What is philosophy of religion?
Matthew Davidson, CSUSB
mld@csusb.edu

This is a difficult question to answer for the same sorts of reasons it is difficult to say what philosophy itself is. First, there is disagreement not only at the margins, but as to the very nature of the discipline; and second, even among like-minded practitioners of the discipline, it still is difficult to give anything approaching an analysis (that would look like a Chisholm-style definition) of the nature of philosophy of religion. (Indeed, it is hard to give an analysis of the nature of all sorts of important things.)

That said, we can gesture in the direction of saying what philosophy of religion is by (i) noting some of the central questions it asks or that are asked by those in it and (ii) noting some of its most-important figures.

(i) Some Central Questions in Philosophy of Religion

Philosophy of religion is applied philosophy, in particular applied metaphysics, epistemology, and ethics. It is concerned, principally, with metaphysical and epistemological questions as they arise in the context of religion. Here are some of the main questions in philosophy of religion.

a) Is there a God? How might we demonstrate that there is a God? Do any of the standard arguments for the existence of God (cosmological, design, fine-tuning (if this is taken to be distinct from the former two), or ontological) work? Are there other non-standard arguments that might show that God exists?

b) If there is a God, what is God like? How do we understand the attributes of God (see e.g. Wierenga 1989 and Morris 1987)? Are there paradoxes that arise with any of them in particular (e.g. paradoxes of omnipotence (one of which is the paradox of the stone) and omniscience (Grim and Plantinga 1993))? Are there paradoxes that arise when we take the conjunction of two of them (e.g. God is perfectly good and God is free (see Rowe 2004))? Are there paradoxes that arise with the conjunction of the instantiation of a divine attribute and some other proposition (e.g. God's omniscience and that humans are free (see Plantinga 1986))?  

c) What is the relation between God and things other than God? Some questions we might ask here include: Are there causal powers independent of God in nature and in sentient beings (see Morris 1988)? Can we make sense of the notion that abstract objects and other necessarily existing things are created
by God (see Plantinga, 1980 and Davidson, 2013)? What is the relationship between God and time (see Zimmerman 2002 and Ganssle 2001)?

d) What is the epistemic impact of the existence of horrendous evil on rational religious belief? Does the existence of horrendous evil entail that God doesn't exist (see Plantinga 1974b)? Does the existence of horrendous evil give us evidence to think that God doesn't exist (see Howard-Snyder 1996, Davis 2001, van Inwagen 2008a, and van Inwagen 2004)?

e) What is the epistemic impact of the hiddenness of God on rational religious belief? (See McKim 2001; Howard-Snyder and Moser, 2001; Schellenberg 2006.)

f) Can religious experience give us evidence for the existence of God and about the nature of God? (See Alston 1993, Yandell 1993.)

g) Can we be rational in believing in God without evidence? (See Plantinga, 1998, Quinn 2006.)


i) Are there non-epistemic reasons (e.g. prudential) reasons for theistic belief? (See Jordan 2002.)

j) What is the relationship between God and moral facts? E.g. Does God make it the case that it is wrong to murder? If so, how does God do this—is it via God's will? (See Loftin 2012, Adams 2002.)

k) What is the epistemic impact of religious pluralism on rational religious belief? (See McKim 2001, 2012; Quinn and Meeker 1999.)

l) What is the nature of the afterlife, and what sort of things must humans be to survive bodily death? (See Corcoran 2001; Hick 1994; and van Inwagen and Zimmerman, 2007.)

m) What is the epistemic impact of the etiology of religious belief? (See Feuerbach 1841, Marx 2002, Nietzsche 1887, Freud 1927, and Plantinga 1998.)

(ii) Some Important Figures in Philosophy of Religion
To my mind since the start of the 17th century (and the start of the Enlightenment more generally) there are unquestionably two figures that loom above all others in importance and quality of work: David Hume and Alvin Plantinga. Hume’s *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion* contain brilliant criticisms of the standard arguments for the existence of God (in particular the design argument), and a trenchant presentation of the problem of evil (see Hume 1969 for a collection of Hume’s writings on religion). Even if one isn’t convinced by Hume’s arguments, one leaves impressed by them. Hume is perhaps like Plato in this regard. I refer the reader to the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* entry on Hume on religion for further discussion.

In the late 1960s, Alvin Plantinga took the semantics for modal logic developed by Saul Kripke (1963) and developed his own modal metaphysics. This can be seen most clearly in his brilliant 1974 book, *The Nature of Necessity*. (It is instructive to see how his thinking developed between his earlier important book, *God and Other Minds* (1967) and *The Nature of Necessity*.) Plantinga then took this modal metaphysics and applied it to classic problems in the philosophy of religion, most importantly the problem of evil and the ontological argument. During the 1970s, Plantinga furthered work in religious epistemology began in Plantinga (1967), and in particular on the question as to whether one can be rational (later, *warranted*) in believing in God (or believing something that entails God exists) on no evidence. His early views on this subject can be found in the collection of papers he edited with Nicholas Wolterstorff, *Faith and Rationality* (1983), and the full statement of his views can be found in his important *Warranted Christian Belief* (1998). In the early 1990s he began to advocate the argument that belief in God is necessary to avoid skepticism. Statements of this argument can be found in Plantinga (1993, 1994, 1998, 2008, and 2011.) Plantinga has produced seminal work on the evidential problem of evil (see Howard-Snyder 1996), philosophical theology (Plantinga 1967, 1974a, 1974b, 1980), and the problem of freedom and foreknowledge (Plantinga 1986).

One thing that both Hume and Plantinga share is that their brilliant contributions to philosophy of religion come, it seems, *ex nihilo*. In the case of Hume, there wasn’t in the late 18th century anything like his penetrating analyses of the design argument and the problem of evil. In the case of Plantinga, in the early 1960s the number of people doing serious philosophy of religion could be counted on two hands (perhaps one). This was largely the legacy of positivism and neo-positivism in the Anglo-American philosophical world. By the early 1990s, the Society of Christian Philosophers was the largest subdivision of the American Philosophical Association. This was in no small part due to Plantinga’s influence.

There are other important figures in philosophy of religion since the beginning of the seventeenth century. I will list some of them, along with principal works in philosophy of religion. Among early modern philosophers, these include Rene

Bibliography


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