

CHAPTER 1.

THE INTERTWINING OF PHILOSOPHY AND RELIGION IN THE WESTERN TRADITION

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Philosophers have gotten something of a bad reputation for widespread—and perhaps closed-minded—atheism. The reality, however, is quite otherwise. We will address the reputation of closed-mindedness towards the end of this chapter. But first we'll address the historical point. For most of their history, philosophy and religion have almost always been intertwined in one way or another, and the vast majority of philosophers have had *some* kind of religious beliefs, oftentimes central to their philosophy, whether or not they have made the links explicit. And this is not without good reason. Though their methods (sometimes) differ, philosophy and religion have always shared a number of similar goals in terms of seeking answers to life's "Big Questions," questions about the ultimate nature of reality, our purpose or place in the world, the meaning of life and how we should live it (compare the discussion of the "life is a journey" metaphor in Section 3 of [Chapter 6](#)). In Plato's *Republic*, Socrates famously says, "It is no small matter we are discussing, but the very question of how we are to live our lives" (Book I, 352d). Many religious believers would say the same thing when discussing their religious beliefs.

Indeed, outside of Western culture, where a sharp division has developed between philosophy and religion as a result of the Enlightenment, it is sometimes hard to tell the difference between the two. Scholars agonize over whether Confucianism is "really" a religion or "only" a philosophy—or maybe neither one (Taylor 1990; Adler 2006; Sun 2015). Likewise for whether Buddhism fits neatly into either category, or maybe into both at the same time (Prebish et al. 2019). [Chapter 6](#) of this book discusses in more detail how and why the Enlightenment may have contributed to this sharp division between philosophy and religion in the West. But even in the Western tradition, the division between philosophy and religion was not always so sharp prior to the Enlightenment, as we will see.

If you are new to philosophy, many of the philosophers discussed below may be unfamiliar to you. That's OK! The point here is not to memorize names and dates, but to get a feel for how a representative sample of many of the "heavyweights" in the history of philosophy have interacted with religion, and how the two have, historically, not always been at odds with one another, but have rather been intertwined, mutually influencing one another.

ANCIENT GREEK PHILOSOPHY

Ancient Platonists, if asked to summarize the essence of the philosophy of Plato (c. 429-347 BCE), would answer that it was a way of life directed towards *homoiosis theou*—becoming like God (Annas 1999, 52 ff.). At various points in Plato's dialogues, his descriptions of philosophy and of wisdom sound much more like descriptions of out-of-body experiences than like today's notion of "thinking deeply about important questions." For example, in *Phaedo*, Socrates says, "I am afraid that other people do not realize that the one aim of those who practice philosophy in the proper manner is to practice for dying and death..." and then defines death as "the separation of the soul from the body" (*Phaedo* 64a). He goes on to discuss how the true philosopher is not concerned with things connected to the body (including sense perception), but with the soul, and trying to get the soul to be "by itself, taking leave of the body and as far as possible having no contact or association with it [the body] in its search for reality... the soul of the philosopher most disdains the body, flees from it and seeks to be by itself." Later Socrates continues, "if we are ever to have pure knowledge, we must escape from the body and observe things in themselves with the soul by itself" (*Phaedo* 66d-e). While there are other ways to interpret such passages, there is a long tradition of reading Plato as talking about something like an out-of-body experience that opens up some sort of mystical knowledge about reality, and even God. Certainly something along those lines is how he was read by the so-called neoplatonists like Plotinus and Porphyry (described below).

What we today call the "metaphysics" of Aristotle (382-322 BCE), he himself famously called "theology" (*Metaphysics* XI.7, 1064^b1). Prior to Plato and Aristotle, the writings of the pre-Socratics (Greek philosophers prior to roughly 400 BCE) were filled with speculations about the nature of God, or the gods. For example, Thales (624-546 BCE) claimed that "all things are full of gods" (Kirk et al. 1983, 95). We know very little about Pythagoras (570-490 BCE); it's doubtful he actually discovered the theorem named after him. But one thing we do know about him is that he taught his followers to believe in reincarnation and engage in various mystical practices (Kirk et al. 1983, 214 ff.). And Parmenides (515-450 BCE) presented his philosophy in the form of a long poem about a spiritual vision he had, in which secret truths were revealed to him by divine beings (Kirk et al. 1983, 239 ff.).

The Stoics believed the universe was guided by a divine *Logos*. While "*Logos*" in Greek Philosophy often just means human reason or an argument, the word is also the Greek equivalent of the Hebrew "*Davar*" or Aramaic "*Memra*," (the divine "Word" of God) which, in the later parts of the Hebrew Bible and in the Targums (Aramaic translations or paraphrases of books of the Hebrew Bible), began taking on many of the characteristics associated with God. (For example, in the Targums it is the *Memra* who delivers the Israelites from Egypt, and makes a covenant with them, and so forth.) And although the Stoics are considered a school of Greek Philosophy, the first Stoics happened to be Semitic immigrants from the East (Lightfoot 1894, 273, 299), so their view that the world is governed by a divine "Word" is especially noteworthy for its connection to Jewish thought.

This term "*Logos*" later shows up in the Jewish philosopher Philo of Alexandria (c. 20 BCE-50 CE), who describes the *Logos* as a kind of "second god," the "first-born Son of God," and the "eldest angel" (archangel) (Philo 1993, 834; 247). Philo's thought about the *Logos* shows deep familiarity with both Plato and the Stoics. Traces of this "*Logos* Theology" are to be found in Jewish **Midrash** as well (American-Israeli Cooperative Enterprise, n.d.). It's perhaps unsurprising that Philo shows

familiarity with the philosophy of his day, being from Alexandria, Egypt, one of the greatest centers of philosophical learning in the ancient world. The Gospel of Matthew claims that Jesus also spent time in Egypt as a boy (Matthew 2:13-21), which, if true, would almost certainly have been in Alexandria, where the vast majority of Jews living in Egypt at that time resided. This would place Jesus in the same city as Philo at just the time Philo's career there was flourishing. We also see Philo of Alexandria's term "*Logos*" playing an explicit, central role in a number of New Testament works, the most famous being the prologue to the Gospel of John (1:1): "In the beginning was the *Logos*, and the *Logos* was with God, and the *Logos* was God." The term "*Logos*" has been described as a kind of bridge between Jewish and Hellenistic thinking (Boyarin 2011, 546-549).

Numerous individual passages in the New Testament, as well as the entire epistle to the Hebrews, also show influence on a number of points either directly from Philo, or else some common source from which Philo and the New Testament authors must both have been drawing (Siegert 2009, 175-209 *passim*; Runia 1993, 83, *passim*). For example, the author of Hebrews famously downplays the importance of the earthly temple in Jerusalem in favor of a heavenly temple, of which the earthly temple is merely a "copy and shadow":

[They] serve the copy and shadow of the heavenly things, as Moses was divinely instructed when he was about to make the tabernacle. For He said, "See that you make all things according to the pattern shown you on the mountain." (Hebrews 8:5)

The talk about "copy and shadow" recalls Plato's famous Analogy of the Cave in Book VII of the *Republic*, where prisoners are chained up, facing a wall, unable to see anything except "the shadows of copies of things," which they mistake for the truth (514a-c ff.). The talk about making all things "according to the pattern" recalls Plato's discussion of the "craftsman" or "demiurge" (creator of the universe) in *Timaeus* (28a6). Likewise, Hebrews 11:10 describes Abraham as searching for "the city having the foundations, whose artificer and constructor [is] God," where "constructor" is Plato's term "demiurge" used for the creator in the *Timaeus*.

Plato also famously divides all of "being" into two realms: (1) the "visible" (particular, concrete things like people, trees, animals, etc.), which is temporary and perishable, and (2) the "invisible" (the abstract ideas or "Forms" or essences of things), which is eternal and unchanging (e.g., *Phaedo* 79a-b). St. Paul seems to explicitly make use of this framework in 2 Cor. 4:18: "For the things which are visible are temporal; but the things which are invisible are eternal." Again in *Timaeus*, Plato describes his highest principle, the "Form of the Good" as "the Creator and Father of all" and thus, in a sense, even higher than both of these visible and invisible realms (*Timaeus* 28c). Again, St. Paul also speaks of God creating "all things, visible and invisible" (Col. 1:16) in Christ. And famously, along with St. Paul and other New Testament authors, even Jesus himself is recorded as referring to God as "Father," a title very rarely used for God in the Hebrew Bible or the Jewish tradition more generally, but appearing in Plato and repeated constantly in the New Testament. Another Platonic theme found in the New Testament relates to Plato's saying that to "find" God is difficult, and "to declare him to everyone is impossible" (*Timaeus* 28c). Elsewhere he repeats that the highest principle is too difficult to grasp, so that we must reason instead about His / Its "Offspring" instead (e.g., *Republic* 506e-507 and 508b-509). We then find in multiple New Testament authors this familiar Platonic idea that we cannot have direct knowledge of God ("the Father"), but must have recourse to His "Offspring" or "Son" for any

knowledge we would have of Him, the Son being an “image” of the Father. (John 1:18; John 14:9; Col. 1:15; 1 Timothy 6:16; Hebrews 1:3; 1 John 4:12).

Does all this mean Plato was the *source* of these ideas in the New Testament? As we’ve seen, it would be difficult to deny that several New Testament authors *make use* (apparently intentionally) both of Plato’s thought and his vocabulary. As to whether Plato was the source of any of the New Testament authors’ thoughts, however, it’s hard to say, and scholarly debate continues. Of course, there are also deep differences that must be acknowledged as well. But while questions about *sources* and *directions* of influence may be debated, one thing is for certain: there was no *separation* into two distinct compartments of “philosophy” versus “religion” at this point in history. Thinkers at this time did not see two categories here, but one.

Questions to Consider

1. Brainstorm definitions of “philosophy” and “religion.” To what extent do those definitions overlap, or differ? Consider a belief system like Buddhism or Confucianism. How do the definitions you came up with categorize that belief system? Do you think your definitions get the right result? What does this say about the relation between philosophy and religion?
2. Similarities between Greek philosophical texts and Christian texts are not always obvious in English translations. For example, the Greek “ὁ Θεός” is typically translated as “God” (Capital-G) in the New Testament but “the god” in Plato’s dialogues. Likewise “ὁ λόγος” is typically translated “the Word” in the New Testament, but as “reason,” “argument,” or “account” in philosophical texts. Why might translators of the New Testament not want to highlight its similarities to Greek philosophical texts? Why might translators of Greek philosophical texts not want to highlight their similarities to a religious text?

MEDIEVAL PHILOSOPHY

After the rise of Christianity, the neo-Platonist philosopher Plotinus (c. 203-270 CE) asks, “What can it be that has brought the souls to forget the father, God, and, though members of the Divine and entirely of that world, to ignore at once themselves and It?” (*Ennead V.1.1*). Here Plotinus refers to his interpretation of Plato’s highest principle—The One, or The Good—with the particularly Christian-sounding terms, “Father,” and “God” (*Ennead V.1.1*). Plotinus’ greatest influence, the middle-Platonist Numenius of Apamea (c. 150-200 CE), created a new school of Platonism with the explicit purpose of demonstrating the overlap between Platonism and ancient near-Eastern religions, like Judaism (which he mentions by name). Indeed, he was the author of the much-quoted saying, “What else is Plato than a Moses who speaks Greek?” (Guthrie 1917, 2). And Plotinus, probably the most famous neo-Platonist in antiquity, saw Platonism not as a merely theoretical study, but as a *spiritual path*. He describes his own mystical experiences, inspired by Plato’s teachings:

Many times it has happened: lifted out of the body into myself; becoming external to all other things and

self-enclosed; beholding a marvelous beauty; then, more-than ever, assured of community with the loftiest order; enacting the noblest life, acquiring identity with the divine.... (*Ennead* IV.8.1)

At points he even gives guidance on how to achieve such mystical states, drawn from Plato's writings, and referring again to God as "Father":

The Fatherland to us is There whence we have come, and There is The Father. What then is our course, what the manner of our flight? ... all this order of things you must set aside and refuse to see: you must close the eyes and call instead upon another vision which is to be waked within you, a vision, the birth-right of all, which few turn to use. (*Ennead* I.6.8)

This again shows us that in antiquity, what was called "philosophy" was not simply the modern-day concept of a kind of deep, critical thinking about important subjects, but was instead an attempt at what might be called a kind of "spiritual science." A spiritual path *supported by* a deep theoretical underpinning, but more than *merely* theoretical.

In this light, it makes much more sense that early Christians were often critical of "philosophy" (by which they meant Platonism), even when they were themselves engaged in something that—in *today's* terms—we would call "philosophy." They were opposed to it, not because they were opposed to critical thinking, but because Christianity and "philosophy" (i.e., Platonism) essentially constituted rival schools of spirituality, with teachings about the spiritual path that, while frequently overlapping, were often at odds. Indeed, Porphyry (c. 234-305 CE), Plotinus' star pupil, saw Christianity (as well as **Gnosticism**) not as something simply unrelated to "philosophy," but as schools of thought competing with "philosophy" and posing a major threat to Platonism. So much of a threat, in fact, that he wrote a 15-volume work *Against the Christians* to attack it! Later Platonists (like Iamblichus, c. 245-325 CE) took a different approach, and began incorporating aspects of **theurgy** (a kind of ritualistic "white magic") into their philosophical systems partly in an effort to compete with popular Christian rituals and liturgical (worship) practices.

After the emperor Justinian discontinued public funding for pagan schools of philosophy in 529 CE, those schools began to fade out for lack of financial support, although classical learning itself was kept alive by Christian scholars in the (Eastern) Roman Empire (usually erroneously referred to as the "Byzantine" Empire) for the next thousand years.¹ From the Christianization of the Roman Empire until its fall in 1453, most philosophical thinking was done in the context of theological thinking,

1. The reason this label is erroneous is that it was only the western territory of the Roman Empire that was taken over by Germanic "barbarians" and fell into the dark ages in the 400s. But by that time, the capital of the empire had already been moved East to the city of "New Rome" (which was referred to as "Constantinople," but only as a nickname), and had been so for about a century. Latin continued to be the official state language in New Rome/Constantinople for centuries, even though most people actually spoke Greek. The Germanic tribes that took over the West then began referring to themselves as "Romans" and to the Easterners as "Byzantines" in an effort to legitimize their rule and to drive a cultural wedge between the Western Christian subjects they had conquered in Rome, and their Eastern Christian (and equally "Roman") allies. This eventually culminated in the myth of the "Holy Roman Empire," which was famously neither holy, nor Roman, nor an empire. Unfortunately, a certain Euro-centric agenda has led, and sometimes continues to lead, some Western scholars to perpetuate this mythology, referring to the Empire's loss of the Western territories as though the Roman Empire itself had actually ceased to exist, or had "fallen." In reality, life in the remaining territory of the Roman Empire continued on mostly as normal for another thousand years, until the gradual encroachment of Islamic armies, and eventual betrayal by Western Christians, led to the fall of New Rome/Constantinople in 1453. For a good (as well as fascinating and well-written) corrective to many common misconceptions about this history see Brownworth (2009).

whether by Greek-speaking Christians,² Latin-speaking Christians,³ Muslims,⁴ or Jews.⁵ Although such thinkers gave intense scrutiny to many philosophical questions, they always did so with one eye towards the religious or theological implications of those philosophical questions.

Questions to Consider

3. Consider these facts: (1) Aristotle describes the subject matter of his book, *Metaphysics*, as “theology.” (2) The New Testament employs technical terms from Stoicism and Platonism. (3) The second century Christian, Justin Martyr (AKA “Justin the Philosopher”) describes his conversion from Stoicism to Aristotelianism to Pythagoreanism to Platonism (all schools of Greek philosophy) and finally to Christianity (as though it was the final and best form of philosophy). (4) The Platonist philosopher Porphyry felt that Christianity was such a threat to Platonism that he wrote a 15-volume work attacking it. Can such facts be easily explained if there is a sharp distinction between philosophy and religion? Revisit your definitions of “philosophy” and “religion” from question 1 above. Do your definitions make facts (1)-(4) easy to explain, or difficult?
4. Re-read Plotinus’ description of his mystical experience of The One, and Plato’s description of philosophy as “practicing for death.” Plotinus thought he was simply following Plato. But beginning in the 1800s, historians of philosophy began calling him and his followers “neo-Platonists,” assuming their unmistakably spiritual brand of Platonism was “new” and not “authentic” Platonism. Most specialists today see that as a mistake. Why might philosophers from the 1800s be reluctant to acknowledge the spiritual aspects of Platonic philosophy?

MODERN PHILOSOPHY

After the armies of the Fourth Crusade sacked the Eastern Christian city of New Rome/Constantinople in the 1200s, and brought back precious ancient manuscripts, Western Europe saw the Renaissance blossom in the following century (1300s). After the eventual fall of Constantinople in 1453 (which led many Greek scholars to flee west and bring more knowledge and manuscripts with them), the arrival of Europeans in the Americas in 1492, the rise of Protestantism beginning in 1517, and the Scientific Revolution (perhaps datable to Copernicus’ publication of *On the Revolutions of the Heavenly Spheres* in 1543), we come to the Modern Period. The rapid pace of discovery of new knowledge and the overturning or questioning of previously-held beliefs from the mid-1400s

2. Such as Basil the Great (c. 330-379), Gregory Nazianzen (c. 330-390), Gregory of Nyssa (c. 335-399), John Philoponus (c. 490-570), Leontius of Byzantium (480-543), Maximus the Confessor (580-662), John of Damascus (c. 655 - c.750), Photios (810-891), Gregory Palamas (1296-1359), and Gennadios Scholarios (1400-1473).
3. Such as Augustine (353-430), Boethius (480-524), Anselm (1033-1109), Aquinas (1225-1274), Scotus (1266-1308), or Ockham (1287-1347).
4. Such as Al-Kindi (801–873), Al-Farabi (c. 870-950), Ibn Sina (980-1037), Al-Ghazali (1056-1111), or Ibn Rushd (1126-1198).
5. Such as Saadia Ben Gaon (882-942), Maimonides (1135-1204), or Gersonides (1288-1344).

to mid-1500s led to a period in which Classical learning began to be questioned, doubted, and interrogated to a growing degree. Not surprisingly, and despite being in many ways revolutionary compared to Ancient and Medieval thought, Early Modern Philosophy was still deeply concerned with religious questions.

The philosophies of the great Rationalists—René Descartes (1596-1650), Baruch Spinoza (1632-1677), and Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz (1646-1716)—were all bound up in many ways with their respective Catholic, Jewish, and Protestant theologies. Descartes' famous *Meditations* are largely concerned with proving the existence of God and the distinction of the body and soul. Spinoza's *Ethics* argues for his version of pantheism. Leibniz wrote versions of both the **Cosmological** and **Ontological** arguments (See [Chapter 2](#)), as well as his famous *Theodicy*, a response to the Problem of Evil (See [Chapter 4](#)).

Turning from the Rationalists to the British Empiricists, John Locke (1632-1704) was a deeply religious man and authored arguments for God's existence. Even his political philosophy begins from the premise that we are all God's property (which he seems to have meant quite seriously), for example, in the *Second Treatise on Government* 2.6 (Locke [1689] 1980, 9). George Berkeley (1685-1753) was actually a bishop in the Church of England, and a key aspect of his philosophy of "idealism" was the idea that, since matter doesn't really exist, only minds and ideas do, there has to be one very powerful mind (God) that constantly perceives all things and holds them in existence. Last among the three great British Empiricists, only David Hume (1711-1776) could reasonably be called an atheist, though this label was more of an accusation by his opponents. His views on religion have been more accurately described as "attenuated deism." In other words, he seems to have held something like the belief that there is *some* kind of Creator, who may possibly be something like a Great Mind, but who is not likely to be directly concerned about anything that happens in the world, at least as far as anyone would have any way of knowing (Gaskin 1987, 223 ff.).

Immanuel Kant (1724-1804), whose "critical" philosophy was largely a response to Hume's skepticism, described his project in *The Critique of Pure Reason* (B xxxi) as a way to "deny knowledge, in order to make room for faith" (Kant [1781] 1998, 117). While the philosophy of Hegel (1770-1831) is today often summarized in the triadic phrase, "thesis-antithesis-synthesis," Hegel's own conceptualization of his philosophy had much more to do with the Christian doctrine of the Trinity (as he interpreted it), which he explicitly stated he was trying to revive, since the *theologians* of his day had, in his view, abandoned it (Schlitt 2012; Schlitt 2016).⁶

Finally, although there had been atheist philosophers before, it is only really in the 1800s, with Karl Marx (1818-1883) and Friedrich Nietzsche (1844-1900), that atheistic philosophies begin to gain what will turn out to be a more solid and lasting foothold in the intellectual history of the West. But of course, it would be completely wrong to say that Marx or Nietzsche were *not concerned* with religious questions. Rather, they were both *deeply* concerned with questions about religion—they simply came down on a negative side of those questions.

6. See Schlitt (2012) for the key role of the doctrine of the Trinity in Hegel, and Schlitt (2016) for the doctrine of the Trinity in other German Idealists.

Questions to Consider

5. As we've seen, nearly every philosopher in the Western tradition during the medieval period was either Jewish, Christian or Muslim. And even in the modern period when people began questioning nearly all medieval thought (and rejecting huge swaths of it), most philosophers still had some kind of religious belief up through the 1800s. Revisit your definitions of "philosophy" and "religion" from question 1 above. If philosophy and religion are sharply distinct pursuits, what could explain the long-standing connection between the two? If they are similar or overlapping pursuits, what could explain why philosophers would begin abandoning religion in the 1800s?
6. Nietzsche described Christianity as "Platonism for the masses." Revisit your definitions of "philosophy" and "religion" from question 1 above. Assuming that Christianity counts as "religion," and Platonism counts as "philosophy," could Christianity *possibly be* "Platonism for the masses"? That is, would it even be possible, on your definitions, for a religion to count as a philosophy? What does this say about Nietzsche's claim, or about your definitions?

IS CONTEMPORARY WESTERN PHILOSOPHY DOGMATICALLY ATHEIST?

Having traced the intertwined history of philosophy and religion in the Western tradition from the pre-Socratics to the 1800s, we can now address the reputation of philosophy as dogmatically or closed-mindedly atheistic. Philosophical speculation can easily lead to beliefs that aren't the same as the surrounding cultural mainstream. So, it's easy to see why people would associate philosophy with heresy (beginning with Socrates himself). But it is probably with philosophers of the early 1900s, such as Bertrand Russell (1872-1970) and the Logical Positivists of the so-called "Vienna Circle" (who met from 1924 to 1936) that we find the source of philosophers' current-day reputations as people who narrow-mindedly refuse even to consider the possibility of the existence of God or anything spiritual. This reputation of narrow-mindedness is rather unfair in context, however. It's true that the Logical Positivists held religious talk to be, not merely false, but *meaningless* (which of course is a bit of a conversation stopper). But this was not, or at least not simply, a matter of being closed-minded or dogmatic about religion in particular. Rather, the Positivists had very specific views about the nature of language and meaning, and the relationship of meaning to observation and experience. Namely, it was held, to put it succinctly, that the meaning of a sentence is just the conditions under which it could be verified to be true (see Ayer 1952 for a famous example of this view). From their presuppositions about language and meaning, it simply followed as a straightforward consequence that talk about God or anything spiritual would be meaningless (Ayer 1952, 72 ff.).⁷

World War I and World War II no doubt also shook many people's faith in any kind of benevolent

7. But then, the same holds for talk about cause-and-effect, about morality, about aesthetics, and many other subjects—religion was not being singled out in this respect.

deity, and solidified the skepticism of those who already doubted. Yet, even during this early 20th century flowering of atheism within philosophy, we still see philosophers like Ludwig Wittgenstein (1889-1951), whose manuscripts make frequent allusions not only to the Bible, but to Christian thinkers from St. Augustine to Kierkegaard, Newman, and Tolstoy. Wittgenstein was both baptized and buried as a Catholic, though between those times he was not a practicing Catholic. Nevertheless, he was deeply interested in religious questions. He is reported to have once said, “I am not a religious man, but I cannot help seeing every problem from a religious point of view” (Rhees 1970, 94). He also expressed to Maurice Drury his deep regret that their friendship had in some unintended way made Drury less religious, and later commented, “There is a sense in which we are both Christians” (Rhees 1981, 130). This is perhaps a great irony, given that Wittgenstein’s early work was one of the inspirations of the very Logical Positivist movement that gave philosophy its reputation of hostility to religion. And of course, two of Wittgenstein’s most famous students—the husband-and-wife pair, Elizabeth Anscombe (1919-2001) and Peter Geach (1916-2013)—were both deeply devout Roman Catholics who made no attempt to hide their faith, despite the manifest unpopularity of their religious views within the profession in their day. Anscombe was by anyone’s admission one of the most important philosophers of the 20th century, and Geach was also an important figure both in the study of logic and in the history of philosophy.

Meanwhile, Continental Philosophy has often been bound up in one way or another with religion as well. Edmund Husserl (1859-1938) did not grow up religious, and seems to have strayed away again in his later years, but we do know that at one point in his twenties after having read the New Testament he was converted to Christianity and baptized in the Lutheran Church (Moran 2012, 13). Martin Heidegger (1889-1976) actually began his studies as a Roman Catholic seminarian before switching to philosophy, and he was influenced by the neo-Thomism he had encountered in seminary (McGrath 2006, *passim*). Jean-Paul Sartre (1905-1980) was by no means religious in any ordinary sense. Yet his philosophy is in many ways deeply *engaged* with religion, insofar as it attempts to explore what the meaning of life could be once we reject the traditional Western religious paradigm. This at least indicates that there is a serious question about how to make sense of, and find meaning in, our lives in the absence of religious belief. Indeed, in “Existentialism is a Humanism,” Sartre describes his entire existentialist project by saying that “Existentialism is nothing else but an attempt to draw the full conclusions from a consistently atheistic position” (Sartre [1946] 2007, 53). A close study of Sartre, including some unpublished writings, reveals he was deeply concerned with theological discussions about free will and determinism under the nomenclature of “sin and grace” (Kirkpatrick 2017, 207 and *passim*). Michel Foucault (1926-1984) is another 20th-century Continental philosopher one cannot describe as religious in any conventional sense, and yet it’s been reported that he “would sometimes laugh about his fascination with Catholic topics,” often criticizing Christianity, but sometimes becoming an unexpected defender of certain aspects of it (Jordan 2014). In his later years, Jacques Derrida (1930-2004) wrote and spoke explicitly about his ambivalent relationship to his Jewish identity, and how deeply it affected much of his thinking (Peeters 2012, 502-504). Thus, even during the heyday of 20th-century atheism, although most philosophers didn’t *adhere* to any traditional religion, they were still frequently *engaged* with religious thought at a deep level (whether or not this was always made explicit).

In the middle of the 20th century, philosophers’ attitudes towards religion began changing, especially

within the Analytic tradition of philosophy that grew out of Logical Positivism. These changes have apparently not yet been widely noticed outside of the profession of philosophy and in the wider culture. At the same time that philosophers began to see deep problems with the Logical Positivists' very narrow theory of meaning, a small number of mostly English-speaking, Christian philosophers began a firm and sustained series of defenses of the rationality of theistic belief against the then-crumbling Positivist theory of meaning. Among them, one in particular—Alvin Plantinga (1932-)—undoubtedly stands out as the primary force, though he was joined at first by a small number of friends (like William Alston (1921-2009) and Nicholas Wolterstorff (1932-), among others) and soon influenced others coming in his wake (Peter van Inwagen (1942-) being among the most notable, though numerous others could be mentioned). We will read about a few of Plantinga's contributions to the Philosophy of Religion in the section on Reformed Epistemology in [Chapter 2](#) and the Free Will Defense in [Chapter 4](#), as well as some of his associates or those he influenced, such as Richard Swinburne (1934-) and William Lane Craig (1949-) (both in [Chapter 2](#)).

Since that time, philosophy of religion has seen something of an explosion within Analytic Philosophy (the kind of philosophy most prominent in English-speaking universities today). This is due partly to the force of Plantinga's arguments themselves, and partly no doubt to a certain level of respect he commanded for making important contributions to metaphysics and epistemology—central areas of concern to all philosophers. Of course, religious belief has by no means won the day among philosophers, and the majority of professional philosophers would identify as atheists. Still, in contrast to the early and mid-20th century, when probably only a few philosophers had any religious beliefs (and even fewer were willing to admit it!), today almost 15% of professional philosophers say they believe in, or lean towards belief in, God. That figure bumps up to almost 30% among those who specialize in Medieval Philosophy (much of which is concerned with philosophy of religion, and the relation between philosophy and theology). And the figure bumps up again to well over 70% among those who specialize in philosophy of religion itself (Bourget and Chalmers 2014). There is controversy of course over what the last bit of data shows. It may mean that the arguments in favor of religious belief are just better than those against, and that those who specialize in philosophical arguments about religion (and so are in a better position to judge their merits) find themselves convinced of the existence of God. On the other hand, it may simply be a matter of self-selection—if one is an atheist, one might not be very likely to specialize in philosophy of religion!

We've seen that the reputation of closed-mindedness about religion among philosophers results from a misunderstanding of one particular school of thought that has somehow managed to overshadow nearly the entire history of philosophy from antiquity to the 20th century. The truth is that most philosophers throughout history have had religious beliefs of some sort, and many of the non-religious minority have been interested in, even consciously influenced by, religion. And while Logical Positivism's dismissal of religious talk as meaningless may sound insulting when viewed out of context, it was a straight-forward and unavoidable logical consequence of the then-dominant view about linguistic meaning in general. That view about language, however, met its demise some time ago.

We stand now at an interesting point in history. We saw a decline in religious belief among philosophers beginning in the 1800s, but are seeing something of a resurgence today. Is the long

interconnection between philosophy and religion from antiquity to the late Modern period an historical accident? Or is it the result of a deep, natural affinity between the two? Does the decline of religious belief among philosophers from the 1800s to the 1900s mean that philosophy finally managed to rid itself of an irrational relic of a bygone age, and will the recent resurgence of philosophy of religion turn out to be nothing but a blip on the radar? Or will the prevalence of atheism for a century or so turn out to have been the blip on the radar, which we are now seeing the end of? History has yet to yield a final verdict.

Questions to Consider

7. Suppose someone believes (1) that all propositions in a certain category are false, (or perhaps meaningless, or unjustifiable), and (2) that all religious beliefs fall into that category. Since it follows from (1) and (2) that (3) all religious beliefs are false (or meaningless, or unjustifiable), this person is not interested in listening to arguments about religious beliefs. But suppose that person is open-minded enough to entertain arguments that they may be wrong about (1) or (2). And if they could be convinced they are wrong about (1) or (2), they would then abandon (3) and be willing to listen to arguments in favor of religious beliefs. Is it fair to say that person is “closed-minded” about religious beliefs? Why or why not?
8. Revisit your definitions of “philosophy” and “religion” from question 1 above. Given your definitions, can you explain why many 20th-century philosophers, despite being atheists or agnostics, still found many religious questions and writings deeply interesting or important? Or do they make those interests seem difficult to understand, or merely a coincidence? What does that say about those definitions?

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