

## PREFACE

A couple of decades ago, I was privileged to hear a talk and reading by Gary Snyder—poet, nature writer, and one of the West Coast group who hung out with Jack Kerouac, Lawrence Ferlinghetti, and Allen Ginsberg. They later became known as the “Dharma Bums” and “the Beats.” After Snyder’s reading and talk, a student asked him, “We know that you are a long-time student of Buddhism, so tell me, how has your religiousness influenced the way you write poetry?” Snyder was silent for a moment and then replied, “I’m not religious; I’m a Buddhist.” Needless to say, the student was disappointed. His question had not been answered. What Snyder had done instead was to question the assumption built into the question. Might the student have learned more from having his question questioned than from having his question answered?

I tell this story because I expect that a similar sort of disappointment may very well descend on many readers of this book. I suppose there are many who might ask, “Do you believe in God or not?” and “Whether you do or not, what are your reasons for doing so?” and “If you do not believe in God, what alternative cosmological theory do you have?” If those are your questions, I’m going to disappoint you, because I’m not going to answer them. Instead, I’m going to challenge them and question the assumptions they make.

It is extremely important to see that even our opening questions make assumptions and that these assumptions are often what most need to be questioned. But that is exactly what philosophy is—the uncovering and questioning of really basic assumptions. As my friend and former colleague Sig Rauspern frequently says, “To start with the right question is to have done half the inquiry.”

Universities and colleges across the country offer courses in the philosophy of religion. These courses may differ from one another in some particulars, but they also share many things in common. Almost all of them, I venture to say, are focused on the question of the rationality of religious belief. And that question is focused, in turn, on the evaluation of theistic arguments, that is, arguments about the existence of God. When people put together texts or anthologies for such courses, they keep this focus well in mind. Louis Pojman, in the introduction to his much-used text *Philosophy of Religion*, articulates this common focus very clearly:

What is the truth about religion? We want to know if religion, or any particular one at least, is true. We want to assess the evidence and arguments for and against the claims in an impartial, judicious, open-minded manner. This I will endeavor to do in this book.

The key notion of most religions is the idea of God, an all-powerful, benevolent, and providential being, who created the universe and all therein. Questions connected with the existence of God may be the most important we can ask and attempt to answer. If God exists, then it is of the utmost importance that we come to know that fact. (5)

I cite Pojman’s introduction here neither because I find fault with it nor because I want to recommend it over others but simply because I think he has aptly articulated the typical focus of the philosophy of religion. This focus is the reason why any good anthology in the philosophy of religion will include the classical arguments for God’s existence as well as the critiques of those arguments and will include discussions of the problem of evil and discussions about the reasonableness of theistic belief.

For decades I have taught an annual class on philosophy of religion. Like most such classes and most textbooks prepared for such classes, it begins with the question of the rationality of theistic belief and with an examination of the classical arguments, pro and con, regarding the existence of God. We employ texts (like Pojman’s) and anthologies designed for such courses. But

over the years, my students and I have discovered that this way of beginning makes a host of significant assumptions, including:

- that belief is the focal and most important part of religious faith
- that the most important belief is theistic belief—that is, belief that God exists—because this is the belief that religious people are assumed to have that atheists and other nonreligious persons lack
- that religious language is primarily referential and that it refers to a being, God, whose existence/nonexistence is the crucial question (The knowledge of God’s existence, if it is possible, is the knowing of “fact,” as Pojman puts it.)
- that existence is the proper mode of reality for thinking about God.

As students of philosophy, it is part of our task to articulate and examine these assumptions once they become apparent to us. The critical examination of these assumptions is how I have shaped the second half of my class on the philosophy of religion. The first half of the class does philosophy of religion the way it is customarily done. It is essentially a generic course in the philosophy of religion. The second half deconstructs the first; it critically examines the assumptions on which the first part rests. How would we have to rethink the philosophy of religion if we discovered that many of the assumptions of its most common arguments are questionable?

This text is a guide to this process of thought. It attempts to make the assumptions of the typical philosophy of religion course explicit and to question them. It then considers some alternative ways of thinking about these matters. Knowing that the text would be used for the second half of a philosophy of religion course, I have tried to keep it reasonably short but without its inquiry being merely suggestive. This text could also be used to introduce a more advanced study in the philosophy of religion. For example, I have a friend who has used an early draft as a text for his students in a seminary course.

The text has four main sections. The first focuses on the oddity of the “Does God exist?” question, which tends to focus much of philosophy of religion as it is usually taught and studied. The second section explicates and challenges three assumptions that philosophy of religion makes. The third section suggests an alternative view of the nature of religious language and religious faith. The fourth section shows what the consequences of this alternative view would be for the understanding of the question “Is religious faith

rational?” Since the argument of the text is fairly complex, I have tried to make the structure explicit, following a topical outline format where I think it will help student readers.

Although each section is unique, they all also share a common structure. Each pursues an inquiry and makes an argument and often includes a discussion of the work of some particular thinkers for purposes of contrast and illustration. Each chapter contains a set of questions posed by students (From the Classroom: Student Questions and Responses) in a philosophy of religion class where a draft of this text was used. The students asked such helpful and probing questions that I decided to include the questions and my responses to them at the end of each section. In some cases, the student questions indicate a misunderstanding or misreading of the text. But that too is helpful since I then get an opportunity to correct misunderstandings others are also likely to have. At the end of each chapter, I also include questions for discussion—*Questions for Critical Reflection*—that may serve as prompts for students who are eager to pursue these issues more deeply.