

Studying philosophy of religion

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*Are there reasonable grounds for holding
religious beliefs?*

*Can religious beliefs and teachings stand up
to philosophical investigation?*
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Why study philosophy of religion?

Philosophy of religion can be quite difficult to define, as people have different views about what philosophy is, and also about what counts as a religion. It is usually understood to be a discipline which applies the methods and tools of philosophical inquiry to the subject matter of religion. These methods include rigorous questioning. A philosopher takes an idea, such as 'justice' or 'existence', holds it up to the light, looks at it closely and asks what it really means. A philosopher will look for any assumptions in the idea, whether obvious or hidden, and question whether it is reasonable to hold those assumptions. A philosopher will try to find counter-arguments and counter-examples to see whether the idea can still stand up, even if faced with criticisms.

Some people find the philosophy of religion quite difficult and challenging: not because the subject matter is academically demanding, but because it calls into question ideas and beliefs that might be very precious and important to them. Someone who has grown up with a firm faith in God might be uncomfortable when asked to justify the grounds for that belief and when presented with alternative, perhaps quite persuasive, arguments supporting an atheist position. People might also feel uncomfortable when they realise that they have been repeating words during worship for a long time but, when they think about it, they are not entirely sure what those words signify. Similarly, people who have been confident of the non-existence of God, or the wrongness of a belief system different from their own, might find it challenging to be presented with a religious belief or idea which makes a lot of sense or which sheds new light on something they had always rejected.

So why study philosophy of religion at all? The answer to this question, perhaps, is that religion deals with many of the most important questions of human existence, and, therefore, trying to find truthful,

or at least reasonable, answers to such questions is an extremely valuable quest. Perhaps it is better not to hang on to a belief which does not stand up when challenged, or a belief which makes little coherent sense, however uncomfortable this might be. Perhaps ideas, doctrines and teachings which are alien to our usual ways of thinking should not be too readily dismissed.

What kinds of questions are addressed by the philosophy of religion?

The philosophy of religion looks at all kinds of aspects of religious belief and practice, through a philosophical lens. Probably the most fundamental question for philosophers of religion is the question of whether a God, or gods, exist at all. This also involves the exploration of other, related questions: what does it mean, for a God or gods, to 'exist'? Is it the same kind of existence that we have as humans? Is there, or could there be, any kind of existence beyond the existence of material things?

And then there are questions of what such a God, or gods, might be like: what are the attributes traditionally ascribed to God, and do they make sense, and are they compatible with each other? If we were looking for the existence of a God, or gods, how would we know when we had found what we were looking for? Should we expect a God, or gods, to allow humans and other animals to suffer?

Questions of the place of humanity in the world are also addressed by the philosophy of religion. Are human beings on the earth for any reason? Do human beings have any kind of fundamental value, beyond their importance to their family and friends? Are human beings any more than physical matter? Can human consciousness be satisfactorily explained? Does human suffering have any explanation or purpose? Can humans expect to continue in some way after their own death?

These questions, too, lead to further areas of exploration. Religious experience is a fascinating phenomenon, which invites consideration of the extent to which it has any evidential force, and whether it should be considered equally as reliable or unreliable as other kinds of human experience. The language used to convey religious ideas is also interesting to philosophers of religion, who ask whether it makes any sense to try to describe in ordinary, everyday terms the objects of beliefs in the supernatural and extraordinary.

Can the philosophy of religion provide firm answers to its questions?

Studying philosophy of religion might leave you with more questions and less certainty than you had when you began. Philosophy does not often, if at all, lead people to single, conclusive, firm answers to the questions it raises. However, as a discipline it does develop valuable thinking skills, equipping people with a greater ability to make judgements, to be more precise in their thoughts and the language they use, to be less willing to accept the views of others without challenging them, and to develop their own ideas, which will be more robust and capable of being defended.

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