

## **Theism in Western Philosophy**

I begin with a very brief, very general outline of the history of Western philosophical treatments of theism. I then discuss contributions to this history from pagans, Jews, Muslims, Christians, and non-believers. Finally, I make some comments about the range of conceptions of God that is evident in this history.

### **Historical Outline**

Western philosophy emerged in ancient Greece in predominantly polytheistic cultures. The ideas of the various schools of Greek philosophy shaped the intellectual histories of the lands that were subsequently conquered by the Romans. When Christianity rose to be the dominant religion in the declining Roman Empire, the primary intellectual task became the integration of revealed Christian doctrine with that Greek philosophical inheritance. However, much of the Greek philosophical inheritance became inaccessible to Christian thinkers, and was preserved primarily in the vibrant intellectual climate of the Muslim world. From the Muslim world, that preserved philosophical inheritance then made its way back into Christian intellectual life around the time of the rise of universities, and contributed significantly to a philosophical flowering that has continued to the present day.

While the task of integrating revealed Christian doctrine with Greek philosophical inheritance remained the primary intellectual task throughout much of the extraordinarily fertile heyday of Scholastic philosophy, the primacy of that task came to be questioned more insistently around the time of the dawning of the Renaissance. Rather than suppose that philosophy is entirely subservient to theology, more Christian thinkers came to accept the ancient Greek view that the primary intellectual task is to understand the world and our place in it—a task that, at least in principle, is capable of being pursued without reference to revealed Christian doctrine. As one element in a brew that contributed to serious political turmoil in Christendom, Renaissance Humanism helped to pave the way both for the Reformation and for the rise of modern philosophy and modern science.

As modern philosophy moved towards its culmination in the Enlightenment, its practitioners deemed themselves freer to follow where they took the dictates of reason to lead. For many, this was a version of deism and natural religion; but eventually, for some—e.g. arguably, Hume—it was either agnosticism or atheism. Thereafter, the story of theism in Western philosophy becomes a story of many different movements, with very different approaches and views.

Much post-Enlightenment philosophy has been hostile to theism. Materialism, naturalism, positivism and numerous kinds of criticism have all fuelled agnostic and atheist positions. Developments in the sciences—e.g. Darwinian evolutionary theory—and in the humanities—e.g. the search for the historical Jesus and higher Biblical criticism—have been taken to underwrite those views. Very recently, ‘new’ atheists—e.g. Richard Dawkins, Daniel Dennett, Sam Harris and Christopher Hitchens—have extended hostility to all manifestations of religion (see Dawkins (2006), Dennett (2006), Harris (2004) (2006) and Hitchens (2007); and, for criticism of the ‘new’ atheism, see, for example, McGrath and McGrath (2007)).

But, of course, much post-Enlightenment philosophy has been friendly to theism. Idealism—both Romantic and Absolute—attracted some theists (as well as some who were looking for substitutes for theism). Much the same can be said for phenomenology, existentialism, structuralism, deconstructionism and various kinds of postmodernism. Moreover, largely in circles occupied by analytic philosophers, there has been a considerable recent renewal of enthusiasm for large parts of Scholastic philosophy. And some—e.g. Thomists—have maintained a tradition that is continuous with the highpoints of Scholasticism.

## **Pagans**

There is a theistic tradition that runs through ancient Greek and Roman thought, centred primarily on Plato (429-347 BCE) and Platonism. Perhaps there are antecedents for this tradition in even earlier thinkers—e.g. Xenophanes (570-480 BCE). However, there is a clear line of pagan thinkers, who defend a kind of theism, from Plato through to the Neo-Platonists of late antiquity—e.g. Plutarch (c.45-120 CE), Plotinus (c204-70 CE), Porphyry (232-305 CE) and Proclus (411-85 CE). Of course, many contemporary theists will insist that the being that the neo-Platonists called ‘The One’ and ‘The Good’ differs in various ways from their God; but there have also been countless Christians down the centuries who have been prepared to say that their God is ‘The One’ and ‘The Good’.

There are many other channels in Greek and Roman thought that trafficked in talk about God and the gods. Some ancient thinkers were pantheists or panentheists (e.g., perhaps, the Stoics—e.g. Chrysippus (c279-c206 BCE)). Some ancient thinkers were polytheists (e.g., arguably, the Pythagoreans—e.g. Pythagoras (fl. 520 BCE)—and the Epicureans—e.g. Epicurus (341-c270 BCE)). Some ancient thinkers were sceptics, and their scepticism extended to God and the gods (e.g., perhaps, Cicero (106-43 BCE) and Sextus Empiricus (possibly second century CE)). The Greek and Roman legacy included a rich diversity of views of about God and the gods and an extended record of discussion and debate about these views and related matters.

Aristotle (384-322 BCE) was a source for many Scholastic arguments for the existence of God, and yet it is not clear whether he is properly classed as a theist. On the one hand, Aristotle seems to have been a polytheist: he took for granted the existence of the gods in the Greek pantheon. On the other hand, in the development of his cosmology, Aristotle was led to the postulation of a Prime Mover of the celestial spheres, and he attributed to the Prime Mover various properties that subsequent Christians attributed to God: e.g., incorporeality, immutability, and absence of potentiality. As we remarked above in connection with Platonism and neo-Platonism, there are many contemporary theists who would insist that Aristotle’s Prime Mover differs in various ways from their God; but there have also been countless Christians down the centuries who have been prepared to say that their God is the Prime Mover.

## **Jews**

While there have been long periods in which Jewish thinkers have contributed little to the main threads of Western philosophy, there have been a number of Jewish thinkers who have made seminal contributions. I shall mention just a few of them here.

Philo (c15 BCE – 50 CE) exerted a significant influence on subsequent *Christian* thought, primarily because he was recognised as one of the first to undertake the task of integrating revealed doctrine with the then still developing legacy of Greek philosophy. In particular, Philo developed a method of allegorical interpretation of scripture that enabled him to ‘find’ Greek philosophical doctrines in the Hebrew Scriptures. This work was a model for early Christian theologians and exegetes. And Philo also developed a theory of the Logos that had some intriguing affinities with Gospel accounts.

During the centuries in which the Muslim world was pre-eminent, there were a number of very significant Jewish philosophers, including: Isaac Israeli (c.855-c.955 CE), Saadiah (c.822-942 CE), and Avencebrol (1021-1058 CE). The most influential Medieval Jewish philosopher was Maimonides (1138-1204 CE); and the most notable to have lived in the Christian West was Gersonides (1288-1344 CE). Isaac Israeli and Avencebrol played an important role in the transmission and revival of Neo-Platonism in the Christian West; and Gersonides and (especially) Maimonides were key players in the popularisation of Aristotle’s works between the twelfth and fourteenth centuries.

Spinoza (1632-1677 CE) is one of the most controversial figures in philosophy. He was a scathing critic of traditional religion, a determinist, and a proponent of pantheism (or something very much like it). However, on his account, he was a religious reformer rather than an enemy of religion. Moreover, his abiding preoccupations were as much political as they were metaphysical: he wrote against the background of prolonged religious conflict, and expressly favoured democratic and republican institutions that promoted religious tolerance.

The Twentieth Century threw up a diverse range of Jewish philosophers; I shall mention just three here. Martin Buber (1878-1965) is noted primarily for his preoccupation with God’s relationship to human beings (though he also collected Hasidic tales, and wrote extensively on the Bible, Zionism, philosophical anthropology, and other topics). Ludwig Wittgenstein (1889-1951) is one of the greatest of all philosophers, and his conception of religious belief has cast a very large shadow—see, for example, Malcolm (1993), Philips (1993) and Arrington and Addis (2001). Emmanuel Levinas (1906-95) studied phenomenology under Edmund Husserl, and was himself a significant influence on Jacques Derrida and a generation of French philosophers.

As suggested by my initial remarks in this section, there is no genuine narrative thread to the Jewish contribution to Western philosophical thought about theism (or, if there is, I have been unable to find it).

## **Muslims**

The Muslim world produced a large number of first rate philosophers between the eighth and twelfth centuries. While these philosophers were mostly from Persia—centred in and around Baghdad—there were also some from the further reaches of the Muslim empire, in Northern Africa and Southern Spain. Perhaps the most significant of the great Muslim philosophers are: Alkindi (d.870 CE), Alfarabi (870-950 CE), Avicenna (980-1037 CE), Algazali (1058-1111) CE), and Averroes (1126-1198 CE).

Alkindi was a polymath who played a key role in the transmission of Greek philosophy to the Muslim world. He translated many of the key texts into Arabic, and developed an Arabic philosophical vocabulary that was taken over by many of his successors. Moreover, his attempts to incorporate Aristotelian and neo-Platonic doctrines into Muslim philosophy were widely favourably regarded.

Alfarabi was also a polymath, noted for his attempts to make Aristotelian syllogistic accessible to those who spoke only Arabic. Although he promoted Aristotelian—or, at any rate, neo-Aristotelian—doctrines, he held that Aristotle’s conception of the Prime Mover required Neo-Platonic supplementation, in order to bring it into line with the conception of God that is provided in the Old Testament.

Avicenna was yet another polymath, perhaps most famous for his contributions to medicine. He attempted to give a proof of the existence of God based on his metaphysical views concerning the distinction between existence and essence. Avicenna held the controversial view that unaided philosophical inquiry yields precise truths about the existence and nature of God, the creation of the world, the fate of human beings, and so forth—truths that are perhaps only obscurely implicit in scripture.

Algazali provided a significantly different orientation to Islamic philosophy. He was a sceptical and severe critic of the views of his predecessors (in, for example, *The Incoherence of the Philosophers*). His systematic Sufism owed much less to inheritance from the Greeks, though some of Avicenna’s ideas found a place in his ‘occasionalism’.

Averroes was the last great Muslim philosophical polymath. He responded to Algazali’s attack on Aristotelianism with *The Incoherence of the Incoherence*, in which he argued both that Algazali’s arguments were no good, and that he was attacking a straw man. Averroes reversed Avicenna’s claim that essence precedes existence, and developed his own proofs of the existence of God on this alternative foundation. Perhaps most controversially, Averroes held that theology is subordinate to philosophy, since only the latter can yield demonstrative knowledge.

Other Muslim philosophers who might have been discussed here include: Albumasar (787-886 CE), Alrazi (870-950 CE), Alhacen (965-1040 CE) and Avempace (d.1139 CE).

## **Christians**

The letters of the apostle Paul (c.2 CE – c.64 CE) involve an interesting fusion of Jewish traditions with elements of Greek philosophy, particularly Stoic and later Platonic moral psychology. The earliest Christian philosophers—Justin (d.168 CE), Irenaeus (d.202 CE), Clement (150-212 CE), Tertullian (155-230 CE) and Origen (185-255 CE)—also drew on a range of Stoic and Platonic sources, but they all took the view that Christianity was a corrective to the errors of pagan philosophers: none of the Greeks had a correct conception of God. Of course, the Christian conception of God was itself a work in progress; and, during the period of the first two Councils—at Nicaea (325 CE) and Constantinople (381 CE)—there were significant developments in the Christian conception of God in the thinking of the Doctors of the Western

Church—Ambrose (c.337-397 CE), Augustine (354-430 CE) and Jerome (347-420 CE)—and the Doctors of the Eastern Church—Athanasius (293-373 CE), John Chrysostom (317-407 CE), Basil the Great (330-379 CE), and Gregory of Nazianus (329-389 CE) (and the third of the Cappadocian fathers, Gregory of Nyssa (c.335 – c.395 CE)).

Between the Council at Chalcedon (451 CE) and the end of the first millennium, there was not a lot of influential philosophical activity. The *Corpus Dionysiacum* was written sometime soon after 500 CE, and Boethius (480-525 CE) wrote the *Consolations of Philosophy* just prior to his death. John Philoponus (490-570 CE) was an interesting critic of Aristotle and Proclus (though he had the posthumous misfortune to be declared anathema). Gregory the Great (540-604 CE), while recognised as a Father and Doctor of the Western Church, was notable for his leadership, administration, and diplomacy rather than for the subtlety of his thought. Isidore of Seville (c.560-636 CE) and Maximus the Confessor (580-662 CE) were among those who studied the *Corpus Dionysiacum*, and who preserved and interpreted late neo-Platonism. Eriugena (800-877 CE) stands out as another significant translator of, and commentator upon, the *Corpus Dionysiacum*.

Early in the new millennium, we find Peter Damian (1007-1072 CE) making vilificatory claims about philosophy. The fathers of Scholasticism—Anselm (1033-1109 CE) and Abelard (1079-1142 CE) both arrived at a much higher estimation of the virtues of philosophy, and prompted a new emphasis on reason and argumentation. (Anselm had access to Augustine and Boethius, including Boethius' translations of Aristotle; Abelard also relied on Cicero and Porphyry.) Of course, the new estimation of the virtues of philosophy had its detractors, most visibly in the persecution of Abelard by Bernard of Clairvaux (1090-1153 CE).

The twelfth century represented an important period of transition. The schools came to be conceived as places whose business was not solely—or even primarily—the transmission of received lore, but rather as places where new knowledge could be received and examined. Knowledge of fragments of Greek and Arabic philosophy and science fed a thirst for more of the same, leading both to a radical overhaul of curriculum and to the rediscovery or recovery of ancient texts, including, most significantly, the works of Aristotle. Alexander of Hales (1185-1245 CE) was one of the first to engage with Aristotle's metaphysics (and he also influenced the future direction of scholasticism by deciding to use the *Sentences* of Peter Lombard (1095-1160 CE) as the basic theological textbook). William of Auvergne (1190-1249 CE) was one of the first thinkers to make systematic use of Greek and Islamic philosophical sources.

Engagement with the works of Aristotle was one of the dominant motifs of philosophy in the thirteenth century. Before the middle of the century, curricula in faculties of arts had come to be modelled around the works of Aristotle. Albertus Magnus (1200-1280 CE) commented on almost the entire Aristotelian corpus. Siger of Brabant (c.1240-1282 CE) was condemned primarily because he held that the study of Aristotle was a worthwhile pursuit in its own terms, i.e. independent of whatever benefits might flow to theology—and was taken by some to be repeating Averroes' claim that theology is subordinate to philosophy. Roger Bacon (1214-1292 CE) claimed that at least experimental science could be taken to be independent of

Aristotelian theory. Roughly on the other hand, Aquinas (c.1224-1274 CE) held that in cases in which there is conflict between empirical science and fundamental Aristotelian teachings, one should ignore the empirical science: for instance, the superior predictive power of Ptolemaic astronomy does not suffice to trump the metaphysical certitude of Aristotle's cosmology. More broadly, Bonaventure (1217-1274 CE) insisted that there are certain fundamental intellectual tasks that philosophy cannot carry out unaided—e.g. guidance of men towards happiness and disclosure of the ultimate foundation of knowledge.

The latter half of the thirteenth century and the first half of the fourteenth century witnessed the full flowering of medieval Scholastic philosophy, in the works of Meister Eckhardt (1260-1328 CE), Duns Scotus (1266-1308 CE), William of Ockham (1285-1347 CE), John Buridan (c.1295-1361 CE), Adam of Wodeham (d.1358 CE), and numerous others. Many of the major figures in this period were nominalists or otherwise less than fully-fledged realists about universals, taking stances on a dispute that endured from the very early medieval period. Some figures went much further in their rejection of metaphysical entities—e.g. Nicholas of Autrecourt (c.1300-1350 CE), sometimes referred to as 'the Hume of the Middle Ages'.

The period from the middle of the fourteenth century to the middle of the fifteenth century—the beginnings of the Renaissance—threw up some particularly interesting figures. Nicole Oresme (1320-1382 CE) was a scientist and mathematician who was convinced of the regularity of nature and who, in consequence, warned against those who were quick to appeal to magical and supernatural explanations of natural events. John Wyclif (1320-1384 CE) was a reactionary Augustinian who opposed what he took to be the intellectual and political corruption that had taken possession of the Church in the fourteenth century. Nicholas of Cusa (1401-1464 CE) was a leading polymath, who made significant contributions to mathematics and theology (and inspired scientific guesses—e.g. that the earth does not occupy a privileged position in the universe, and does not follow a circular orbit around the sun).

Some key figures in the period from the middle of the fifteenth century to the middle of the sixteenth century were rather idiosyncratic. Erasmus of Rotterdam (1467-1536 CE) was a Renaissance humanist, a devotee of the great Greek and Roman authors, and a vigorous opponent of the 'speculative sciences' of medieval universities (meaning, in part, that he was much more Platonist than Aristotelian); and, of course, his publication of an annotated New Testament with Greek text was pivotal for the coming Reformation. Niccolò Machiavelli (1469-1527 CE) criticised the role of Christian religion in then extant republics, and looked with admiration at the role that pagan religion had played in Roman times. However, the most significant figures in this period were the architects of the Reformation: Martin Luther (1483-1546 CE) and John Calvin (1509-1564 CE). Luther was very critical of the synthesis of Aristotelian philosophy and Christian theology: he was critical of reason and philosophy, but offered a revised conception of the role of rationality in theology. Calvin produced a compendium of Reformed theology—*The Institutes of the Christian Religion*—that also evinces hostility towards reason and philosophy, though it contains the seeds of what later came to be called 'reformed epistemology'.

Interesting figures in the latter half of the sixteenth century include Michel de Montaigne (1533-1592 CE) and Francisco Suarez (1548-1617 CE). Montaigne is

difficult to pigeonhole. His essays yield a cultivated examination of religion, in which he provides pointed criticisms of many aspects of contemporary religions, sceptically reserves judgment on claims to religious truth, but insists on humanistic study of religion as a way of enlarging experience and knowledge of human life. Suarez, from the School of Salamanca was one of the last and greatest Scholastic thinkers. His *Disputationes Metaphysicae* is a magisterial discussion of metaphysics, including a careful discussion of the nature and existence of God, whom he supposes to be perfect, infinite, simple, immutable, eternal, incomprehensible, and ineffable. Suarez's conception of God is continuous with conceptions of God throughout the medieval period.

Some of the most famous names in Western philosophy belong to the seventeenth century. All were theists—even Thomas Hobbes (1588-1679 CE), whose materialism prompted feverish system-building amongst many of his suspicious contemporaries and successors. Some—such as Benjamin Whichcote (1609-1683 CE), Ralph Cudworth (1617-1688 CE), Henry More (1614-1687 CE), and the other Cambridge Platonists—believed in the harmony of religion and mystically conceived reason. Others—perhaps most notably René Descartes (1596-1650 CE), John Locke (1632-1704 CE), Nicolas Malebranche (1638-1715 CE), Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz (1646-1716 CE) and George Berkeley (1685-1753 CE)—erected philosophical systems in which God and other non-material entities played pivotal roles. Yet others—e.g. Blaise Pascal (1623-1677 CE)—eschewed philosophical systems, yet made lasting contributions to philosophical reflection on God and religion. The seventeenth century also witnessed the beginnings of deism—a rather minimal kind of theism—in the works of Herbert of Cherbury (1583-1648 CE), Matthew Tindal (1657-1733 CE), John Toland (1670-1722 CE), and many others.

The second half of the eighteenth century is dominated by David Hume (1711-76 CE) and Immanuel Kant (1724-1804 CE). Of course, there were many other notable philosophers who contributed to philosophical reflection on God and religion during the eighteenth century—e.g. Voltaire (1694-1778 CE), Jonathan Edwards (1703-1758 CE), Thomas Reid (1710-1796 CE), Denis Diderot (1713-1784 CE), Gotthold Ephraim Lessing (1729-1781 CE) and William Paley (1743-1805 CE)—but Hume's scepticism and Kant's deism reflected a fairly widespread dissatisfaction with organised religion and traditional metaphysical conceptions of God. Moreover, Kant's transcendental idealism—and his attempted overcoming of disputes between rationalists and empiricists—served as backdrop for philosophical discussion well into the next century.

'Criticism' provides one organising motif for thought about God and religion in the nineteenth century. 'Higher criticism' developed over the course of the century, drawing on the thought of Friedrich Schleiermacher (1768-1834 CE), David Strauss (1808-1874 CE), Ludwig Feuerbach (1804-1872 CE), Wilhelm Dilthey (1833-1911 CE) and many others. Feuerbach developed the idea that divine attributes are 'projections' of human attributes, and laid the foundations for the more critical views of thinkers such as Karl Marx (1818-1883 CE) and Friedrich Engels (1820-1895 CE).

'Idealism' provides a second organising motif for thought about God and religion in the nineteenth century. Johann Gottlieb Fichte (1762-1814 CE), Friedrich Schelling (1775-1854 CE) and G. W. F. Hegel (1770-1831 CE) all played significant roles in

the development of ‘Absolute Idealism’—a philosophy that has affinities with the views of thinkers such as Meister Eckhardt and Spinoza, but which might more properly be supposed to be panentheistic rather than theistic. Absolute Idealism became the dominant philosophical position in Britain—in the thought of such philosophers as Thomas Hill Green (1836-1882 CE), Edward Caird (1835-1908 CE), Francis Herbert Bradley (1846-1924 CE), and Bernard Bosanquet (1848-1923 CE)—and it also rose to prominence in the United States—in, for example, the thought of Josiah Royce (1855-1916 CE).

Other thought about God and religion in the nineteenth century was more resistant to classification. Arthur Schopenhauer (1788-1860 CE) approved of the spiritual concerns of the ‘pessimistic’ religions—Buddhism, Hinduism and Christianity—but rejected their established metaphysics. Auguste Comte (1798-1857 CE) opposed all theology—on positivistic grounds—but hoped for the establishment of a ‘secular religion of humanity’ that could legitimately occupy the social ground inadequately held by historical religions. John Henry Newman (1801-1890 CE), in his *Essay in Aid of a Grammar of Assent*, developed views about the justification of religious belief that received little serious attention from philosophers until nearly a century after their initial airing. Ralph Waldo Emerson (1803-1882 CE) developed views—concerning unity and ‘the over-soul’ that had some affinity with Absolute Idealism—but was primarily concerned to emphasise the value of spontaneous and untutored ‘illumination’. John Stuart Mill (1806-1873 CE) appears to have been an agnostic who professed great admiration for the moral character of Christ but promoted the virtues of something like Comte’s ‘religion of humanity’. Charles Darwin (1809-1882 CE) was at least an agnostic and, of course, a scientist: he was well aware that many would take his evolutionary theory to have negative implications for their religious beliefs. Søren Kierkegaard (1813-1855 CE) is almost impossible to précis: his complex writings have been variously labelled ‘existentialist’, ‘humanist’, ‘moralist’, ‘individualist’, ‘post-modernist’, and so forth. Charles Saunders Peirce (1839-1914 CE) professed belief in the reality of God, but supposed that religious belief is primarily significant for the kinds of human conduct that it underwrites. William James (1842-1910) shared Peirce’s pragmatic approach to religion—and his profession of belief in God—but supposed that mystical experience lies at the core of theistic belief.

Philosophical reflection on God and religion in the twentieth century is even more diverse than that of the preceding century: the following selection is partial, and perhaps not representative. Henri Bergson (1859-1941 CE) appears to have been a theist—and to have converted from Judaism to Catholicism late in life—though his tendency to embrace apparently contradictory positions makes his thought difficult to summarise. John Dewey (1859-1952 CE) thought of God as ‘the active relation between the ideal and the actual’, a conception that allowed him to emphasise the virtues of ‘religious experience’ while repudiating organised religion and the supernatural. Alfred North Whitehead (1861-1947 CE) and Charles Hartshorne (1897-2000 CE) developed a novel ‘process’ conception of God that rejected key parts of the traditional Scholastic conception—e.g. that God is changeless, simple and non-temporal. Max Scheler (1874-1928 CE) developed a phenomenological account of religious experience, according to which God is disclosed as real only in ‘reactions of faith in God’. Jacques Maritain (1882-1973 CE) was a convert to Catholicism who philosophised under the shadow of Aquinas. Karl Jaspers (1883-1969 CE) thought of

God as something like ‘absolute transcendence’, at best indirectly signposted by religions and religious faith. Paul Tillich (1886-1965 CE) identified God with ‘being itself’, the absolutely unconditioned and ineffable ultimate object of all desire and aspiration. Karl Barth (1886-1968 CE) produced a massive, unfinished, thirteen volume expression of ‘Christian belief’ under the title *Church Dogmatics*. Martin Heidegger (1889-1976 CE) was a Catholic philosopher, though he appears to have thought that philosophy has nothing to say about relations between God and humanity. Simone Weil (1909-1943 CE) seems to have held that God is literally inconceivable but certainly not illusory. William Alston (1921-2009 CE) developed an epistemological theory according to which beliefs about the nature of God can be justified on the grounds of putative perceptions of God. John Hick (b.1922 CE) defends a religious pluralism according to which all of the world’s great religions refer to the same ineffable ultimate reality. Mary Daly (1928-2010 CE) reconceived God—the most ultimate and intimate reality—from a radical feminist perspective. Jacques Derrida (1930-2004 CE) wrote quite extensively about God and religion, but his writing resists easy encapsulation: he may have been an atheist, but—on his own terms—he would not have been able to say so. Alvin Plantinga (b.1932 CE) holds that God is a necessarily existent, essentially omnipotent, essentially omniscient, essentially morally perfect person, and that Christian belief in God is warranted if God exists. Richard Swinburne (b.1934 CE), an Anglican convert to the Eastern Orthodox Church, defends the existence of an unembodied person who is eternal, perfectly free, omnipotent, omniscient, perfectly good, and the creator of all things. (Macquarie (1971) affords some idea of the diversity of Christian thought in the first two-thirds of the twentieth century. This diversity continues unabated.)

### **Non-Believers**

Tracing the history of non-belief in the West is not easy. At least prior to the Enlightenment, accusations of non-belief are often more properly classified as accusations of unorthodox or heretical belief. There is no question whether Arianism, Macedonianism, Nestorianism, Pelagianism, Monophysitism, Monothelitism, Monoenergism, and so forth are versions of theism; there is no greater question whether deism is a form of theism. While the emergence of deism in the seventeenth century marked a clear threat to organised religion, this did not—in itself—constitute the emergence of non-belief (atheism or agnosticism).

There are figures in antiquity who were called ‘atheists’—e.g. Diagoras of Melos (fl. 420 BCE) and Theodorus of Cyrene (c.340-c.250 BCE). However, it is not clear whether they were really atheists, or whether they merely failed to believe in the gods of their cities.

Clear cases of atheism do emerge in the seventeenth century. Kazimierz Łyszczyński (1634-1689 CE) was condemned and executed for his treatise on the non-existence of God. Jean Meslier (1664-1729 CE)—who was forced into the priesthood against his will by his father—bequeathed to posterity a lengthy manuscript in which he argued a case for atheism (in which considerations about evil played a significant role).

Figures in the eighteenth century who have been linked to atheism (or agnosticism) include: Julian Offray de la Mettrie (1709-1751 CE), Claude Adrien Helvétius (1715-1771 CE), Baron d’Holbach (1723-1789 CE), and the Marquis de Condorcet (1743-

1794 CE). (As noted above, it is controversial whether David Hume should be added to this list.)

There are many figures in the nineteenth century who are properly classified as atheists (or agnostics). Famously, Marx and Engels argued that religion is a legitimate expression of class oppression, and claimed that both the expression and its cause would wither away with communist revolution. Friedrich Nietzsche (1844-1900 CE) provided notable ‘psychological’ critiques of religion, in ‘The Antichrist’ and elsewhere. Sigmund Freud (1856-1939 CE) argued that religious belief is an illusion that we take on to cope with existential fears (particularly concerning death). Émile Durkheim (1858-1917 CE) and Max Weber (1864-1920 CE) pioneered the sociological study of religion; Durkheim—perhaps echoing Feuerbach—claimed that God is society writ large. (Other nineteenth century figures that might be mentioned here include: Friedrich Karl Forberg (1770-1848 CE), Harriet Martineau (1802-1876 CE), Bruno Bauer (1809-1882 CE), Mikhael Bakunin (1814-1876 CE), Ludwig Büchner (1824-1899 CE), Thomas Huxley (1825-1895 CE), and William Clifford (1845-1879 CE).)

Perhaps the best known atheist philosophers in the twentieth century are Bertrand Russell (1872-1970 CE) and Alfred Jules Ayer (1910-1989 CE). Russell wrote extensively on religion; while he argued strongly against theism, he was sympathetic to Comte’s search for a secular substitute for the institutions of organised religion. Ayer famously denied that the propositions of religion and metaphysics are meaningful—we cannot even make sense of the claim that God exists. (Among the many other figures who might be included in a discussion of twentieth century atheism and agnosticism, there are at least the following: Karl Popper (1902-1994 CE), Jean-Paul Sartre (1905-1980 CE), Simone de Beauvoir (1908-1986 CE), Albert Camus (1913-1960 CE), John Leslie Mackie (1917-1981 CE), Gilles Deleuze (1925-1995 CE), Michel Foucault (1926-1984 CE), Kai Nielsen (b.1926 CE), Noam Chomsky (b.1928 CE), Bernard Williams (1929-2003 CE), Michael Martin (b.1932 CE), David Lewis (1941-2001 CE), Evan Fales (b.1943 CE), Peter Singer (b.1946 CE), and Michel Onfrey (b.1958 CE).)

One interesting feature of the history of non-belief is the persistence of arguments against the very possibility of non-belief. As Berman (1988) documents, it was a staple of seventeenth and eighteenth century Christian authors to assert that there simply cannot be *theoretical* atheists and agnostics—i.e. atheists and agnostics whose non-belief is based in reason, evidence and reflection rather than in ignorance, passion, folly, vice, and the like. In an interesting recent inversion of this view, Rey (2007) claims that theistic avowal of belief is never based in reason, evidence and reflection, but rather is always the product of self-deception. McGrath (2004) argues—counter to the available evidence—that non-belief is on its last legs, owing to the purported demise of allegedly underpinning doctrines: ‘Freudianism’, ‘Marxism’, and the like.

### **Conceptions of God**

Throughout the history of theism in the West, there are several different currents of thought that flow continuously, though with differing comparative strength in different eras. These currents of thought are not necessarily mutually exclusive: some conceptions of God have features that belong to more than one current.

One set of ideas is based securely in the thought that God's transcendence or otherness places very severe limitations on what we can know or sensibly say about the intrinsic nature of God. On some versions of these ideas, there is nothing 'positive' that we can know or say about God's intrinsic nature: we can only know or say what God's intrinsic nature is not. On many versions of these ideas, while there is almost nothing *literal* that we can know or say about God's intrinsic nature, there are figures, or metaphors, or allusions that have some value as items of knowledge or assertion. However, on other versions of these ideas, there are not even figures, or metaphors, or allusions that have value as items of knowledge or assertion concerning God's intrinsic nature.

A second set of ideas is based in the thought that access to God requires some kind of mystical experience or illumination, or, at any rate, some kind of religious experience. Often, these ideas go together with claims about the ineffability and incommunicability of the knowledge that is acquired by way of mystical experience, illumination, and religious experience in general. These ideas are typically taken to contrast with the first set of ideas because, on this second set of ideas, it is supposed that there is knowledge of God's intrinsic nature, albeit knowledge that is incommunicable; whereas, on the first set of ideas, there is simply no knowledge of God's intrinsic nature.

A third set of ideas is drawn from the basic thought that God is the fundamental principle, or ground, or source of (more or less) everything else. This kind of idea finds elaboration in pagan philosophy—e.g. in Aristotle's conception of the Prime Mover—and in the more arcane moments of Christian theology—e.g. in Tillich's conception of 'being itself'. On some versions of these ideas, God is not personal, and not properly regarded as an agent; however, on other versions of these ideas, it is held that these ideas are compatible with further claims about the personality and agency of God.

A fourth set of ideas centres around a positive conception of God that characterised much thought about God during the Middle Ages: God is simple, eternal, unchanging, infinite, indestructible, necessarily existent, and so forth. Some may argue that these properties are not 'positive'; however, it is hard to argue with the claim that proponents of these ideas supposed that God's nature is intrinsically simple, unchanging, eternal, and so forth.

A fifth set of ideas is based around the conception of God as person and agent. While these ideas are often criticised—on grounds of undue 'anthropomorphism'—by proponents of some of the earlier sets of ideas, these ideas have the advantage that they seem to comport well with at least some aspects of literal and close-to-literal interpretation of scripture. In modern garb—'open theism'—these ideas involve rejection of some of the attributes that were characteristically ascribed to God's intrinsic nature in the Middle Ages: simplicity, immutability, eternity, and so forth.

Of course, there is typically much more to Christian theism than this brief outline discloses; however, my intention here has been merely to sketch some of the history of philosophical discussion of Christian commitment to theism. The history of

philosophical discussion of Christian commitment to such doctrines at Trinity and Incarnation is an entirely different topic, well beyond the compass of this chapter.

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**Related Topics**

Theism in Historical Perspective; Theism in Christianity; Theism in 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> Century Intellectual Life; Theism in 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> Century Intellectual Life; Theism and the Philosophy of Religion.

**Bibliographical Note**

Graham Oppy is Professor of Philosophy, and Head of the School of Philosophical, Historical and International Studies at Monash University. He is the author of *Ontological Arguments and Belief In God* (1996), *Arguing about Gods* (2006), *Philosophical Perspectives on Infinity* (2006), and *Reading Philosophy of Religion* (2010, with Michael Scott), and editor of *The History of Western Philosophy of Religion* (2009, five volumes, with Nick Trakakis).