

Philosophy of Religion

An overview of the main arguments

What is religion?

- “Religion is constituted by a set of beliefs, actions, and experiences, both personal and collective, organized around a concept of an Ultimate Reality that inspires or requires devotion, worship, or a focused life orientation.” (p. 7)
- We focus mostly on theistic religion, and the claim of (mono) *theism*.
- The main alternative to theism, discussed by philosophers, is *naturalism*.

(sociologists) Collins and Pinch

Fundamentalist religion is:

“... mysterious, revealed, hierarchical, exhaustive, exclusive, omnipotent and infallible. The language is that of the Crusade or the Witch Hunt; victory, confession and retraction are the goals wherever heresy is encountered.”

(The Golem: p. 152)

- They're talking about (some) scientists, however! Here's the full quote:

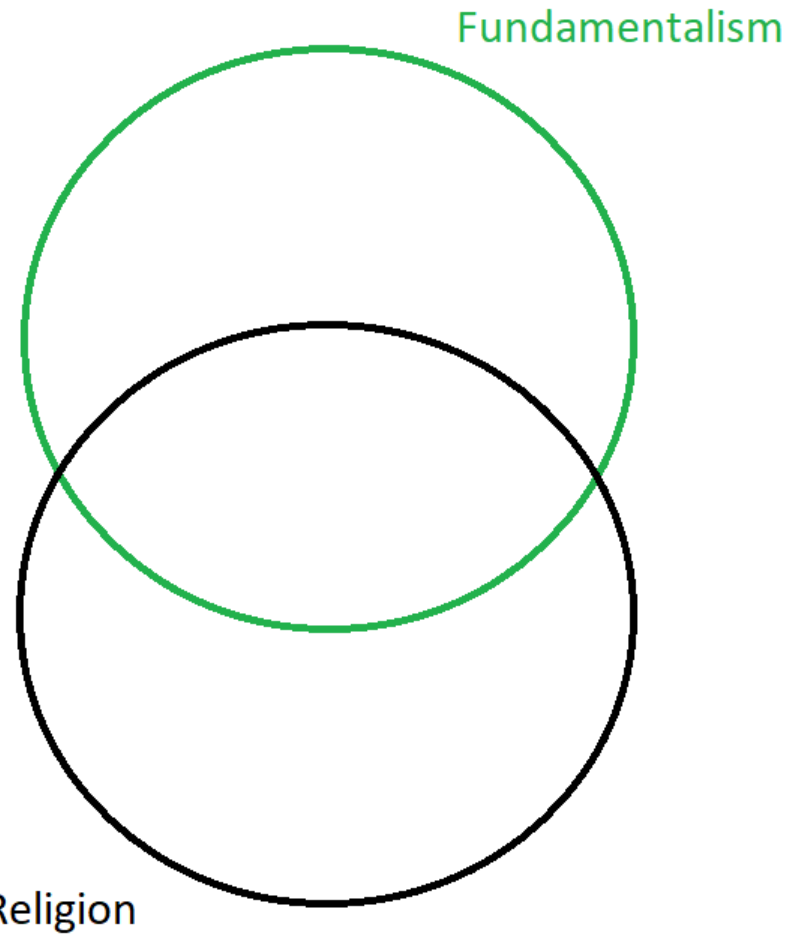
“The science warriors who hate or scorn the Golem notion will countenance no alternative view of science. They seem to think of science as like a fundamentalist religion: mysterious, revealed, hierarchical, exhaustive, exclusive, omnipotent and infallible. The language is that of the Crusade or the Witch Hunt; victory, confession and retraction are the goals wherever heresy is encountered.”

Science!™

WOKE RACISM

*How a New Religion
Has Betrayed Black America*

JOHN
McWHORTER



Naturalism vs. Theism

- **Naturalism** is often defined as the view that only natural objects exist – there is nothing supernatural (no gods, angels, demons, spirits, immortal souls, ghosts, etc.)



- **Theism** says that reality consists only of God (an intelligent eternal being) together with the things that God has made.

- Arguments for/against theism:
 - Cosmological
 - Ontological
 - Design
 - Moral
 - Religious experience
 - Miracles
 - Evil

- Is belief in God *rational*?
 - Does every rational belief need supporting evidence?
 - Does religious belief have to be certain?

Science and Religion:

- Are they friends or enemies?
- Does science explain religion, or does religion explain science?

Analytic philosophy of religion

- Take religion (mostly theism) seriously, as a set of philosophical claims supported by arguments.
- Evaluate the strength of these arguments, as well as contrary arguments.

Arguments for/against God

- “Scientific” arguments
 - Cosmological argument (God is/isn’t needed to explain why there’s something rather than nothing)
 - Design argument (God is/isn’t the best explanation of evolution, origin of life, origin of universe, natural laws)
- Moral arguments
 - God is/isn’t needed or useful for morality
 - Evil is/isn’t strong evidence against God
 - God is/isn’t needed for logic, rationality and truth to be objective

Arguments for/against God

- Religious experiences
 - It's reasonable to believe in God as a result of (private) first-person experiences.
- Miracles
 - It's reasonable to believe in God, on the basis of public miracles, observed by oneself or reliable witnesses.

Part 2

A closer look at the arguments

Cosmological Argument(s)

E.g.

“Most things depend for their existence on something else. But the claim that *every* being is dependent is self-contradictory, as all such proposals involve an uncaused being. Hence an uncaused being (God) exists.”

Ontological Argument

- The aim of an ontological argument is to establish that God is a *necessary* being, i.e. something that *has* to exist, as a matter of logic.
- E.g. the most famous version (St. Anselm) argues that the statement “God does not exist” contradicts itself. Since God is by definition the greatest possible (or most perfect) being, it’s a contradiction to say that God lacks the great-making attribute of existence.

Design Arguments

- Design arguments are driven by the fact that the natural world is full of things that have obvious *purposes*, and which contain very intricate engineering to achieve that purpose. (E.g. eyes, wings, etc.)
- We don't see matter spontaneously forming itself into such structures, so an external cause is necessary, which would have to be intelligent.

Moral Arguments

- Does morality require more than human preferences, reactive attitudes, social instincts, etc. as a foundation? (Is a normative human nature, or a divine nature, necessary?)
- Can morality be based on God's nature and commands, without absurdities?
- Can rationality and logic be timeless and objective, in a godless universe?
- Is there any reason why a good and omnipotent creator would make a world like this, with so much horrific and apparently pointless suffering?

Miracles

- **Hume** argued that, given our massive and uniform experience of natural laws, it's *very* unlikely that these laws are ever violated. Hence, when one hears reports of such violations, it's *always* more likely that the witnesses are mistaken, lying, etc. Moreover:
 - Witnesses to miracles are never credible (they're few in number, uneducated, biased, barbaric, mentally unstable, etc.)
 - People *love* to believe in miracles
 - Miracles claimed by contrary religions invalidate each other

- A. R. Wallace replies (e.g.) that:
 - Our experience of natural laws *isn't* quite uniform, simply because there *are* thousands of reports of miracles.
 - Witnesses to miracles are sometimes numerous, scientific experts, unbiased, sceptical people of high rank in society.
 - In discussing such credible witnesses, Hume changes the premises of his argument by assuming that miracles are impossible *a priori*, rather than merely not supported by evidence.

Even if God exists, is theistic belief rational?

- Non-theists claim (and many theists admit) the arguments for theism are unconvincing.
- And, in the absence of evidence, *it is not rational to believe in God*. (Rational belief is proportioned to the evidence.)
- It's likely that we cannot prove that God *doesn't* exist, but that's not the point. Neither can we prove that there's no teapot in orbit around Mars. It's not rational to believe that there's a teapot orbiting Mars, in the absence of evidence.
- This is the 'evidentialist challenge' to religious faith.

The Evidentialist Challenge

- Evidentialists often appeal to *Ockham's Razor*, the epistemological principle that simpler explanations, those that appeal to fewer causes, are better than complex explanations (other things being equal).
- If God is not needed to explain the data, then one *shouldn't* believe in God.

The Evidentialist Challenge

- Alvin Plantinga (a theist) argues, in response, that *if theism is true then it is rational*.

Plantinga on evidentialism

- Suppose theism is true, says Plantinga. In that case, our brains were designed by a person who wanted us to flourish in the world, and who desired a relationship with us.
- Such a creator would give us *a priori* (i.e. innate, hard-wired) knowledge about important matters.
 - For example, we would be hard-wired to believe in the reality of the external world, the existence of other minds, the reality of the past, the uniformity of nature, and so on.
 - Also we would be hard-wired to believe in God, or to perceive God in certain ways.

Religious experience

- In cases of ordinary sense perception, many philosophers argue that we have beliefs (e.g. *that's a tree*) that are:
 - (a) concerned with external objects, and
 - (b) warranted directly by the manner of production.

In other words, the existence of the tree is a foundational belief, and *doesn't require argument*.

Religious experience

- Beginning in the Enlightenment, however, religious experiences are not treated as perception.

“But in order to state the sort of evidentialism characteristic of Enlightenment thought, it is stipulated that no beliefs asserting the content of religious or mystical experiences count as evidence. For example, if Fatima had an experience that she would describe as of the presence of God she should not treat **God’s presence to her** as a piece of evidence. That does not prevent the claim that someone has had a religious experience with a certain content from counting as evidence. For example, the fact that Fatima had an experience **as if** of God’s presence would be a piece of evidence.”

(SEP, entry on “The Epistemology of Religion”)

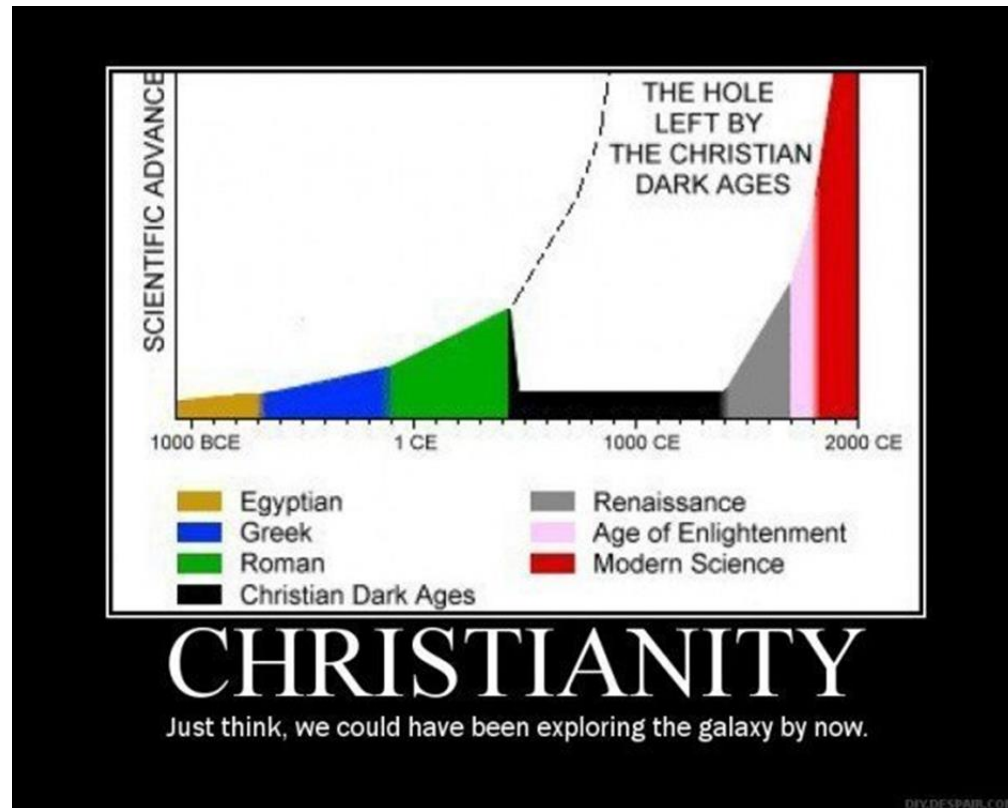
- *Question:* Is this an unfair double standard?

Does religious belief need to be *certain*?

- Some religious traditions stress the certainty and “assurance” of their faith.
- However, many of the “top” religious figures in history (saints, etc.) admit to having grave doubts.
- Pascal, with his wager argument, says that certainty of belief isn’t needed for *acts* of faith. It just has to be a good bet, considering the payoffs in the decision matrix.

Science and Religion

- Are they friends or enemies?



Columbus's Proposed Voyage



A

B

[Add Destination - Show options](#)

GET DIRECTIONS

It's 14,000 miles, not 2,800!

We could not calculate directions between **Canary Islands, Spain** and **Japan**.

Naturalism vs. science?

- Plantinga (and some other theists) say that science and theism aren't in conflict – very much. Rather, theism is in conflict with *naturalism*.
 - Naturalism cannot account for the comprehensibility of the world (theism can)
 - Naturalism cannot account for the existence of mathematical facts (theism can)
 - Naturalism cannot explain humans' ability to do science
 - Naturalism entails that evolution is 'unguided'. But we have no evidence that unguided evolution can accomplish anything.

The evolution of religion

- Can science explain why we are religious (despite there being no god)?

