the claims of unquestionable, faith-based “truths” said to be revealed to others and often contained in scripture), are beyond an individual’s personal experience, they cannot be grasped by human understanding. Thus, “god” or “angels,” if such entities exist, cannot be meaningfully thought about or known. For certain Western philosophers after Kant, who accepted his arguments, this meant that all the metaphysical claims made by religions were not worth thinking about, because they could in no way lead to any firm and satisfactory knowledge. Furthermore, if one could not think reasonably about it, that is, grasp it intellectually, it might as well not exist. The concurrent development of the scientific method, with its foundational principles

such as Occam's (or Ockham's) Razor, further marginalized religious and metaphysical claims. Occam's Razor is a principle in which, when choosing among various explanations for the same phenomenon, one favors the hypothesis or theory with the fewest assumptions behind it. When it came to understanding the universe, why postulate the existence of god or supernatural beings as causes, if simpler explanations were possible based on observable data, without recourse to such unseen, immeasurable, and perhaps non-existent factors? This heightened the rift between religion and philosophy.

Ludwig Wittgenstein (1889–1951) was one of several philosophers who tried to bridge this divide. Although he acknowledged that the ability to express human experience was bounded by our ability to communicate, he did not deny the possibility of religious experience. Wittgenstein drew attention to the “games of language,” or the different uses to which language was put. Parables and myth were as different from each other as the languages of liturgy or theology or historical report. In resonance with the allegorical method articulated by Philo nearly two millennia earlier, Wittgenstein's position would be that even a statement such as “God exists” in a religious context is not like the same statement made in a philosophical argument. Wittgenstein pointed out how when someone kisses a photograph of a loved one in private, this act is not based on a belief that they are actually kissing the person, and although it is a gesture of love it is different from actually kissing the person, or even saying “I love you.” Each of these actions may express similar attitudes but have different contexts and purposes. Religious actions and religious language may belong to different categories of human behavior than philosophical discourse, and may serve different purposes. It is foolish to hold one kind of language to the formal constraints of the other.

This brief historical survey of the relationship between religion and philosophy in the West demonstrates the non-distinction between them among the early Greeks at the time of Plato and Aristotle, although the Socratic approach of free inquiry and metaphysical speculation was the hallmark of their thinking. As Jewish and Christian (and later Islamic) worldviews grew dominant in the Middle East and the West, philosophy was primarily a form of apologetics for religious doctrines grounded in rational arguments. One of its greatest exemplars was the Catholic theologian, Thomas Aquinas, and such philosophical approaches still form the essence of what is known as theology. By the period of the Enlightenment, a rift developed between philosophy and theology, and metaphysical speculation was one of the casualties. Philosophy aligned itself with the pure and natural sciences, and metaphysics was subsumed into scientific hypotheses and theorization. Theology continued in its apologetic vein, struggling to reconcile the scriptural teachings of particular faiths with a worldview progressively shaped by the findings of science. What was lost in this divide was a means of satisfactorily addressing the kinds of questions about the mystery of existence that were not entertained seriously by science or convincingly by conventional religions. Is there a purpose to our existence? What does it mean to live meaningfully? What is beauty, evil, love, or truth? Is there a god or some power(s) higher than human consciousness?

Religion and modern science

By the middle of the twentieth century, observations had damaged science's own previously constructed worldview, its paradigm, which had conceived of the universe as a giant machine operating according to laws of nature such as those discerned and mathematically described by Sir Isaac Newton. This Newtonian worldview has begun to yield to a newer but as yet unclear paradigm shaped, in part, by relativity and quantum theories. The primary building blocks of matter, namely atoms, are apparently made up of a dazzling array of sub-atomic particles far smaller than the previously known protons, neutrons, and electrons. The observed behaviors of these particles, and light energy, which acts both like a particle and an energy wave, are puzzling. They seem to suggest that each particle exerts instantaneous influences on every other particle across the cosmos, that even within material things there is very little matter and mostly space, and that particles might shift locations without actually moving through space. The Heisenberg Uncertainty Principle highlights our inability to know, with certainty, certain minute features of the things we attempt to observe, such as both the speed and location of an electron, because we affect "the observed" through the very act of observation. So, the scientific stance of absolute objectivity is jeopardized, because even in the seemingly neutral act of observing and measuring some phenomenon, the subject (i.e. the scientist) may be affecting the object and the observation.

The new, emerging, but incomplete scientific paradigm has provided fertile ground for the human imagination. Since the descriptions of the observations themselves, their implications, and the corresponding scientific hypotheses and theories are conceptually difficult to grasp, they are often misunderstood. While many high-school graduates know Newton's laws of thermodynamics, and can solve equations for the trajectories of a snowball in flight, only a small fraction of the world's population can honestly claim to understand the theory of quantum mechanics. Even fewer can articulate its implications for the nature of the world. None can reconcile the differences between relativity and quantum theory. Science's inability to articulate a convincing worldview for the masses has led to a revival among those religious faithful who feel that the teachings of their scriptures are just as viable a description of reality as that produced by science. The scientist's speculations on the nature of quarks, a kind of subatomic particle, are no less remote to the average person than the medieval theologian's purported debates about the nature of angels. They are quite different, of course, because science is grounded in experimentation and the testing of hypotheses. Nevertheless, science's capacity to demystify the nature of existence is currently under severe duress. Impressive scientific speculations, such as string theory, find themselves removed from the scientific method's crucial anchor of validation, namely, through experimentation.

The crumbling Newtonian (i.e. mechanistic) paradigm has also spawned a number of quasi-religious movements that invoke the jargon of the new science. We thus have "quantum" weight-loss, fitness, healing, and life-extension programs. More problematically, the intellectually challenging subtleties within the theories of

modern science have led to a resurrection of disputes that were thought to have been mostly resolved. For instance, despite its inability to answer all questions about the formation and variation of species, evolutionary theory in biology has been corroborated and fine-tuned for over a century through the application of the scientific method, involving the painstaking gathering and examination of evidence of life forms in existence and in the fossil record. However, various segments of the population, who are disposed to give primacy to their belief in scriptural truths rather than what science has to offer, have been lobbying to have their particular religiously grounded visions of the origins of human life (e.g. various formulations of God's plan for humanity), which are cloaked in the language of science, taught to children within or alongside the science curriculum. While this may seem as unusual as arguing that one should teach a scientific cosmology within or alongside religious ones during religious gatherings, the efforts to conflate the two often derive from misunderstanding the nature of science and the scientific method, while believing that the religious explanations (often misrepresented as complying with the parameters of science) are equally valid.

However, there is also a revival of metaphysical speculation in the classical sense, which is built upon a solid grasp of the observations and theories of science. This breed of philosophy is not grounded on an outright rejection of the scientific method and what benefits it has to offer. It is an effort to secure a worldview that is holistic, more encompassing than the narrow concerns of science, and thus, it is hoped, embracing of the fullness of the human condition. An early example is found in the thought of Alfred North Whitehead (1861–1947), a British philosopher of science and logic, whose approach is often known as process philosophy. Aware of the shifting paradigm in the scientific worldview brought about through new observations and theorizing, Whitehead offered a view of the world that was not grounded in substance but in process. One might say there are no “things” in existence, only “events” or “happenings.” Whitehead rejected what he termed scientific materialism, that the universe is made out of bits of material, and that mind or consciousness is derived from these static bits of matter. The worldview he postulated, aspects of which are aligned with the observations and theories of many contemporary scientists, is that there is a fundamental interconnectedness between everything in existence, and that all these are in a condition of change. For Whitehead, the ultimate purpose of the creation, that is, its teleology, is towards the production of Beauty. Features in Whitehead's philosophy resonate surprisingly well with more ancient ideas found in Eastern religions such as Buddhism and Hinduism, to which we shall turn shortly.

Whitehead's process philosophy has led to the rise of process theology, a novel re-envisioning of the nature of God and the creation, which has received mild support from some liberal Christians and Jews. In the work of the theoretical physicist David Bohm (1917–1992) we see an example of a scientist striving for a holistic understanding of the full compass of reality. For instance, Bohm had hypothesized that the explicit events, objects, and such that we perceive around us are derived from a vaster, although mostly hidden, implicit structural order to the universe,

which in essence is a singular unbroken whole. The foregoing approaches point to a movement towards the reconvergence of philosophy, theology, and science. Although there are cogent criticisms of this brand of exploratory holistic thinking, it also often receives denigration from those who are determinedly situated within the compartmentalized disciplines of philosophy, theology, and science, because it breaches each of these discipline's respective restraining parameters.

Philosophy in the East

As early as the fifth century BCE, Eastern thinkers had also philosophized on the relationship between mind and matter, the nature of particles, and the limits of rational thought. Philosophers of the Vaishesika school in India had speculated on the nature of the fundamental building blocks of matter, the atoms, and how, if identical, they were different from each other. They also wondered if atoms, like the Greek geometer Euclid's "point," had any dimensions, and if not, then how dimensions such as length, width, or height could emerge. And if atoms had some fixed dimensions, just how small were they? We note how these questions continue to challenge physicists today. Around the same time Siddhartha Gautama (a.k.a. the Buddha) had pointed to the inability of thought to deal adequately with transcendent entities, and grounded his perspective of reality on the transient or impermanent nature of existence. This moment is different from the one that just passed, and while the past is no longer here it has somehow contributed to shaping or conditioning the present. The "things" we perceive and label with our thoughts are like a candle flame as it burns from beginning to end, appearing as one thing but in fact always changing, neither the same as when it was first lit, yet somehow not different when it is about to die out. To cling to permanence in the face of this continual process of change is an error that leads us to suffer.

Certain of Gautama's ideas were more thoroughly developed by the Buddhist philosopher Nagarjuna (c. second century CE) who also attempted to demonstrate through logical argumentation that nothing arises or exists independently, and that "things" as we conceive them are thus conditioned or influenced by our thoughts. The Hindu philosopher Shankara (c. eighth century CE) elaborated on the concept of one overarching power or reality, known to the fifth century BCE philosophers of the Upanishads as Brahman. Shankara offered up the concept of Brahman (the Great, or Absolute Reality) as beyond all description by the mind. It was beyond predication (i.e. nothing could be attributed to it or said about it that would not be a distortion or reducing of its true nature). In part, this is because human beings and thinking itself derive from Brahman, and are but portions of what Brahman truly is. Thus rational thought is fundamentally handicapped in its capacity to know Absolute Reality. The notion of the interconnectedness between all reality, including mind or consciousness and the objects of thought, became the basis of the Hua Yen (Flower Garland) school of Chinese Buddhism. A symbolic image used in Hua Yen is the Jeweled Net of Indra. In myth, Indra is a Vedic god whose net consists of jewels at

each of its knots. Each jewel thus reflects every other jewel in the net, and each such reflection contains reflections of all others, and so on. Thus each jewel, which symbolizes each bit, piece, or fragment of reality, is somehow connected to, interpenetrates, and/or is dependent upon every other bit of the whole. One might even suggest that the part somehow encompasses the whole. Each perception, each thought, or each action is fundamentally linked to everything else in existence, across both space and time.

In this short excursus into a few Eastern conceptions about mind, thought, and reality, one can see ideas that resonate well with certain perspectives in modern Western philosophy, as well as in some modern metaphysical conceptions of reality. Whitehead himself acknowledged the similarities between his ideas and aspects of certain Eastern philosophies. Just as a shard of a mirror may reveal as much as the whole mirror, and a piece of a hologram may still produce the complete image when laser light is passed through it, David Bohm's notion of the universe as a holomovement (akin to a flowing hologram) suggests that in some measure every bit of time and space (i.e. every bit of manifest reality) somehow encodes the whole. Such imagery from a respected contemporary theoretical physicist resonates surprisingly with the ancient symbol of the Jeweled Net of Indra discussed above. Efforts to show such similarities between the findings of modern physics and Eastern philosophies are also evident in books written for popular consumption, such as Fritjof Capra's *The Tao of Physics*. Whatever the shortcomings of such attempts might be, they point out that the modern Western philosophical tradition had, for many centuries after Descartes, focused its attention and critiques on theistic (i.e. god-centered) religions, as if these alone were "religion." They had ignored Eastern religious philosophies, some of which espoused ideas that were not too remote from the classical concerns of the Western philosophical and scientific traditions.

Influential Western philosophers and scientists

René Descartes (1596–1650): French thinker; regarded as the father of modern Western philosophy; known for the dictum, *cogito ergo sum* ("I think, therefore I am"); developed coordinate or Cartesian geometry.

Isaac Newton (1643–1727): English physicist; known for his laws of motion and gravitation, presented in *Philosophiæ Naturalis Principia Mathematica* (1687), one of the most influential scientific treatises ever written.

David Hume (1711–1776): Scottish philosopher; known for his criticism of the argument for the existence of God based on the notion of intelligent design.

Immanuel Kant (1724–1804): German philosopher; known for metaphysics and epistemology.

Charles Darwin (1809–1882): English naturalist known for his theory of biological evolution through natural selection, presented in his landmark book, *On the Origin of Species* (1859).

Herbert Spencer (1820–1903): English philosopher; coined the term “survival of the fittest” to explain Charles Darwin’s theory of evolution; promoted the notion of the evolution of societies.

Friedrich Nietzsche (1844–1900): German philosopher known for his critique of religious morality; remembered for his statement “God is dead.”

Alfred N. Whitehead (1861–1947): English mathematician and philosopher; associated with the development of process philosophy.

Bertrand Russell (1872–1970): British mathematician and philosopher; major contributor to the development of analytic philosophy.

Albert Einstein (1879–1955): German-born theoretical physicist and winner of the Nobel Prize in 1921; known for his theory of relativity with its famous equation, $E=mc^2$, and his contributions to quantum theory (e.g. photoelectric effect).

Ludwig Wittgenstein (1889–1951): Austrian philosopher; known for his contributions on the philosophy of language and on mind.

Werner Heisenberg (1901–1976): German physicist; known for the Heisenberg Uncertainty Principle; awarded the Nobel Prize in 1932.

David Bohm (1917–1992): American physicist and philosopher associated with concepts such as the “implicate order” of reality, which is seen as a “holomovement.”

Stephen Hawking (b. 1942): British scientist, one of the world’s leading theoretical physicists renowned for his work on black holes; published the popular *A Brief History of Time* (1988), which made conceptually challenging notions in theoretical physics accessible to the public.

Philosophy of religion

It would be misleading to leave this discussion without some description of the current sub-discipline known as the philosophy of religion. Of course, this approach derives from the distinction made between philosophy and religion, and is the Western, reason-centered philosophical scrutiny of religious notions. Since this approach developed in the West, it has tended to be preoccupied with theistic religious questions. As such it might analyze rational arguments put forward to justify the existence of god, or what god and god’s attributes might be. For instance, the

Christian theologian, Anselm of Canterbury (1033–1109), put forward the argument that by God we mean something beyond which nothing greater can be thought. Because we can imagine this concept, God must exist. But Kant refuted this line of reasoning by pointing out that just because something, such as “a chair,” is said (or thought) to exist, does not make it exist, nor does such an assertion add to the concept of “chair.” To conceive of something like “god” does not make god exist, and does not add to the understanding of what “god” might be. Kant pointed out that ultimately such arguments go nowhere because they deal with categories that are beyond human experience and attempt to utilize tools and judgments (i.e. rational thought) which are actually only suited to deal with the content of experience.

Another such argument for the existence of God is commonly known as the “argument from design.” In this it is postulated that the seemingly orderly workings of the cosmos, the planetary movements, the seasonal changes, and so on, appear to be the result of some conscious power, akin in nature to human consciousness but vastly superior. These orderly workings could not emerge purely by chance, and thus we can infer the hand of some great designer in the everyday workings of the cosmos. The orderly creation is empirical evidence for the existence of God. The classic refutation of this argument belongs to the philosopher David Hume (1711–1776) who convincingly demonstrates that the cosmic order that we observe can as easily be explained by laws of nature, without recourse to a divine agent that is different from the creation. It would be interesting to explore the application of Hume’s argument to certain Eastern religious notions in which God/Brahman is and is beyond the natural world, as in Hindu panentheistic formulations, or where no static Absolute is affirmed, as in Buddhist metaphysics. These Eastern perspectives differ from the Western one, because the conscious agent (i.e. god or awakened consciousness) is not separate from the creation, but inextricably within it, within the very consciousness (i.e. the scientist and philosopher) that explores it.

Hume also demonstrated some of the inconsistencies in typical theistic formulations. For instance, theists typically claim that God is all-powerful (i.e. omnipotent). They may further claim that God is all-good. However, they also agree that there is evil in the creation. Hume argued that if God is able to prevent evil but is not willing to do so, then he is not all good, but malevolent. If God is willing to prevent evil, but cannot, then he is not omnipotent. And if he is both able (i.e. omnipotent) and willing (i.e. good), then evil cannot exist. In response to this kind of argument, theologians have offered counterarguments for the existence of evil in the face of God’s omnipotence and goodness which forms a branch of theology known as theodicy (*theos*—God + *dike*—justice). Typically, these arguments might postulate that evil only appears to exist from the limited perspective of our consciousness, but if viewed from God’s perspective what appears to be evil is actually good. Alternately, arguments might revolve around the notion of free will, in which God grants freedom to human beings to make certain choices. However, this concession compromises the absolute omnipotence of God.

Philosophy of religion will be progressively enriched as it begins to tackle more thoroughly the formulations of Eastern religions. In the non-dualistic formulations

of Kashmir Shaivism, a medieval Indian religious philosophy, for instance, God (i.e. Shiva) is omnipotent, but chooses to limit himself precisely as an expression of that omnipotence. This limitation is the creation, and, although God is more than it, he is present within all of it. Thus the direct experience of God is available to everyone. Goodness and evil are relative and related categories whose seeming tension is resolved when one obtains a complete realization about one's true nature. This is known as *moksha* or liberation. We can see here the interplay among a number of ideas that form the basis of Western religious thought, such as the relationships between omnipotence and limitation, self and God, goodness and evil, and so on. Kant suggested that the philosopher's task was not to promote or add to the substance of religious beliefs, but to analyze their structures and lay bare their presuppositions, judgments, and inconsistencies. This is generally the approach taken by philosophy of religion courses taught in philosophy departments in most Western universities. Nevertheless, there have been philosophers who have not simply taken a neutral analytic approach to religious traditions. Friedrich Nietzsche (1844–1900) launched an all-out assault on Christianity in his work *The Antichrist*, and is remembered for his dictum “God is dead.” In this Nietzsche is pointing to the impotence of conventional concepts of God to provide any basis for morality or meaning for people in the modern world. A more sober summary of philosophical arguments against some Christian beliefs is found in Bertrand Russell's (1872–1970) lecture “Why I am not a Christian.”

There is also another type of philosophy of religion that is primarily theological in orientation. It is perhaps more correctly called philosophical theology, and although still ultimately a form of apologetics, is less rigorously bound to the strict canons of belief in the religious traditions it examines. An exemplar of this approach is John Hick (b. 1922), whose intellectual struggles with issues of theodicy and God's love have moved him into studies of religious pluralism, so that he now challenges fundamental Christian doctrines, such as belief in the divinity of Jesus of Nazareth. Nevertheless, this brand of philosophy of religion is still theology, because it does not content itself with analysis, but attempts to put forward its own formulations. It is engaged in the process of adding to or subtracting from the actual content of certain religious traditions.

One of the more influential of modern metaphysical philosophers of religion is Alvin Plantinga (b. 1932), who may be classified as a Christian apologist. Among Plantinga's contributions is his intellectual attack on the foundations of knowledge. For instance, he questions many atheistic arguments that claim theism (i.e. a belief in god) is irrational. Plantinga points out that such a notion of irrationality implies that the believer is somehow mentally dysfunctional or flawed. However, he argues that a thing might be regarded as functioning properly if it fulfils the reason for its creation. A theist might then argue that our cognitive faculties function properly if we are fulfilling God's reason for having created us, and that belief in God is one intrinsic indicator of a properly functioning mind. The atheist, by contrast, is somewhat hard pressed to provide a rationale for why belief in God is a cognitive malfunction. After all, such belief does not necessarily prevent believers from

satisfactorily achieving their goals, or diminish their capacity for survival. Do saintly figures such as Mother Teresa need to be criticized for not adequately applying their rational thinking skills, which would make belief in God seem unreasonable?

Theological approaches

In the introduction to this text, we briefly differentiated religious studies from religious education in general and theology in particular. The differences are important and often misunderstood. However, the relationship between the two is more complex than strict opposition. In fact, theological approaches have been the most influential mode of studying and transmitting religion for most of history. Theology is no longer the overarching “Queen of the Sciences” as it was once known in European universities, nor is it the dominant mode for studying religion in the secular university setting. In fact, many scholars pursuing the “scientific” study of religion explicitly distance themselves from theological approaches. However, they use the term “scientific” in keeping with social scientific ideals of objectivity and theories responsive to observation, repeatable experimentation, and analysis of data, which is in turn modeled on the systematic testing and modification of hypotheses characteristic of the scientific method in the physical sciences. The earlier assertion of theology as “Queen of the Sciences”—admittedly not the only discipline to make this claim—concerned a broader conception of science as a wide-ranging body of knowledge that employed reason to systematically pursue wisdom about nature, human beings, and the divine.

This theological approach has not disappeared, and it continues to shape religious understanding about doctrinal issues, ethics, interpretation of sacred texts, guidance for lay people and religious officiants, and answers or reflections on a variety of philosophical and spiritual questions. There are times when this approach crosses paths with other approaches in religious studies, but it is often separate in its questions, answers, and sources of authority, which are from within the faith tradition. We will return to the complex relationship between religious studies and theology, including different institutional configurations, in the second half of this section. First, we will briefly describe theological approaches through an eclectic survey of select religious thinkers who exemplify aspects of this approach in different eras and traditions. The term theology is typically used to discuss systematic Western formulations of thinking about God and religious belief in the Christian tradition. Its use at times extends to similar activities in closely related traditions, such as Judaism and Islam. It is less often used for Asian religious traditions, such as Buddhism and Hinduism, and many scholars of religion have rightly criticized misrepresentations and the ensuing misunderstandings that can arise when religious language developed in and for one tradition is used to describe or analyze something similar in another religion.

For example, soteriology is a technical term in the study of religion that refers to the doctrine of salvation. It is most at home in Christian theology, but at times it is

applied to other traditions, such as Buddhism, that have highly developed texts, practices, and ideas related to religious salvation. However, the use of the term soteriology has fallen out of favor in much of the recent Buddhist scholarship for fear that it brings too much baggage specific to Christian ideas of salvation. Problems of language and the trade-offs that arise in borrowing a term from another tradition—both the advantages for comparison or clarification of unfamiliar traditions by means of a familiar term and the disadvantages of misrepresentations and conflation of meaning—are age old. Buddhism entered China from India in the first century CE, and for centuries translators and Chinese literati used Chinese characters and terms associated with Daoism, which they believed most closely approximated the concepts from this culturally and linguistically foreign Indian religion. Only near the middle of the first millennium were many of these terms dropped or clarified as translations were improved, Buddhism was better known in China, and Buddhists more forcefully differentiated their tradition from Daoism in recognition that the Daoist terms had brought with them Daoist lenses through which Buddhism had been misread. The view of Buddhism was thus distorted by the concepts, categories, and context of Chinese culture and the Daoist religious and philosophical worldview. Often the misreading was not intentional, and the Daoist terms served as a bridge between cultures until their distorting disadvantages outweighed their initial service of making the foreign tradition relatively accessible and meaningful.

These examples are a roundabout way of explaining why we are including examples from other traditions, such as Buddhism, in this section. Christian theologians might object to the inclusion of figures from these other traditions or to the limited coverage of the giants in their own tradition, and scholars of these other traditions might object to placing writings from Asian religions under this “theological” heading. However, our review of theological approaches concerns an orientation toward studying, reflecting on, systematizing, disseminating, defending, and promoting one’s religion from within that tradition. This is a mode that can be employed in any tradition, and it is a mode that often comes into conflict with the ideals of the academic study of religion in the secular university. Just as Buddhists in China reached beyond the limitations of Daoist terms 1,500 years ago and scholars of Buddhism have questioned the usefulness of Christian terms, such as soteriology, for their studies in more recent years, a student of religious studies reading this text may come to challenge the fit between these examples and the category “theological approaches.” However, exposure to these examples beyond the Western study of Christianity can familiarize students with core issues and concerns in the increasingly broad study of religion.

Early Christian theology

Although we will not limit our survey to Christian theologians, it makes sense to begin with Christianity. Theology certainly has not disappeared due to the arrival of many other approaches to the study of religion, and studying Christianity through

theological and other approaches remains vibrant even as attention devoted to non-Christian traditions in Western universities has exploded in the last forty years. This recent past includes a diverse array of theologians, but the history of Christian theology remains rooted in much earlier seminal figures, such as Augustine of Hippo (354–430 CE). Augustine became Bishop of Hippo, a wealthy Roman port city in North Africa, at the end of the fourth century. His theological assertions therefore carried the authority of his high office. In his *Christian Doctrine*, Augustine formulates biblical interpretation and theological assumptions that remain influential today. He demonstrates a blend of argument based on reason with the more ultimate and authoritative basis of divine revelation. Augustine built on the foundation of theological assertions that had been formulated, contested, and clarified at the councils of Nicea in 325 and of Constantinople in 381. These councils addressed key theological issues, such as the nature of the Trinity (i.e. God the Father, Jesus Christ the Son, and the Holy Spirit), and established an authoritative creedal statement about core Christian beliefs, which is still recited today by hundreds of millions of Christians. This Nicene Creed begins, “We believe in one God, the Father Almighty, maker of heaven and earth, and of all things visible and invisible. And in one Lord Jesus Christ, the only begotten Son of God, . . . consubstantial to the Father, . . . Who for us men and for our salvation came down from heaven. And was incarnate of the Holy Ghost and of the Virgin Mary and was made man; was crucified also for us under Pontius Pilate, suffered and was buried; and the third day rose again according to the Scriptures.”

These excerpts from the Nicene Creed illustrate the importance of orthodoxy, or correct belief, in Christianity and the continuity and enduring influence of theological formulations of belief from Augustine’s time to the present. Similarly, later theologians built on Augustine’s *Christian Doctrine* as well as his other major works, such as *Confessions* and *City of God*, by means of insights and analysis derived from both reason and faith. The quantity and quality of Augustine’s output were impressive, and medieval and contemporary theologians return to his writings in their own assertions about doctrinal issues and theological responses to personal, institutional, and political questions. For example, Augustine’s writings are still used in discussions about “just war theory”—the conjecture of philosophers and theologians regarding when and how war can be waged within permissible limitations and ethical guidelines.

The scholastic period

Thomas Aquinas (1225–1274) is frequently invoked in these same discussions, and his influential thought owes much to earlier theologians, including Saint Augustine, but also to earlier philosophers, especially Aristotle. Aquinas is a towering figure in the histories of theology and philosophy. Augustine and other Church Fathers—early Christian theologians writing in Greek and Latin during the Patristic era, which lasted for five or six hundred years following the composition of the New Testament

around 100 CE—often presented faith as prior to and supportive of reason. Aquinas, instead, epitomized the medieval scholastic era of Christian theology, which is characterized by more systematic elevation of reason as separate from but ultimately equal to and aligned with faith. Aquinas and others used reason, once it was deemed not to be in conflict with faith, to prove and defend faith. Aquinas's writings, including his reflections on the nature of God, ethics, and Christ in the *Summa Theologica*, became central to the medieval European university setting in which scholasticism thrived.

Influential theologians in the centuries before Aquinas's time also attempted to work out this relationship between faith and reason. For example, Peter the Lombard's treatise, *Sentences*, provided a seminal contribution to Christian theology in the twelfth century CE. Some theologians, within and beyond Christianity, promoted the value and capacity of reason to understand and support religious truth, while others doubted that reason could access the mysterious depths of religion, which they felt were better plumbed by intuition, revelation, and religious—rather than philosophical—reflection and contemplation. Muslim and Jewish thinkers were among the influential religious and philosophical figures who addressed these issues. In fact, the resurgence of Aristotle's thought and other aspects of Greek culture owe a great debt to Muslim thinkers and Islamic civilization more generally for keeping alive and contributing to texts and ideas that had been lost to Europe.

Averroes (1126–1198), also known as Ibn Rushd, was just such an influential Muslim philosopher and theologian. He was born in southern Spain in the city of Cordoba and his extensive commentaries on Aristotle helped to reintegrate Aristotle more fully into Western theology and philosophy. In fact, his commentary provided a model for the style and Aristotelian leanings of Aquinas. Ibn Sina (980–1037), known in Europe as Avicenna, can in turn be understood as a model for Averroes, whose contributions also ranged from theology to medicine. Ibn Sina was a multi-talented Persian physician and philosopher. His genius was both broad and deep. His breadth is evident in volumes of writings ranging from medicine to theology, physics to metaphysics, logic to poetry. The depth of his insight and influence is particularly clear in the field of medicine, where his *Canon* remained the standard work in European medical schools, as well as throughout the Islamic world, for centuries. He, too, wrote commentaries on Aristotle, which influenced Muslim theologians and Christian scholastics. The influence of these great medieval thinkers on one another was not simply a matter of adopting the theological systems of a predecessor as a whole. Averroes criticized aspects of Ibn Sina's commentaries and Aquinas disagreed with some of Averroes' interpretation of Aristotle. The shared interest in Aristotle across cultures and religious traditions during this medieval period demonstrates shared concerns about the roles of reason and faith and illustrates how theological approaches, far from being confined to Christianity, were influenced by Muslim thinkers at that time. The examples of these eminent medieval men of letters also illustrate that theology was one sphere of inquiry that overlapped with interests in medicine, natural sciences, metaphysics, philosophy, law, etc.

Two more examples of great religious thinkers from this theologically rich era illustrate influential theological contributions in Islam and Judaism. Al-Ghazali (1058–1111), also known as Algazel by the European scholastics, remains one of the most influential Muslim theologians in history. His unique academic and religious life oscillated between the extremes of academic training and philosophy on the one hand and personal religious questing and contemplation as a Sufi mystic on the other. His insights and writings integrated, systematized, and moderated extremes of philosophical reason, Sufi mysticism, and Sunni orthodoxy. He employed his mastery of Greek philosophy, which had earlier caused him to doubt his faith and leave his professorship on a religious quest, to use the logic of Aristotle and methods of the Neoplatonists to demonstrate the limitations of reason as well as its value. In particular, he asserted that reason and philosophy are not capable of reaching beyond finite boundaries and experiencing the infinite, absolute, divine. His identity, practices, and perspective as a Sufi were crucial to his religious understanding, but he sought to rein in what he perceived as excesses of Sufism as well. His integrative and systematizing genius harmonized Sufism and Sunni orthodoxy with close attention to ethics, beliefs, and practices—including detailed daily guidance. His writings exemplify many aspects of theology, from studying and interpreting authoritative scriptures and precedents to determining norms and standards, speculating about metaphysical and spiritual understandings of the divine Absolute, and giving detailed guidance for how a believer should live his life.

The final Western medieval theologian in our survey is Moses Maimonides (1135–1204), also known as Rambam. Like his contemporary, Averroes, he was born in Cordoba, Spain, and was a tremendously influential physician and philosopher. Unlike Averroes, he was a Jewish rabbi and thinker. His early education benefited from the cultural and intellectual flowering of Islamic southern Spain, but he and his family had to leave Cordoba when he was thirteen, and he eventually fled Spain in his twenties due to persecution of non-Muslims. After brief stays in Morocco and Israel, he moved to Egypt and spent most of his life as a leader of Cairo's Jewish community. His life story illustrates both the cross-cultural and inter-religious dimensions of knowledge exchange, including theology, as well as the ways religion can divide. In this case, his leaving Spain was forced by political orders backed by religious authority demanding that he convert to Islam or go into exile.

Moses Maimonides, like the other medieval theologians, took up the issue of faith and reason. He, too, read Aristotle, including commentaries by Ibn Sina, and he determined that religious people need not be embarrassed by apparent contradictions between philosophy and the Torah because ultimately there is no contradiction. God revealed the truths in the Torah and God endowed humans to come to complementary truths through reason, science, and philosophy. Moses Maimonides used reason to argue proofs for God's existence and unity. He was a great Talmudic scholar, whose commentaries on Mishnah offered interpretations, systemization, and guidance on the religious and social duties outlined by Jewish law. Along with setting norms for Jewish practices, he also formulated the "Thirteen Principles" of faith, which served as a Jewish creed where adherence to these

fundamental principles establishes membership in the “Community of Israel.” His *Mishneh Torah*, along with the more philosophical *Guide for the Perplexed*, which masterfully harmonized faith with reason as developed in philosophy and science, provided lasting contributions to Jewish thought and marked the apex of medieval Jewish theology and philosophy.

As already noted, these medieval Western theologians were also philosophers and often physicians, scientists, and more. The category of “theological approaches” under which we have grouped them does not exhaust their contributions, but it is fundamental to their thought and influences. Each resolved potential tensions between reason and faith by firmly establishing the legitimacy and importance of faith and using reason to further bolster the position of faith. Certainly, they started with the importance of faith as a given, and they might not have been placed in this category if their ultimate conclusion dismissed faith and other core aspects of their religious identity. Al-Ghazali, for example, left his professorship when he felt his faith was threatened because he decided that the benefits of his status paled in comparison with the religious stakes of eternal reward or punishment. In other words, the religious commitment of these thinkers was primary and their brilliant philosophical and other contributions were linked and at times determined by or in the service of this religious commitment.

Post-Enlightenment theology in the West

Many theologians in these and other faiths have also contributed religious insights and guidance in more recent eras marked by tensions between science and religious faith. Apologetics in Christian theology took various forms to defend divine revelation against scientific truths found in nature, to defend Catholic or Protestant positions against each other, and to defend Christianity against a host of perceived religious and secular challenges. Various movements loosely labeled “liberal theology” incorporated reason, skepticism about dogmatic claims concerning revelation and miracles, biblical criticism that investigated the age, authorship, and variant readings of the Bible, and increased openness to the role of humans and specific historical and cultural contexts in shaping religion. Karl Barth (1886–1986), an eminent Protestant theologian born in Switzerland, was educated in this liberal theological mode, but broke away from its direction and from natural theology in a return to a more dogmatic position centered on biblical revelation as the only way to know God. Unlike various attempts to harmonize theology with philosophy or various sciences, Barth asserted a theology that depends only on the “word of God.” Human beings’ investigation of God will always fall short just as their too-human images of God do not appreciate God’s transcendence.

Barth’s example is useful to illustrate the fact that theological approaches, and other approaches to the study of religion, do not simply move in one direction. Assuming that theology would necessarily continue moving in a liberal direction might be akin to the mistaken assumptions about the impending disappearance

of religion altogether in what theorists assumed to be an increasingly secular world. At the same time, even the work of an influential theologian of Barth's stature does not lead to the demise of liberal theology or to a divorce between theological approaches and contemporary currents in philosophy. There are many influential liberal theologians today, and well-known contemporaries of Barth, such as Rudolf Bultmann (1884–1976), shared some of Barth's concerns but also sought to demythologize the New Testament for a clearer and more immediate existential encounter that might provoke the believer to lead a life of authentic meaning. Existentialism refers to a philosophical approach that emphasizes the individual's choices and responsibility to forge a meaningful existence through encounters with a world that has no set meaning. Many existentialists are atheists; however, there are other important existentialist theologians as well. Martin Buber (1878–1965) and Paul Tillich (1886–1965) are two more examples of influential, existentialist philosopher-theologians from Judaism and Protestant Christianity respectively.

An earlier forefather of existentialism and modernism, the great Danish philosopher Søren Kierkegaard (1813–1855), laid a foundation for “a leap of faith” characterized by passionately embracing faith and participating in religion as a focused and subjective commitment beyond a sense of merely following one's duty as dictated by philosophy, ethics, or dogma. These eminent thinkers' identities as philosophers and theologians blur distinctions between these categories in ways that recall what we saw with medieval Christian, Jewish, and Muslim philosopher-theologians. However, Kierkegaard and many other subsequent philosophical and religious thinkers differ from their medieval predecessors in acknowledging insurmountable contradictions between reason and faith; and proclaiming their own choice of faith over reason for reasons of existential rather than logical necessity when confronted with such gaping discontinuity.

Some influential Christian theologians

Augustine of Hippo (354–430 CE): Influential Christian Church father; known for his doctrine of original sin; author of *City of God*, *On Christian Doctrine*, and the *Confessions*.

Anselm of Canterbury (1033–1109): Italian; influential early scholastic known for his ontological argument for the existence of God; served as Archbishop of Canterbury.

Peter Lombard (c. 1100–1160): Italian-born, French scholastic; renowned for his *Four Books of Sentences* (c. 1150), a systematic summary of Church doc-

trine, which functioned as the standard Christian theological text of the Middle Ages.

Thomas Aquinas (1225–1274): Italian Dominican friar; possibly the most influential of Catholic theologians; attempted to reconcile rational philosophy in the style of Aristotle with Church doctrine in his *Summa Theologica* (1265–74).

John Duns Scotus (1266–1308): Influential Scottish theologian, supporter of the Catholic doctrine of the immaculate conception (i.e. born without original sin) of Mary, mother of Jesus.

William of Ockham (c. 1288–1347): English scholastic philosopher, critic of the papacy, known for the doctrine of parsimony in the formulation of explanations and theories (Occam's Razor).

Friedrich Schleiermacher (1768–1834): German thinker; arguably the most influential Protestant theologian of the nineteenth century; conceived of religion as founded upon inner sentiments, such as the feeling of utter dependence.

Søren Kierkegaard (1813–1855): Danish philosopher/theologian; known for his contributions to the notion of faith, laying the foundations of the philosophy of existentialism, and criticizing systematic rational perspectives for inadequately depicting the reality of the human condition.

Rudolf Bultmann (1884–1976): German Lutheran theologian; associated with efforts to "demythologize" scripture by uncovering personally useful theological messages within scriptural narratives, rather than affirming their literal meanings.

Paul Tillich (1886–1965): German-American Protestant theologian, known for his emphasis on religion and theology as founded upon a human being's ultimate concern; wrote his *Systematic Theology* (in three volumes) over a period from 1951 to 1963.

Karl Barth (1886–1968): Influential Swiss-born Protestant Reformed theologian, who studied in Germany; a pacifist who opposed the Nazi regime, he was deported to Switzerland; his *magnum opus* (great work) is the thirteen-volume *Church Dogmatics*, written between 1932 and 1968.

John Hick (b. 1922): American theologian and philosopher of religion, known for reflections on theodicy and support of pluralism, i.e. the view that salvation may also be available through other faiths.

Alvin Plantinga (b. 1932): American philosopher/theologian; Christian apologist, associated with the idea that faith in the existence of God needs no proof, and some features of intelligent design.

Some Eastern “theologies”

Although examples of theological approaches have focused on religious thinkers and dynamics in the three Abrahamic traditions, there are many thinkers from Asian traditions who could be brought into this discussion of theological approaches broadly conceived. As with their Western counterparts, they do not neatly fall into just one category, and several who immediately come to mind could also be categorized as philosophers. The following examples from China, Tibet, and Japan have been chosen because they exemplify the normative interpretation or systemization of a religious tradition, or types of apologetics, where the religious thinker is defending or promoting his tradition over other religious traditions. Generalizations about East Asian religions’ harmonious coexistence, and even complementary relationship, are relatively accurate and helpful up to a point. However, there are conflicts and polemical writings in Asian religions too. Polemical writings are common in most theological and philosophical traditions, and consist of arguments attempting to disagree with or refute the opinions of others. Despite Beat Zen and similar Western notions of Buddhism that ignore its institutional forms and history, Buddhism has its own tradition of textual interpretation and missionary activity. The category of “theological approaches” for the following examples may not fit perfectly, but has some explanatory power.

The interaction between Buddhism and other religious traditions in East Asia stimulated new formulations to define and justify each tradition in light of the others. For example, just as Daoist terms were used in early Chinese translations of Buddhist texts, Buddhist apologists used arguments from Confucian classics to define and defend their “foreign” tradition in Chinese culture. This approach is analogous to the use of reason and philosophy to support religious faith at times when there were tensions between those spheres. In the case of Buddhism entering China, there were tensions between Chinese cultural sensibilities, as articulated by Confucian values, and the foreign Buddhist notions of monastic life, which threatened traditional modes and the importance of having children to serve their living parents and venerate their deceased ancestors. The Buddhist apologetic tract, “The Disposition of Error,” appears to have been written in the middle of the first millennium CE in response to anti-Buddhist polemical writings. The author of this work quotes Confucius, Laozi (Lao Tzu), and other venerated Chinese philosophers from 1,000 years earlier to rebuff challenges that Buddhism should not be followed because it is not Chinese, and to answer a series of questions about Buddhist beliefs regarding death, rebirth, the lack of a recipe for immortality, and Buddhist foreign practices—namely, celibacy, harming one’s own body, and renouncing worldly pleasure.

Around this same time, the sixth-century CE Chinese monk Zhiyi (Chih-i) founded the Tiantai (T’ien-T’ai) School of Buddhism and systematized the vast corpus of Buddhist *sutras* (i.e. summaries of doctrines) and commentaries that had arrived from India. His monumental task included sorting out and harmonizing apparent doctrinal discrepancies found in the religious writings from India. The resulting

synthesis respects philosophy and practice while promoting a unified vehicle of Buddhism with the *Lotus Sutra* as the dominant text. During the following 1,400 years, East Asian religious thinkers have interpreted from this *sutra* the meaning, order, and structure of the Buddha's teachings, as well as guidance for daily life, and more lofty promises of protection, enlightenment, and world transformation. Nichiren, a thirteenth-century Japanese Buddhist monk, went beyond defensive apologetics to denounce Buddhists of other schools and rulers who did not show sufficient reverence for the *Lotus Sutra* and failed to invoke it through the practice of reciting its title. The polemical passion of Nichiren's assertions of orthodoxy and orthopraxy, right belief and right practice, is not the norm for Buddhism. Nonetheless, the example is useful to demonstrate that even the divisive connotations of theology have counterparts in Asian traditions.

Tsong Khapa (1357–1419) provides a powerful example of a Tibetan Buddhist systematizer, reformer, and theologian who instituted rigorous standards of virtue, practice, textual study, interpretation, and debate. The influential Gelugpa sect, of which the Dalai Lama is the head, arose out of his reforms and systemization. He presided over a monastic university with thousands of monks and is credited as the teacher of the first Dalai Lama, although the title came about centuries later and was assigned to Tsong Khapa's student retroactively. The title Dalai Lama means "Teacher [who is an] Ocean [of wisdom and compassion]." Tsong Khapa's *Great Exposition of the Path* typifies a theological *magnum opus* (i.e. great work) capable of integrating diverse teachings and offering guidance for Buddhists' daily life, philosophical perspective, and ultimate religious aims.

Finally, for more recent examples from Asia, we will briefly mention two Japanese Buddhists. Shaku Sōen (1859–1919), a Zen monk and abbot, is the most famous of the Japanese Buddhist representatives who attended the 1893 World's Parliament of Religions in Chicago. This widely publicized event was part of the Columbian Exposition, which was a particularly influential and well attended World's Fair. The very concept of holding such a forum of religious representatives from around the world stemmed from liberal theological optimism of shared brotherhood in diverse traditions as well as impulses to improve or solidify the standing of individual religious traditions through the process of comparison and to bolster the position of religion as a whole. Religion was facing considerable challenge from the surging authority of science and the perceived disconnect between Charles Darwin's theory of evolution, as well as subsequent forms of social Darwinism, and religious doctrine including biblical explanations of creation. Shaku Sōen's presentation, "The Law of Cause and Effect as Taught by Buddha," is noteworthy for how it explains a fundamental Buddhist teaching while emphatically asserting that this is a "law of nature, independent of the will of Buddha, and still more of the will of human beings." He and his fellow Buddhist delegates emphasized rational dimensions of Buddhism for their own strategic, apologetic reasons of promoting Buddhism as a universal religion particularly well suited to modernity. The final figure, Abe Masao (1915–2006), continued this work of representing Zen Buddhism in the West; however, his training in Japanese and Western philosophy as well as theology

equipped him for in-depth forms of interfaith dialogue. This dialogue has attempted to provide a bridge of understanding between traditions through discussion and debate of shared and differing practices and philosophical and theological perspectives.

Theology vis-à-vis religious studies

The preceding eclectic examples of theologians from various times and traditions illustrate certain theological concerns as well as the overlap between theology, philosophy, and other disciplines. This section will attempt to situate these theological approaches in relation to religious studies in academic settings today. Secular religious studies departments and academic programs at universities only came onto the scene in the second half of the twentieth century. Although some of the seminal thinkers, texts, and approaches to the secular, academic study of religion were earlier products of the nineteenth century, religious studies as a discipline is much younger than the millennia-old traditional perspectives in the study of religion—philosophy and theology.

Theology is typically the domain of religious “insiders” who are actively promoting, defending, transmitting, and shaping their tradition. Of course, theologians reflect on issues that are important beyond the boundaries of their tradition, such as the nature of the divine, of humanity, of existence, and of a meaningful life. This mode of inquiry is highly valued in many traditions and by many people. The questions and answers are shaped by a particular tradition and are typically directed toward members of that same tradition—to deepen faith, convey wisdom, inspire or curtail certain actions or beliefs. They may offer guidance in understanding the tradition, leading a life according to the tradition, and formulating positions on a range of new or timeless issues often by extrapolating from traditional, authoritative sources. Whereas apologetics can include theological arguments that defend or explain the insider’s tradition to an outsider, theology more typically denotes an authoritative voice from within a particular tradition speaking to other members of the same religious community about their shared tradition, values, and concerns.

The discipline of religious studies in the secular university differs on each of these main points. The scholar studying religion in this academic setting need not be an insider in any tradition. She can be religious, but might direct her academic research to a religious tradition other than her own and in any case should self-consciously attempt to avoid privileging her tradition or restricting questions and analysis to views sanctioned by her religious tradition. Just as the scholar need not be an insider, the scholarship is generally not conducted for or targeted to a specific religious audience. Religion is considered to be one of many subjects of study for which the scholars, students, questions, concerns, and approaches resemble what one finds in other disciplines in the humanities and social sciences, such as in history and anthropology. Some of the same questions of ultimate meaning arise, but for religious studies there is often a sense that it is not the scholar’s role to sit in

judgment of religious or metaphysical claims of ultimate truth or divinity so much as to analyze these claims, along with a wide variety of practices, beliefs, texts, and perspectives, for what they reveal about society, history, culture, and people and their religions. In short, the religious studies scholar should avoid the normative role of determining what the norms or standards of a religion should be and what its followers should believe, whereas the theologian's role can go beyond these boundaries by actively shaping and defining norms as well as defending and promoting a tradition.

As you may have noticed, this last sentence, which asserts that religious studies scholars *should* not play a normative role in dictating what a religion should be, is itself a normative statement. However, it is a normative statement about what the *academic study of religion* in the secular university should be, not an attempt to regulate the members, beliefs, and practices of a religious tradition. This is intentional. By means of this introductory text, we aspire to introduce students to the academic study of religion, including a sense of the norms and standards for this pursuit in a university setting. Students and scholars, both within and beyond religious studies, often confuse and conflate religion, the study of religion, and being religious. When kept separate, there is no contradiction in asserting that a norm for the academic study of religion should be to avoid determining norms for how a religious tradition should be practiced. However, these categories are not always understood to be separate. Sometimes this is simply a matter of mistaken assumptions. For example, an acquaintance at university might automatically assume that a student majoring in religious studies is especially religious. That may or may not be true, just as another student who is majoring in biology may or may not be religious.

Even other university professors can make this mistaken assumption. One of our colleagues in religious studies noticed that a professor of biology had just finished giving an exam in the room where he was about to teach. He jokingly invited that professor to stay and teach his religious studies class and received the earnest reply that the biology professor could not possibly teach that course *because he is not religious*. Our colleague jokingly replied, "Do you have to be a frog to teach biology?" This humorous exchange is not meant to suggest that someone who is religious cannot do religious studies—unlike the frog, which would presumably be hard pressed to lecture on biology. Instead, it reinforces the fact that *religion* signifies the *object of study* for religious studies, and *not the required disposition* for religious studies scholars and students. The example highlights the distinction between religion, religious studies, and being religious. The other professor mistakenly declined because he is not religious, whereas he would have been perfectly justified to refuse because he did not have training in religious studies, or was not an anthropologist, historian, or sociologist who focused his attention on religion as an object of study.

This attempt to separate and clarify the distinctions between religion, the study of religion, and being religious, runs into difficulty with the theological approach. In this approach, there is often an intentional conflation of these categories. Or, from the perspective of this approach, the theologian might argue that it is the secular religious studies attempt to separate these categories that is mistaken and confused.

This is a fundamental difference. Consequently, we are pursuing two purposes in this section on the theological approach, which are partially in tension with each other. In addition to offering a preliminary and general idea of what this approach entails, we are simultaneously attempting to differentiate it from the other approaches in the academic study of religion in order to clarify the boundaries and norms of our discipline for the secular university setting. Clarification of a complex relationship risks oversimplification, but remains worth pursuing in an introductory text precisely because confusion within and about religious studies often centers on these dichotomies of insider/outsider, subjective/objective, descriptive/normative, and religious studies/theology.

Interaction at university

However, to define religious studies simply as apart from theology ignores how centuries of theology influenced the relatively recent discipline of religious studies, as well as how theological approaches continue to interact with other modes of religious studies. This interaction is part of a complicated relationship with a spectrum of attitudes and institutional dynamics. There are religious studies scholars who are adamant that theology has no place in the academic study of religion and even perceive theological thinking as a principal threat that religious studies must guard itself against. Conversely, there are theologians who see no value in secular modes of inquiring about religion and see menacing attempts to limit, reduce, and “explain away” religion in everything from the scholars’ use of the category of “religion” as one of many facets of human culture and activity, to the social scientific modes used to describe, understand, and explain religious practices and beliefs. There are many positions in between these extremes that acknowledge more or less value in either theology or religious studies as a mode that can supplement or at least provide material for their own mode of studying, analyzing and interpreting religion.

Institutionally, the relationship between theology and religious studies has varied at universities depending on the country, era, and history of each institution. For example, there are many religious seminaries, colleges, and universities in Canada and the United States. In these institutions, religious education is often theological and is characterized by believers of one faith teaching, interpreting, and shaping their tradition for believers of that same faith. Public universities and secular private colleges and universities in North America often seek clear separation between theology and religious studies. Here the era and history of each post-secondary institution plays a role as some are now only nominally attached to religious identities that were more important when they were founded. In other words, they may have had religious education requirements emphasizing a single tradition early in their history, but have since moved to a secular religious studies model. Well-known universities, such as Harvard and Yale, have a divinity school as well as a much younger program of religious studies. At these schools of divinity, theology and the training of ministers continued to be central to their role even after the addition of

programs for the study of various religions using secular, academic approaches. On the other hand, their fellow Ivy League institution, the University of Pennsylvania, never had a school of divinity. As a result, the secular academic mode of religious studies did not contend with or separate from theological approaches.

Admittedly, Harvard promotes the interrelatedness of its Divinity School, various departments in the Faculty of Arts and Sciences, and centers and committees focused on the study of religion. However, models of institutional separation between theology and religious studies, or the presence of only one or the other, are more the norm in North America. Universities in Great Britain, on the other hand, often integrate the two more fully. The theological approach has been an especially influential mode of reflecting on religion at major German universities. Of course, each institution has its own history and all are constantly changing from era to era. Change, alongside continuity, is evident in the study of religion from new Buddhist-oriented universities in western North America to some of the most respected and tradition-conscious European centers of learning. For example, “D Society” seminars at the University of Cambridge’s Faculty of Divinity continue to draw brilliant scholars and theologians to fortnightly lectures followed by debates that are both spirited and thoughtful. However, there are important differences between past and present. The professors and lecturers are no longer all Anglicans. Not all focus exclusively, or even primarily, on Christianity. Moreover, participants read widely beyond theology and incorporate theories and data from other approaches of religious studies and beyond.

In short, the relationship between religious studies and theology is complex, varied, and still developing in each era, place, and institution. Theology, generally conceived, has been central to teaching, learning, interpreting, and shaping religious understanding in most places for most of history. However, it is at times marginal or oppositional to the secular academic study of religion. That is to say, depending on the time, place, institution, and scholar, a theological approach may or may not be perceived to be part of religious studies. In fact, some scholarship that is not explicitly theological may be characterized as a sort of crypto-theology, or hidden theology, due to its normative claims about what religion or certain religious traditions, practices, or beliefs should be, or how a sacred essence of religion can only be understood or interpreted from within a religious perspective or a privileged religious experience. Some phenomenological approaches, which we address in a later section, are accused of being too theological or insufficiently scientific in their quest for the essence of religion or the real meaning or ultimate importance of religious experiences, beliefs, or practices. Not only is the relationship between theology and religious studies complex and controversial, it is not always clear where the boundary should be drawn between the two or which side of that contested boundary certain scholars, essays, or approaches inhabit. In fact, theologians can do academic religious studies and can make use of any of the approaches surveyed in this text. Religious studies scholars *can* ask theological questions and engage in theological reflection on a religious tradition. However, confusion arises when scholars slip into a theological mode without being clear about what they are doing—

either because they do not realize that they have crossed this tenuous boundary or because they do not acknowledge to their audience which hat they are wearing from one essay to the next or even in the middle of a given essay or lecture.

We have devoted quite a bit of space to this issue of the relationship between theology and religious studies precisely because it has been and will almost certainly continue to be a tension in the study of religion and a point of confusion and controversy for students pursuing religious studies in a university setting. Of course, scholars of religious studies can help clarify the muddled waters by being more aware, forthcoming, and consistent about which hat they are wearing in their writing, lectures, and class discussion. Moreover, students' understanding of religion and religious studies can benefit from greater sensitivity to the distinction between the two and awareness of the perspectives, objectives, and possible biases of each voice they encounter. This benefit is not restricted to greater scrutiny of what students encounter at university—in their textbooks, films, lectures, research, and discussions with professors and fellow students—but extends out into the rest of their life and society from interaction with neighbors, relatives, and acquaintances to more savvy analysis of portrayals of religion in news media and popular culture.

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