

## Chapter 1

# Religious Philosophy among Kindred Disciplines

The field of religious philosophy sustains complex relationships with kindred disciplinary areas—including especially philosophy, religious studies, and theology. Each of these disciplines also confronts religious philosophy, as I define it, with forceful critiques as to its possibility or advisability. I will address such objections in the process of describing how religious philosophy relates to each of these three disciplinary areas.

### Religious Philosophy as a Form of Philosophy

**Religious philosophy overlaps significantly with philosophy that inquires into the big questions of metaphysics, epistemology, and ethics when those questions touch on religious themes. Big-question philosophy in the contemporary situation faces serious challenges to its possibility and prospects. Nevertheless, three considerations suggest that religious philosophy understood in these terms remains viable, and indeed may possess untapped potential: the overcoming of the modern aberration of epistemic foundationalism, the contemporary emergence of comparative philosophy, and the increasing philosophic usefulness of the natural and social sciences.**

#### *Big-Question Philosophy*

In one respect, religious philosophy just is inquiry aiming to answer the big philosophical questions of metaphysics, epistemology, and ethics insofar as they possess religious significance. The idea of

“religious significance” is difficult to pin down because the interests of religious groups and individuals vary dramatically across cultures and contexts and eras. Yet there is no question that a significant number of philosophical issues are religiously potent in many contexts. Thus, I will move on to consider the more pointed problem, which is identifying the relationship between religious philosophy and “big-question philosophy.”

Most philosophers worldwide would accept that ethics, aesthetics, epistemology, and ontology are proper domains for philosophical reflection, even if they do not agree on why they do it or how they should. Consider ontology. At the most basic level, ontology is the branch of philosophy that deals with the “what” and “how” of existence: trees exist in one way, ideas in another, and some ideas refer to things that do not exist at all. Philosophers seek explanatory principles that unite descriptions of what exists into coherent ontological theories of reality. Historically, these principles have included being and relation, space-time and causation, creativity and chaos, *jīva* (soul) and *prakṛiti* (material nature), *pratītya-samutpāda* (dependent co-arising) and *vijñāna* (consciousness), *qi* (*ch’i* or 氣 or 气; life force) and *de* (*te* or 德; inner power of integrity), *yin* (*yīn* or 陰 or 阴; darker feminine element) and *yang* (*yáng* or 陽 or 阳; lighter masculine element).

Once the domain of ontological principles of explanation is entered, it also has to be allowed that some ontological principles have more explanatory scope than others. For example, *vijñāna* struggles with the physics of brute material interactions described in classical mechanics, while space-time has difficulty comprehending the emotionally textured quality of intense aesthetic experiences. Thus, comprehensive ontological models of reality typically require several explanatory principles and nested layers of explanation, which show how the principles fit together coherently. Principles familiar from the natural sciences—quantifiable aspects of reality (for example, what we call force, mass, and acceleration) and the equations expressing relations between them (for example,  $F = ma$ )—operate at the more determinate level of this nested network of explanations. At more encompassing levels, we might see vaguer explanatory principles such as matter or causation, consciousness or *pratītya-samutpāda*.

There seems to be no principled way of blocking questions about the ultimate integrating explanatory principles, those that unite everything that is into the most comprehensive and coherent interpretation. This is how the big philosophical questions of ontology yield ideas of God and creation in the West, Brahman and *saṃsāra* (cycle of lives) and *śūnyatā* (ultimate emptiness) in South Asia, and *Dao* (*Dào* or *Tao*

or 道; ultimate way), *Tian* (*Tiān* or *T'ien* or 天; heaven), and *Shang Di* (*Shàng Dì* or *Shang Ti* or 上帝; ultimate emperor or supreme God) in East Asia—in each case understood as ultimate explanatory principles for ontology. Of course, these are not necessarily religious ideas in this context; they are principles for the ontological interpretation of reality. And the semantic content of these words might be quite different, even indigestibly different, than that of the same words in religious contexts. But there is no question that there has been two-way traffic between the ideas inspiring and structuring religion and the ideas prominent in philosophical explanations of reality.

In much the same way, ethical questions about the good, aesthetic questions about the beautiful, and epistemological questions about the truth and human reason also yield principles that invite controlled speculation about ultimate explanations. Philosophers use such explanatory principles to find a properly weighted place for every human understanding and experience, and for every aspect of reality, within the widest possible domain of reflective equilibrium. At the most basic level, this is why religious philosophy is closely related to philosophy.

### *The Place of Inquiry*

In historical and crosscultural perspective, the achievements of big-question philosophy are plentiful, diverse, and difficult to harmonize. Thus, they may strike the onlooker as hypothetical exercises in constructive modeling, with contextual factors explaining both why some models prove more plausible than others in particular settings, and why models take on distinctive features that make consistency with competitor models problematic. Before concluding that big-question philosophy operates in a slippery world of relativistic delusions, however, let us take seriously the possibility that hypothetical exercises in constructive modeling could be a form of inquiry.

We might construe such exercises as follows. Explanatory principles function as the hypothetical core of our explanatory model, which we then develop in rich detail to take account of the host of relevant considerations. This process of development involves both elaboration into new areas and correction of existing ideas, where resources for correction exist. The more adequate, applicable, beautiful, coherent, consistent, and fruitful the result, the more entitled we are to believe that the hypothetical explanatory model might refer truly to the world in which we live and move and have our being, and thus the more likely we are to respect it and to use it in other

applications (such as moral reasoning or political philosophy). Some forms of correction are obvious, as when an explanation simply can't account for some feature of reality, perhaps because it predicts events that do not occur. We see this with explanations of scientific inquiry that don't match the way scientific practice actually operates. Other forms are subtle, as when we compare competing explanatory models and conclude that one is superior to another in important respects such as coherence or elegance. If some hypotheses are able to subsume or eliminate others, and if other corrective resources are sufficiently plentiful, then we have reason to think that this sort of hypothetical philosophical inquiry might be capable of advance. The promise of advance gives such inquiries special value beyond the basic value that properly belongs to the careful systematic or poetic or narrative elaboration of explanatory hypotheses.

It is no small thing to assert that philosophy (in any specialization) is a species of inquiry, as I do here of big-question philosophy and also of religious philosophy. The word *inquiry* suggests solving a problem through an organized, rational procedure that yields an answer to the problem, an answer that purports to be true, along with reasons for believing the answer that are thoroughly tested within a community of experts. The ideal of truth-seeking is built into the idea of inquiry—even when inquiry is the fallibilist, hypothetical procedure I conceive it to be, and even when confidence about truth-finding is low. Unfortunately, truth-seeking has become so controversial in contemporary Western philosophy that direct assertions of the value of rational truth-seeking have become uncommon. It is a more visible ideal for inquiry in the sciences or in history but even there the philosophy of science and historiography have disclosed that truth seeking, which once seemed to be a straightforward and commonsense task, is more like stepping gingerly through an epistemological minefield.

The loss of confidence in truth-seeking inquiry is a step-child of big-question philosophy itself. As creative constructions, the best of the big-question explanatory hypotheses are intellectually impressive, culturally influential, and the objects of sustained study by generation after generation of philosophers. Unfortunately, however, some of these creative philosophers were so certain of their constructive models that they made definitive claims on behalf of those models—claims that some of their contemporaries and most of their successors deemed overblown. Certainty of this sort entails unreasonably aggressive claims for the ability of human reason to plumb with confidence the ontological, moral, aesthetic, and epistemological depths of reality.

With the very idea of big-question philosophy under suspicion, historical and crosscultural awareness delivered a killing blow by disclosing the parochial character of most claims to philosophic certainty. Ignorance of important alternative theories appears to have played a large role in inflating philosophic confidence, and criteria for judging the adequacy of philosophical constructions were often indebted to insufficiently scrutinized local plausibility structures. In this way, the idea of truth-seeking inquiry fell into disrepute right along with confidence in the powers of human reason and certainty about the creative models of reality that constructive philosophers produced. It has been an unfortunate era for philosophers with aspirations to inquire into the big questions of life, and doubly unfortunate for those who seek to engage religious themes in the process.

Whether, as I claim, a fallibilist, hypothetical mode of inquiry can be separated from overblown claims to truth and then made both intelligible and feasible as a vehicle for philosophical inquiry into religious topics, remains to be seen. For now, it is enough to note that religious philosophy is in the same predicament as big-question philosophy. To rescue one from its predicament is very likely to rehabilitate the other as well.

### *Competing Philosophic Ideals*

In some philosophic styles, ideals of analysis (such as clarity and logical consistency) have supplanted the ideals of truth-seeking and problem-solving that guide inquiry. This is understandable because the modest ideals of analysis work relatively well even in the context of intractable disagreement among philosophic theories. But such modest analytical ideals also limit the scope of topics available for philosophical analysis because clarity and logical consistency typically demand determinateness of ideas, which is easiest to achieve when the scope of interpretation is narrow and tightly controlled. Big-question philosophy's quest for integrated, large-scale interpretations of phenomena requires vague ideas—that is, ideas that are capable of mutually inconsistent specification—in order to link different levels and types of phenomena under unifying explanations. There is logic to vagueness but it applies mostly at the semantic level of concepts rather than at the level of syllogistic analysis. Thus, big-question philosophy cannot live on analysis alone.

In some other philosophic styles, the ideals of consciousness-raising critique and deconstruction of unexamined prejudices have

the ascendancy. Such scrutiny is invaluable as a component of philosophical inquiry because it aids in the efficient correction of tentative hypotheses. These styles of philosophical work typically are allergic to big-question philosophy, however, because large-scale constructive interpretations necessarily make numerous assumptions to stabilize modeling efforts within the dynamic process of hypothesis and correction. This renders the large-scale interpretations of big-question philosophy relatively unattractive to critically minded deconstructionists; they sense too many unsteady assumptions for the constructive effort to be worthwhile. Yet critical deconstructive philosophy routinely leaves a trail of breadcrumb hints about big-question philosophic matters, treasured insights that fascinated readers pick up as they follow along behind. While there is a place for constructive hinting even in critical philosophy, this covert way of entering philosophic insights into discussion can also protect them from public scrutiny and evaluation. This forgoes the need for justification, the opportunity for improvement, the risk of failure, and the taking of responsibility for philosophic influence. Achieving those virtues requires inquiry, no matter how daunting the task of inquiry may appear.

In yet other philosophic styles, the primary task is historical reconstruction and comparison of important philosophers' great ideas. Like analysis and deconstruction, historical work is crucial for expressing and refining hypotheses in big-question philosophical inquiries. But historical interpretation and big-question philosophical interpretation are quite different tasks requiring quite different skills, and they are subject to quite different norms for excellence. Philosophers uncomfortable with first-order philosophic interpretation sometimes confine themselves to historical studies, rightly more confident about their methodology. But historical work in philosophy sometimes seems in thrall to a rarely discussed conviction—namely, that we dare not directly debate the theories we study with our own theories of similar scales, because (presumably) we know better than the giants we study what human reason can accomplish. The irony here is too often lost in the noise of contemporary philosophic activity.

In still other philosophic styles, the aim is poetic expression, perhaps as a form of appreciation or testimony. The ideals in this case are existential potency, richness of descriptive texture, and conformation of the mode of expression to the nature of the thing expressed. Antimetaphysical philosophy often resorts to poetic expression, which is sometimes called "theopoetics" in the context of religious philosophy. There is a great weariness in posturing at having a firm metaphysical grasp on an intractable subject matter. Poetic appreciation can offer

sorely needed relief from this weariness. Moreover, the indirectness of poetic testimony applies the balm of humility to the nausea of futile grasping after explanatory power, and conforms philosophic speech to the ungraspable, uncontrollable contours of its profound subject matter. In fact, such theo-poetics is an essential component of elaborating hypotheses within a process of inquiry. Theo-poetics is also theo-poiesis—it conjures that of which it speaks—so there is danger in it that demands the same scrutiny that we would apply to any other kind of philosophic speech about big questions. Humility in the form of eschewing philosophic control through processes of inquiry can easily mask control exercised over imaginations through unchecked poetic rhetoric.

Some philosophers persist in practicing the philosophy of big questions—metaphysics, ontology, theology, and the foundations of ethics and aesthetics. Few of these philosophers do so systematically; in fact, systematic philosophies have been rare in the last century. Unfortunately, mainstream philosophers in many contexts tend to marginalize such adventurous thinkers, confident that their vigilance protects the discipline from an unseemly variety of philosophic enthusiasm. So it seems, at any rate. Yet the philosophy of big questions persists nonetheless. And in the hypothetical, fallibilist form I am commending, it persists in a morally pleasing way—simultaneously fearlessly adventurous and humbly aware of its inescapable limitations.

This hypothetical fallibilist approach to big-question philosophy also registers the virtues of other philosophic styles as proper to the various phases of its work. The ideals of poetics belong both to the art of elaborating hypotheses and to the governing epistemic posture of fallibilism. The ideals of historical work appear in the contextualizing of hypothetical models in vast traditions of religious philosophy and in the sensitive contextual interpretation of ideas. The ideals of criticism and deconstruction play roles in the testing of hypotheses against their practical consequences, in the cross-checking of hypotheses against one another, and in the fallibilist attitude to any and every explanatory hypothesis. The ideals of analysis are present throughout the process of inquiry, guiding the elaboration, testing, and refinement of hypothetical explanatory models toward optimal clarity and consistency. These ideals are reconfigured when they appear in big-question philosophic inquiries, to be sure. But the religious philosopher interested in multidisciplinary comparative inquiry will not hesitate to interpret narrower forms of philosophic activity as *stylistic contractions*. And they will argue that such contracted styles of philosophic activity are governed by ideals that are *abstracted*

from the context of their proper application in inquiry. Inquiry, after all, is the fundamental biological and social manifestation of human rationality, as this book will argue in some detail.

*Arguments Against the Possibility of Big-Question Philosophy*

Philosophy has special virtues when it is pursued as logical analysis, as deconstruction, as history of ideas, and as poetics. These virtues mean that there can be no objection to the restrained exercise of rationality in these forms. Moreover, the results of these types of philosophical activity confirm their usefulness. But neither this pattern of usefulness, nor the appealing epistemological asceticism that often drives these forms of philosophy, entails the impossibility or even the inadvisability of more adventurous forms of philosophic inquiry into the big questions of life. Establishing such a negative result soundly would require an argument that necessarily operates in the same domain of big questions that it attempts to restrict.

People have offered such arguments, of course—notably Immanuel Kant and A.J. Ayer—but critics have been quick to point out the territorial irony. In Kant's case, the problem was the vastly unanalyzed premise of the perspective (the transcendental "I") from which his adumbration of the boundaries on human rational capacities was credible. In Ayer's case, it was the self-referential character of any criterion for the meaningfulness of statements; bold universal policing dictums typically undermine themselves. Indeed, Kant and Ayer themselves were troubled by these features of their philosophic programs.

Each failure of in-principle arguments against adventurous forms of constructive philosophic inquiry underlines the hypothetical character of such restrictions. The arguments relevant to evaluating hypotheses about the capacities of human reason struggle to achieve the decisiveness often intended for them. Such arguments can, however, exert cumulative pressure for or against particular hypotheses. The most potent instance of cumulative argumentative pressure is an interpretation of the history of big-question philosophy as a contradictory tangle of ideas—an argument that would be made against the rich and ancient literary heritages of Western, South Asian, and East Asian philosophic traditions alike. According to this skeptical cumulative critique, each of the major debates is intractable and the collective effort is futile.

The sharpest form of this argument is Kant's attempt in the transcendental dialectic of the *Critique of Pure Reason* to show that



contradictions result when reason extends beyond its domain of proper operation to questions of psychology, metaphysics, and theology: “the antinomy of pure reason will exhibit to us the transcendental principles of a pure rational cosmology. But it will not do so in order to show this science to be valid and to adopt it. . . . [T]his pretended science can be exhibited only in its bedazzling but false illusoriness, as an idea which can never be reconciled with appearances.”<sup>1</sup> Calling this the antinomy of pure reason, Kant presents strong arguments in favor of opposite metaphysical claims, drawing the conclusion that such metaphysical topics are beyond the reach of pure reason altogether. For him, arguing endlessly over such metaphysical themes is the sort of illusory trap into which human reason falls instinctively.

Kant’s offering of parallel arguments on behalf of opposite conclusions marks the Enlightenment rebirth of comparative philosophy, though on behalf of a decidedly negative conclusion about whether such comparison can further constructive philosophic inquiry. He points out that, “it is only for transcendental philosophy that this sceptical method is essential” because it is only there that “false assertions can be concealed and rendered invisible.” The root of the problem is that these inquiries concern “transcendental assertions which lay claim to what is beyond the field of all possible experiences. . . . [T]hey are so constituted that what is erroneous in them can never be detected by means of any experience.”<sup>2</sup>

Time and new perspectives have shown that Kant’s reasoning is not decisive, and on three levels. At the strategic level, Kant’s approach is not effective in a fallibilist epistemological framework. Only the foundationalist for whom nothing less than certainty will do could feel convinced that the dueling arguments of the four antinomies, if sound, decisively dispose of the sorts of reasoning involved. The fallibilist engaged in the hypothetical form of inquiry I describe here will see only the lack of corrective resources needed to advance inquiry at that point, and will not incautiously generalize this negative result as Kant did.

At the logical level, Kant’s presentation of the antinomies abstracts these arguments from the context of the large-scale modeling efforts that produce them, yet these contexts are highly relevant for assessing argumentative force. For example, the first antinomy argues that the world has a beginning and is spatially limited, and also that the world has no beginning and is spatially unlimited. But the meanings of the key terms are only stabilized in the context of the wider theoretical ventures in which such arguments appear, such as the worldviews of Augustine (354–430 CE) and Aristotle (Ἀριστοτέλης; 384–322 BCE),

respectively. Kant's abstracting move disguises this semantic dependence. When this problem is corrected, the antinomy seems more innocent. Suppose Augustine's and Aristotle's worldviews are large-scale explanatory hypotheses of the sort used in big-question philosophy. Suppose further that Augustine's worldview entails X (world is finite-in-age-and-spatial-extent) while Aristotle's worldview entails not-X. If we have no empirical basis for preferring X over not-X, then we have no leverage on the decision between Augustine and Aristotle *in that respect*. But X and not-X arise in a context of ideas that may allow other resources to impact the choice between them by making one entire worldview more plausible than the other. Neglecting the semantic and logical implications of theory dependence produces fallacies of equivocation in philosophy as in any other theoretical endeavor.

Finally, at the content level, Kant was overconfident about what could and what could not be exposed to experience. In relation to the first antinomy again, imaginative physical cosmologists are finding ways to test the claims that the universe has a finite age and that it is spatially finite—note that, despite Kant, conceptual reconsideration forced spatial (size) and temporal (age) limitation into separate possibilities. Neither of the two opposed arguments in the first antinomy is as compelling as Kant claimed, and the question may eventually be decidable, if not based on direct observation then indirectly and probabilistically within the framework of quantum cosmologies. In either case, what Kant thought was an irresolvable dispute may prove to be tractable and thus relevant for choosing between the hypothetical explanations of big-question philosophy.

How does this softening of the antinomy of pure reason affect Kant's severe dichotomy between the noumenal and phenomenal realms? Kant thought he had showed that it is disastrous to apply reason beyond the domain of its allegedly proper application, and traced many philosophic errors to a lack of the required discipline among philosophers. The antinomy of pure reason was a crucial factor in his judgment about what reason could and could not achieve, and where it could and could not be applied successfully. But Kant never entertained the possibility of hypothetical philosophical inquiry in a fallibilist epistemological framework. To formulate a fallible philosophical hypothesis about something in Kant's off-limits noumenal realm cannot be ruled out a priori. It may well prove to be futile, in the sense that resources to correct the hypothesis and thereby warrant belief in it cannot be located. But, what for Kant was a strict rule is for the proponent of hypothetical inquiry in a fallibilist epistemological framework merely a suggestion for how to expend philosophic energy

most efficiently. And whether or not the suggestion is a wise one is ultimately transformed into an empirical question. Thus, the opening for big-question philosophy remains, even in the presence of cross-cultural and historical pluralism of reasoned philosophic opinion.

*The Prospects of Big-Question Philosophy*

The specter of apparently intractable disagreement within big-question philosophy does not establish its impossibility or futility any more than Kant's and Ayer's and others' policing pronouncements did. By the same token, as just noted, merely to defeat in-principle arguments against the philosophy of big questions is not to establish its possibility, and yields few insights into the best method for conducting it. In fact, the task of big-question philosophy appears to be extremely difficult, at best. Yet our impression of its prospects may change with time. Three important considerations collectively suggest that now is the wrong time to abandon it, or the religious philosophy that has so much in common with it.

First, the kind of epistemic foundationalism that has prevailed in most modern Western philosophy has now mostly collapsed. (I take up this theme in Chapter 3.) Its artless insistence on certainty in the foundations of knowledge proved unsuitable even for mathematics and natural sciences, and it was a particularly inapt standard for big-question philosophy. The early American pragmatists Charles Peirce and John Dewey deliberately rejected epistemic foundationalism and worked hypothetically within a fallibilist epistemological framework across the whole range of philosophical questions, including the big questions of metaphysics and morality and religion. The nonfoundationalist approach caught on more widely in the last half of the twentieth century, especially after W.V.O. Quine's famous 1951 article, "Two Dogmas of Empiricism." The response to this essay accomplished for Anglo-American analytic and language-oriented philosophy what the early pragmatists had achieved earlier in the century. (I take up the theme of inquiry in Chapter 6.)

The surrendering of foundationalist aspirations is a boon to big-question philosophical inquiry. Hypothetical, fallibilist modes of inquiry accommodate big-question philosophy in a way that foundationalist modes of inquiry could not because of the difference in expectations about how confident the philosopher needs to be about an interpretative hypothesis. The nonfoundationalist approach helpfully invites the philosopher to explore philosophical territory in order to locate resources for correcting hypotheses, rather than forcing the philosopher to be

confident that sufficient resources exist before inquiry even begins. Some big-question inquiries may prove futile, but we can't easily determine where these dead ends are without trying. Despite the importance of nonfoundationalism for big-question philosophy, however, it is important to note that all streams of nonfoundationalist philosophy—including those within American pragmatic philosophy, Anglo-American analytic philosophy, and Continental postmodern philosophy—have currents that resist discussion of metaphysics and theology as well as currents that support it. But this resistance is not due to epistemological policing of the Kantian or logical positivist sort.

Second, increasingly detailed and integrated knowledge in the natural, social, and cognitive sciences is also changing the prospects for big-question philosophy, even as it challenges prevailing approaches to less controversial domains of philosophical reflection. For example, it no longer makes much sense to study epistemology in isolation from the cognitive sciences, or ethics separately from evolutionary theory. The contemporary scientific picture of the natural and social worlds is not seamless, but rather an elegant, semi-consistent patchwork of piece-wise robust theories. Yet it is far more richly connected to physical nature—as measured by both predictive accuracy and explanatory richness—than all past understandings of the natural world. Its impact on philosophy in all areas is correspondingly more important than ever.

The emerging scientific view of the world has serious weaknesses in its handling of aspects of reality that lie beyond the reach of the physical sciences, especially consciousness and value. It is important to guard against such limitations lest we fall prey to what Alfred North Whitehead termed the fallacy of misplaced concreteness, whereby (in this case) we foolishly treat as real or important only that which we can conveniently study with the natural sciences. This is the bet of scientism, and it is ultimately a losing proposition. Even with these difficulties, however, the emerging scientific picture of the natural world and of human beings holds great promise for big-question philosophy. (I take up the theme of multidisciplinary in Chapter 4.)

Third, our era has witnessed the birth of comparative philosophy, in which big-question philosophy takes on a crosscultural aspect. In systematically comparing answers to big philosophical questions, the possibility exists for inference-to-best-explanation arguments where formerly there were only unconvincing attempts at direct deduction of answers. The direct-inference approach is exemplified by cosmological arguments for the existence of God, where some feature of the world (say, its contingency) is supposed to entail the existence of God (in

this case, as a necessary being). But comparative philosophy effortlessly establishes that quite a few metaphysical options are compatible with the apparent contingency of the world, and the existence of a necessary being is merely one of them. In fact, the world's religions and philosophies furnish a long series of examples of the same problem with direct-inference arguments in big-question philosophy. The inferences typically run more soundly in the other direction, from metaphysical and theological hypotheses to their conditions. This is the domain of inference-to-best-explanation argumentation. (Chapter 5 takes up the theme of the role of comparison in inquiry.)

The comparative philosophical approach could have been imagined prior to our era, and sometimes was partially explored. I mentioned above Kant's adventures in comparative philosophy, and there are medieval and ancient examples also—with particularly impressive examples in the debate traditions of South Asia. But a full-blown approach to comparative philosophy was never feasible before recent decades because the scholarly interchange over world philosophy was usually unsophisticated. The prospects for, and the very nature of, big-question philosophy are materially different due to the development of comparative philosophy.

These are three reasons to hold out hope in our time for what I have been calling big-question philosophy. They correspond to the three defining words of the term *religious philosophy* as I use it here: *multidisciplinary comparative inquiry*. For any of this to work, however, inquiry needs to be understood as the nonfoundationalist, fallibilist, venture described above (and in detail in Chapter 6). Religious philosophy may not always be identical with big-question philosophy. But the considerations about the possibility and prospects of one typically apply to the other.

### Religious Philosophy as a Form of Religious Studies

**Religious philosophy and the academic study of religion share the goal of understanding religion. In this sense, religious philosophy is a part of religious studies. Religious studies rightly seeks objective scholarship—partly for its own sake, and partly to overcome a history of bias as it gradually distinguished itself from its theological and often Christian roots. While some forms of theology and philosophy of religion are incompatible with this criterion of objectivity and fair treatment of religions, religious philosophy as multidisciplinary comparative inquiry exemplifies it.**

*The Goals of Religious Studies*

In the previous section, we saw that the word *philosophy* lacks consensus definition in the Western context. Much the same is true of South Asian philosophy, where the aftermath of colonial influence has produced a deep divide between traditional Indian philosophy and British analytical philosophy. In both contexts, it is not uncommon to see hostility toward or condescending dismissal of some philosophical practices by proponents of others. This drives home the social character of the contemporary Western and South Asian philosophical enterprises. They have a common structure of insiders and outsiders, renegades and conformists, warriors and workers. Each sub-tradition has characteristic practices, legitimacy relative to segments of the history of philosophy and slices of contemporary life, and rationalizations for its behavior toward other parts. The variations in style of inquiry come with tradition-borne criteria for what counts as admissible work and what is truly excellent. Education of young philosophers instills and activates these criteria, thereby perpetuating them and the traditions that bear them.

Like *philosophy*, the phrase *religious studies* lacks clear definition. This is partly due to infamous battles over how to construct an adequate definition of religion, which must contend with the unwieldy cluster of phenomena under investigation. But it also reflects controversies among those who study religion comparable in magnitude to the turf wars of philosophers. The inherently multidisciplinary character of religious studies helps here, however. Religious studies scholars typically identify themselves professionally as sociologists or anthropologists, historians or philosophers, with a specialty in one or another aspect of religion—an historical era or a geographic region, for example. Most expect to work alongside people with quite different types of expertise, and they are accustomed to making use of insights from other disciplines that operate according to methods quite different than those of their chief specialization.

This drives home the fundamental goal of religious studies: it is to understand religion as such—not merely what any one given discipline can comprehend of religion, but religion as a whole, in all its intricate variations and manifestations. This goal is supported by the cultivation of specific virtues in religious studies. These include paying close attention to the details of religious phenomena, avoiding abstractions that can distort the intricacy of religious practices and ideas, taking proper account of social and historical context in interpreting religious texts and artifacts, and prizing objectivity of description so as

to win both agreement from qualified experts and, where appropriate, recognition from adherents. The training of religious studies scholars includes scrupulous attention to these virtues as well as evaluation of skills in the central discipline for each student.

Flowing out of this fundamental intellectual goal is a little discussed but pervasive practical goal: to inform people about religion so as to increase mutual understanding and global security, and to guide diplomacy and political policy decisions. Religion has always had a politically and socially explosive character and wars driven by religion have been common in human history as a result. Political tensions and cultural misunderstandings are frequently exacerbated by ignorance of the points of view of those involved, and those points of view almost always have a religious dimension. Ignorance of religion is as dangerous as religious extremism, and equally infuriating to those negatively affected by it. The academic study of religion has a crucial role to play in alleviating the problem of ignorance, just as religions themselves must tackle the problem of extremist violence.

Religious philosophy is fully *compatible* with these fundamental and practical goals of religious studies. Moreover, many aspects of religious philosophy are *indispensable* for achieving these goals. This is the twofold basis of my assertion that religious philosophy is a vital part of the academic study of religion.

First, regarding indispensability, despite appearing to be a stronger claim than mere compatibility, the indispensability of religious philosophy is easier to demonstrate because it only needs to be established for some styles of religious philosophy rather than all styles. The argument is straightforward. To understand religion obviously involves understanding what religious people think and believe. Indeed, religious ideas are a conceptually crucial and socially potent part of religion. Like other aspects of religion, however, religious ideas are extremely complex and intricate, as are the sacred texts that inspire many of them and the traditions of debate that nurture and refine them. Thus, several domains of scholarly expertise are vital for constructing a satisfying understanding of religious ideas: expertise in the interpretation of sacred texts, expertise in the commentarial traditions that arc out of those texts, expertise in the systematizations of belief that prove so influential for stabilizing religious identity, and expertise in the crucial conceptual debates that often influence the course of a religion's development. Religious philosophers are the experts in several of these domains, so they play an essential role in understanding religious ideas, and thus are indispensable for achieving the goals of religious studies.

Second, regarding compatibility, subsequent chapters will discuss the tasks of religious philosophy in more detail, and I will take up the question of the compatibility of these tasks with the academic study of religion again in the Afterword. At one level, the question of compatibility is answered easily: religious philosophers are obviously concerned with understanding religion and conveying a sound understanding of religious beliefs to those they teach and influence. That would seem to settle the matter. Yet complications arise because not all styles of religious philosophy focus merely on understanding religious ideas and beliefs, in the mode of history of ideas. Some aim to mount inquiries into first-order religious topics. That is, while all religious philosophers study the truth claims of religions and religious believers, some religious philosophers also seek to evaluate those claims from as many points of view as possible. For example, all religious philosophers ask what religious people have believed about ultimate reality and seek careful accounts of those beliefs—a formidably complex task. But some religious philosophers go further to ask what the most compelling idea of ultimate reality is, whether it is possible to prove the existence of a divine being, and how one might reconcile apparently contradictory ideas of ultimacy. Such questions still dominate textbooks in philosophy of religion. While these are philosophical questions of the first importance, it is not obvious that these questions are compatible with the goals of religious studies, if construed narrowly.

#### *Wariness in Religious Studies Toward Philosophy*

The disciplinary battles within religious studies that are most important for understanding the place of religious philosophy have concerned fairness and objectivity. There is no obvious reason why religion's well-earned reputation for nurturing true believers and myopic convictions should pass on to scholars the infection of biased judgment. After all, religious studies is not an inherently religious activity, any more than religious philosophy is, despite the unfortunate suggestion of the adjective. But definitions of religion, along with the descriptions, analyses, interpretations, and evaluations they inspire, have historically displayed palpable bias. This was especially true in the early years of religious studies, prior to the founding of religious studies departments in the United States and Europe in the late 1960s. In earlier works, a pattern of bias in favor of or specifically hostile to Christianity, which just happened to be the religious affiliation of most early religious studies scholars, is plain to see. Standard examples are



early interpretations of Hinduism as fundamentally polytheistic; the unreflective dismissal of tribal religions as primitive; the promotion of Christianity as the “one true” religion above its “incomplete” or “distorted” or even “evil” rivals; and the framing of religion as mere superstition within a philosophy of history that posits humanity moving away from superstition and toward science, and thus away from religion toward atheistic or naturalistic humanism.

Even though more recent work has mitigated these early problems to a significant extent, a legacy of suspicion remains. This legacy takes the forms of wariness about the historic role of Christianity within religious studies, censoring the promotion either of religion in general or of any particular religious perspective in the teaching and study of religion, caution about philosophical modes of religious studies that evaluate religious truth claims, and rejection of theological modes of religious studies that seek to do intellectual work on behalf of particular religious institutions and traditions. Numerous works express or respond to such suspicion—though in a host of differently modulated ways, sometimes historically and sometimes programmatically framed, and often in connection with arguments for the place of religious or theological studies in the university.<sup>3</sup>

Unsurprisingly, therefore, religion scholars tend to stress modes of inquiry that explicitly target objectivity and have built-in safeguards for detecting and correcting bias. Thus, historical, phenomenological, philological, sociological, and anthropological approaches to religious studies are ascendant. Comparative approaches, once important for unifying religious studies as a field, are currently in decline due to the increasingly specialized character of work within religious studies. This development endangers the identity of the multidisciplinary venture of religious studies, resulting in members of a department having rather too little in common, and potentially triggering the dissolution of religion departments, returning specialists to their native university departments. Meanwhile, philosophical and theological approaches are under a cloud within the academic study of religion because of a widespread perception that they lack the requisite objectivity.

Indeed, suspicion of philosophy and theology as components of the study of religion has been so strong in recent years that the number of employment opportunities in U.S. colleges and universities devoted to philosophy of religion has been in marked decline (judging both from positions advertised and from numerous discussions about individual departmental histories).<sup>4</sup> The proportion of such positions relative to religious studies positions as a whole also is also declining, as departments sometimes replace retiring philosophy of religion

professors with appointments in other areas of the ever widening field of religious studies. This partly reflects a need for rebalancing teaching expertise as religious studies generates more specialties. But I suspect that the shift also reflects lingering concerns about the lack of objectivity and ideological neutrality in philosophical and theological studies of religion.

I am not sure what the evidence is for this purported distinctive lack of objectivity in philosophical and theological approaches to religion. There seems to be the potential for bias throughout the social sciences and humanities, to various degrees—and even in the natural sciences, judging from numerous episodes in the history of biology and physics.<sup>5</sup> This potential for bias is typically managed through procedures that help willing experts detect and correct it. The widespread perception of bias in philosophical and theological approaches to religion probably reflects a belief that such procedures do not or perhaps cannot exist in those cases, as compared with the cases of historical and sociological approaches. The perceived solution, oddly, is not to insist on unbiased philosophy of religion and theology, which would be fitting, but rather to limit or eliminate philosophical and theological approaches within religious studies. Evidently, something else is afoot.

The concern about objectivity in the philosophical and theological study of religion is twofold. On the one hand, it expresses a strategic preference for defining religious studies in league with history and the human sciences rather than with the humanities, thereby simultaneously consolidating an intelligible place for religious studies in the academy and disentangling the academic study of religion from its theological and often Christian roots. On the other hand, it reflects a belief that sufficient resources for diagnosing and correcting biased interpretations of religious phenomena do not exist in philosophy and theology. I will take up the former, more strategic concern in the next section, and defer discussion of the latter, more philosophical concern until the subsequent section.

### *The Changing Identity of Religious Studies*

In general terms, as difficult as the changing academic job market is for newly minted PhDs in philosophy of religion, these transformations in religious studies strike me as a well-intentioned effort to correct mistakes of the past, in the name of a richer and more accurate understanding of religion. Yet there is something unduly defensive

about the current attitude of religious studies toward the historic role of Christianity in founding and nurturing the discipline.

The motivation of early Enlightenment scholars of religion such as Friedrich Schleiermacher and Georg Hegel may have included justifying Christianity's superiority in relation to other world religions. But they and other Enlightenment thinkers also sought to understand unfamiliar religions, which in their time was vastly more difficult than it is in ours. There is plenty of room for more pride of ownership of the Enlightenment Christian pioneers of religious studies. It is in the early nineteenth century that we see the most sustained and determined efforts to give birth to the objective study of religion, under challenging circumstances, through a long period of gestation within the womb of Christian theology reaching back into the medieval theology of Thomas Aquinas (c. 1225–1274) and earlier. After a difficult post-Enlightenment delivery lasting more than a century, this vast effort finally bore fruit with the field-defining works of Max Müller, Max Weber, Emile Durkheim, and William James.

The new-born discipline of religious studies transformed many aspects of Christian thought, provoking a sharp divide between Christian theologians who privilege Christianity and Christian theologians who do not. Some among the first group explicitly depreciate other religions, while others ignore religious studies and focus on nurturing Christian identity and self-understanding while maintaining abstract courtesy toward other religious traditions. Most in the second group take for granted the value and importance of non-Christian religions and insist on allowing this assumption to affect their interpretations of the meaning of Christianity. The same theological split is now evident in analogous forms of theological activity within religious traditions other than Christianity.

Meanwhile, the academic study of religion went its own way. Having left behind humble origins in the womb of Christian faith—nurtured by missionaries and curious philosophers and theologians—it allied itself with existing ventures in philosophy, in history, and in the human sciences. Its distinctive practice was comparison of religious ideas and practices, with comparison understood as serving a variety of intellectual and practical purposes. The theological interpretation of religious pluralism was gradually confined to strictly theological contexts, and the focus on the Bible gradually broadened to all sacred literatures of the world's religions.

The unfolding transformation had several stages. First, the American Academy of Religion changed its name and character in

precisely this way. Founded in 1909 as the Association of Biblical Instructors, and renamed in 1922 to the National Association of Biblical Instructors, it originally had a distinctively Christian profile. In 1964 it adopted its current name in an attempt to lessen or eliminate the Christian-Jewish emphasis expressed in the word *biblical*. Most of the over fourteen hundred undergraduate religion departments in the United States were founded in the 1960s and 1970s, and quite a few of these were in state schools where a premium was placed on nonpartisan approaches to religious studies. Certain key exemplar departments of religion began before this period, and some key societies and journals did also, including notably the Society for the Scientific Study of Religion (founded in 1949) and its *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* (founded in 1962). These initiatives spurred the professionalization of religious studies. Thus, if the founding intellectual transformation occurred at the beginning of the twentieth century, the professionalization transformation came several decades later, in the 1960s and 1970s.

Second, if we mark 1972 as the midpoint in this burst of professionalization within religious studies, graduate statistics from the American Academy of Religion reveal an interesting trend. In the three decades from 1972 through 2002, 1.1 million research doctorates were granted in the United States, with about 165,000 of those in the humanities, and 13,216 in religious studies, theology, or religious education. The interesting trend is the relative proportion of religious studies doctorates. The 6,805 doctorates in religious studies were awarded most heavily toward the end of this three-decade period—eventually overtaking the 6,411 doctorates in theology and religious education, which outpaced religious studies at the beginning of this period. The academic study of religion has come into its own as a scholarly field, staking out territory in distinction from the confessional and institutional interests of Christianity and other religious traditions, and finding a home within the contemporary Western university.

A third notable period of transformation occurred with the new millennium and is still underway, and this makes it difficult to assess. The general character of this transformation is consolidation, though sometimes in rather exclusionary ways. It has three components. One is the decision of the American Academy of Religion no longer to hold its annual meeting jointly with the Society of Biblical Literature, which took effect for the first time in 2008. This was a highly controversial and deeply hurtful parting of the ways, for some, and a long-overdue divorce of an unhappy marriage for others. It reaffirms the intention of the leaders of the academic study of religion in North