

Philosophy of Religion Intellectual Output 2, UNIT II



Co-funded by the
Erasmus+ Programme
of the European Union

The European Commission support for the production of this publication does not constitute an endorsement of the contents which reflects the views only of the authors, and the Commission cannot be held responsible for any use which may be made of the information contained therein.

Version No.	Author, institution	Date/Last Update
1	<i>Mette Horstmann Nøddeskou, University of Southern Denmark</i>	11/11/2018

PHILOSOPHY OF RELIGION

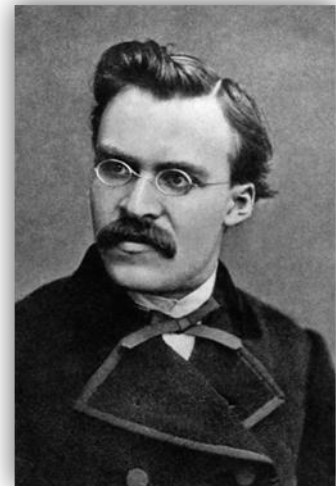
In the Western European Middle Ages, the encounter between philosophy and theology gave rise to discussions still going on today: discussions about the relationship between so-called 'faith' and knowledge, about the so-called 'Theodicy Problem', and about the possibility of so-called 'free will', if it is also claimed that a 'God' predetermines everything.

More information on:

- [The Theodicy problem](#)
 - (The question of why God, if omnipotent and absolutely good, can still allow evil in the world).

A prominent approach to religion, shared most often also by scholars of the study of religion, is based on *reductionist* theories, characterized by explaining religion by something else. Some point to psychological reasons, others to the social- or biological development of the human being. Reductionist theories have different explanations as to why people have religion.

Important historical examples of philosophical theories and approaches include the theories of David Hume (1711-1767) on the origin and purpose of religion; Immanuel Kant's (1724-1804) arguments that religious propositions are beyond proof; and Friedrich Nietzsche's (1844-1900) view of religion as both a powerful 'tool' for the weak amongst humans and a "comforting illusion" supposed to hide the chaos of naked reality.



Friedrich Nietzsche c. 1869

More information on:

- [Critical philosophy of religion](#)
 - Critical thinkers and reductionist explanations

More recent philosophical discussions on religion have been inspired by e.g. philosophical linguistic theories. While that has led to reflections on meaning and truth in terms of religious language, reflections within political philosophy also concern discussions about the place of religion in the public arena and minority rights.

1.1. Normativity, faith and knowledge

In contrast to the empirical study of religions, philosophy of religion also works with so-called normative questions about the possible truth and value of various religions and religious claims. While, for example, a sociologist of religion might study the role of religion in the public arena, a philosopher of religion is more likely to treat the question of whether religion ought to be in public arenas or spheres at all.

More information on:

- [The methods and objectives of the philosophy of religion](#)

A common theme in classical philosophy of religion revolves around the relationship between 'faith' and knowledge. The Danish philosopher, Soren Kierkegaard (1813-1855), belongs to a philosophical tradition that rejects the idea that it is possible to obtain knowledge of religious truths in the same way as one acquires knowledge of historical matters. On the contrary, he believed that a certain, objective knowledge regarding religious topics was an obstacle to the main issue: that of 'faith'. He saw 'faith' as a subjective dimension, a specific mode of existence. Philosophers like William James (1842-1910) and William Alston (1921-2009) have tried to argue that, in principle, nothing speaks against religious, mythological-based roads to knowledge. It can be compared with the possibility of being clairvoyant.

More information on:

- [Philosophy of religion: normativity, faith and knowledge](#)
 - Source 2

1.2. Religious themes in political philosophy

Recent philosophy of religion discusses the relationship between religion and politics. Among other reasons, this interest has emerged from encounters between various religions and disagreements about the role of religion in a secular society. Some of the major discussions relate to multiculturalism and minority rights, but the theme appears also in the discussion of whether religious alternatives to the evolutionary theory should be included in biology classes in schools.

More information on:

- [Religion in public space](#)



An American organisation that works against the confusion of religion and politics.
[Freedom from Religion Foundation](#)

By opening [this link](#), a page opens where the theoretical formulations here illustrated (Religion and Ethics, Religious Themes in Political Philosophy) are accompanied by actual examples from various religious traditions, with links to the corresponding sections of the various Digital Modules. Click on 'Philosophy of Religion' and choose a category. Press 'For Teachers' or 'Reflective questions' for more didactical comments, questions, and tasks for the students.