
Unit 3 Religion, Philosophy of Religion, and Theology*

Structure

3.0 Objectives

3.1 Introduction

3.2 Religion

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3.0 OBJECTIVES

- To understand the elements of Religion
- To understand Philosophy of Religion as a subset of Philosophy
- To demarcate the separate provinces of Religion, Philosophy of Religion, and Theology and to understand their interrelationship

Note: The content in the *ponder boxes* is not part of the conventional unit, but pondering on it would enrich your understanding of the unit and would allow the assimilation of knowledge in a broader context.

3.1 INTRODUCTION

It's not uncommon to witness intersecting domains of common interest giving an impression of sameness even when they are not so, but a closer inspection quickly dissipates this misconception. Religion, philosophy of religion, and theology too are domains that intersect,

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often giving an impression of resemblance, but a closer inspection suggests otherwise, for domains might intersect, interests might align, but they do so with a different set of *aims* and *attitudes*. Thus, this unit is an attempt to closely examine this intersection and give an account of what differentiates the three.

In this effort, it seems reasonable to begin with 'religion', as apart from it being a domain in its own right, it also happens to be the subject matter for the other two. Therefore, the following is a brief account of what religion represents.

3.2 RELIGION

Although a precise number is difficult to arrive at, most of the estimations suggest that there are over 4000 religions, sects and their offshoots practised worldwide. Thus, though it is not entirely impossible, it is highly unlikely to find someone not acquainted with religion in one form or the other, yet any effort to define it in some *precise* way is likely to end up as a failure because religion represents such diverse beliefs, practices, observances and adherences that have very few parallels.

Thus, maybe a more fruitful approach to understand religion is by delineating its general or common features, and subsequently relying on such features, synthesise a broad and holistic outlook regarding what the concept of religion represents.

Religion can be identified with some core set of beliefs, associated practices and observances adhered by an individual or a group of people or a sect. Alternatively stated, religion represents a core set of beliefs that dictates the way of life of an individual or a group. In the context of the preceding statements and for the discussion to follow from here, it is significant to understand what 'beliefs' are.

Beliefs are statements, claims or propositions considered or accepted to be true by an individual or a group. For example, When someone considers the statement—'the sun rises in the east' to be true, they adopt or form an affirmative mental attitude towards this statement/proposition. This mental attitude is what we may call a belief. Belief, it needs to be underscored, is not representative of the truth or falsity of a *proposition*. Albeit, they represent the *consideration* of an individual or a group for the truth or falsity of a proposition. In view of the afore-stated notion of belief and our common experience with them, it's reasonable to state, without probably attracting any disagreement, that not all our beliefs are religious in

character, signifying that there have to be some identifiable key characteristics that separate our religious beliefs from our commonly held other beliefs. One of the promising ways, it appears, to decipher some of the essential characteristics of religious beliefs—the claims that are considered to be true within the religious domain—is by observing how the organised religions function worldwide and arrive at some broad generalisations therefrom. The following, therefore, is an effort to bring forth some of the essential characteristics that can be solely associated with religion.

PONDER BOX-I

Beliefs play a seminal role in the decision making of individuals, thereby shaping their entire lives. The same is to be expected in the context of religious beliefs if you hold them.

List the decisions in your life that have been fully or partially influenced by religious beliefs. You may discover the extent of your life influenced or conditioned by religion.

3.2.1 Salient Features of Religion

3.2.1.1 Claims to provide answers to some of the fundamental questions

To begin with, most world religions claim to be the sole repository of the answers to some of the *fundamental* questions that concern us. Such fundamental questions, amongst others, may include ‘what the ultimate reality is’, ‘why anything exists at all’, ‘what our place in such a reality is’, ‘what our true nature is’ etc. These questions, arguably, suggest that religion claims to offer the *architecture of our reality*. Most religions, if not all, provide answers to these questions and often they project a reality that transcends our common experience but at the same time is intimately connected to our lives and wellbeing.

Some examples may prove useful in driving home the essence of what is stated above. Consider, for a moment, one of the questions mentioned above, ‘why anything exists at all’. One may find, on investigation, that many religions offer some conception of a creator or an uncaused cause as an answer to this question. Judaism, Christianity, Islam and many schools of Hinduism fall in this category, where the appeal is made to some theistic notion wherein God or gods, assume(s) the role of a creator along with many other roles. However, not all religions, it is emphasised, subscribe to such a view. For example, Jainism and Buddhism don’t offer any conception of a creator to explain the existence of this world. However, it doesn’t mean the question of *existence* is abandoned. What differs is only the *form of answers* offered.

Such answers are considered absolute truths within the fold of respective religions. Further, such claims, owing to the immutable status accorded to them, are opaque to any challenges, meaning their authority is considered *final* and their legitimacy is *unquestionable* in most religions. However, the foregoing doesn't imply that the prevalent beliefs in a religion are always accepted by all the adherents alike. Internal disagreements often occur on account of mostly varying interpretations of the same religious tenets, but the rigid character of such tenets and their different interpretations often push religion towards schism. Various subjects of all the major religions are a testimony to this propensity.

3.2.1.2 Gives a higher purpose that ought to guide our life

Another salient feature of most of the world religions is the concerted effort to address the concern of meaning of life, i.e., addressing the questions like- 'is there some inherent meaning to life' or 'is there a higher purpose that ought to guide our life'. The afore-stated concern probably stems from a foreseeable impending end to our lives, which forces upon us some psychologically unsettling questions such as, is death the final truth staring us and our loved ones, or is there some form of continuity that makes our lives more meaningful than what is apparent. Most religions attempt to satisfy this human yearning for continuity by advancing a conception of our true nature that is separate and distinct from our perishable physical body. For an instance, most religions rely on some conception of soul, self or consciousness to define our *true* nature and in effect establish a continuity and tranquillity that cannot be jeopardised by mortality, impermanence, uncertainty or death. It is in the context of this immortal true nature that most religions define or give meaning to the purpose of life. *Salvation* for Judeo-Christian and Islamic religions, *Mokṣa* for Hinduism, *Nirvāṇa* for Buddhism, *Kaivalya* for Jainism, represent such a higher purpose of life.

3.2.1.3 Offers general moral principles to guide one's actions

Most religions, it appears, assume a central role in shaping the moral compass of their followers. Alternatively stated, most religions demarcate the province of what is *right* and *wrong* or *good* and *evil*, which means, that religion offers the general principles that the adherents of a religion must follow while conducting the affairs of their life. For instance, the doctrine of 'niṣkāmakarma', one of the key teachings of Bhagavad Gita, calls for a desire-less or a self-less pursuit of an action in accordance with one's duty.

As such the principles are considered to be the commandments of divine origin, meaning, the adherents of a religion, in most such cases, are not assumed to have the autonomy to accept

or discard such principles or duties. Adherence to such principles by a follower can be seen as a function of reverence or fear or a combination of both. Reverence for such principles is understandable as they are believed to be divine commandments by a follower, whereas the fear stems from undesirable consequences and punishments that such commandments append to non-adherence.

3.2.1.4 Faith

Faith is another salient feature that is associated with religion in ways that are arguably unparalleled in other walks of life. Faith, in one sense, is subscribing to a belief or a set of beliefs without seeking justifications for having them. As mentioned earlier, belief is treating a proposition, a claim or a statement to be true. Thus, faith, in the aforesaid sense, is treating a claim/ proposition/ statement to be true *without needing any justification* to do so. The adherents of any religion, it appears, place their faith, in the aforesaid sense, in the dictates and claims of their respective religion and conduct their lives according to it.

The foregoing doesn't imply a complete absence of justification from the domain of religion. Having faith doesn't mean the adherents or practitioners completely renounce justification. Quite the opposite, justification is central to religion when it comes to the conduct of a follower or a practitioner, but such justifications always come from the tenets, claims and principles advanced by the religion. What they cannot seek, in most religions, is the justification for *these tenets, claims and principles themselves* that make up the edifice of a particular religion. In fact, questioning the core set of beliefs and their basis is often regarded as irreverence for the religion. Most religions, therefore, have instruments of deterrence to prevent such blasphemy.

3.2.1.5 Revelation as the source of ultimate knowledge

Religious beliefs often hinge on a specific source of knowledge which starkly differentiates them from most other forms of beliefs. In most religions, the source of knowledge is claimed to be some form of *divine revelation*, or some *authority*, such as *scriptures, prophets* or *inscriptions*, that is treated to be the repository of all knowledge, the veracity and legitimacy of which is supposedly unchallenged and unrivalled. As explained earlier, all justifications for religious practices rely on them whereas *their* justification generally lies in their claimed divinity or absolute authority.

3.2.1.6 Ritualism

Ritualism, a socio-cultural phenomenon in general, is also an integral part of most religions. *Rituals*, in this sense, constitute religion instituted specific set of practices and observances often for their supposed benefits to the practitioners. These are generally the practices seamlessly integrated with even the most secular aspects of the socio-cultural sphere of a person, dictating '*whats*' and '*hows*' to them. The extent of penetration of rituals often goes unnoticed, but it can be understood from merely inspecting the various stages in a religious person's life from birth to death.

3.2.1.7 Prayer

Prayer is a phenomenon associated with most of the religions. It is conceived as a medium of communication between the divine and its subject. Prayers can be classified based on the intent of such communication. One such intent is to demonstrate adulations and reverence for the divine, and the prayer fulfilling such intent, therefore, involves elements demonstrative of worship or praise. Different from the preceding are petitionary prayers, where the intent is to see some desire getting fulfilled or to seek forgiveness for some wrong conduct or just to ensure that the blessing of the divine doesn't abandon the petitioner. A significant facet of petitionary prayer is the conception of the divine or the God.

3.2.1.8 Spiritualism

Spiritualism, although is often identified with religion, is a secular notion. It's a quest to understand one's own nature or what may be called the quest for self-actualisation. In the above sense, it's closely associated with the yearning to understand the meaning of life, but when such a meaning is sought within the confines of a religion, or when the quest to understand one's own nature takes one to the doorsteps of religion, it becomes integrated with religion. Thus, in the above sense, spiritualism is an integral part of religion but it is not exclusive to it.

Hitherto, some of the essential features of religion have been introduced to aid the reader in identifying and segregating beliefs and practices that are representative of religion. Preceding is not an exhaustive list of features characterising religion, yet they afford enough generalisations to assist in drawing a tentative perimeter around its domain for further exploration.

Check Your Progress I

Note: a) Use the space provided for your answer.

b) Check your answer with that provided at the end of the unit.

1. Delineate the general features of religion.

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3.3 PHILOSOPHY OF RELIGION

This section provides an exposition of what constitutes ‘philosophy of religion’, but any definitive progress in the stated direction is inconceivable without alluding to what *philosophy*, in general, represents.

Philosophy marks an *attitudinal shift* from what has been witnessed in the context of religion in the preceding section. If religion is about faith as its underpinning, philosophy adopts a posture of *scepticism** or *doubt* for any assertion. This attitude of scepticism for any apparent or obscure is at the core of philosophy. In the preceding sense, philosophy offers a prospect of *unrestrained scrutiny* into the edifice of our notions.

Consider the following questions and reflect for a moment. ‘what is reality’; ‘is there a reality beyond our sense mediated experience’; ‘why anything exists’; ‘what is our place in this world’; ‘is there any meaning to life’; ‘how do we know what we know’; ‘are we an autonomous agent with free will’; etc. In the previous section, it was told that religion claims to provide answers to these questions or at least some of these questions, but is it necessary to rely on religion or any other authority to get answers to such questions, or can one exercise the option to give into one’s sense of *wonderment* and *curiosity* and *reflect* on such issues.

When an individual exercises the latter option and reflects, it may rather quickly dawn upon that each of these questions can be responded to in more than one way. Apparently, the

* Scepticism is used in a specific sense here. It should be understood as the readiness to question any claim to truth, to seek conceptual clarity of the categories forming such propositions and to look for the logical coherency, all being done with an openness for accepting the limitation of such justifications and the assumptions involved.

existence of each of the thousands of religions and their offshoots bears testimony to the diversity and plurality in the responses to these questions, and when non-religious responses too are added to the mix, it may seem prudent to adopt a reasonable level of scepticism for any assertion made regardless of the authority it is coming from. This attitude that drives philosophy is in stark contrast to religion, which has *faith* at its root and therefore is content with embracing the words of authority.

Apparently, scepticism or doubt propels one to ask in what ways an assertion is true. This enquiry brings forth the significance ‘*justification*’ has in the context. Justification means *supporting* or *grounding* the assertion made by a declaration, which in common parlance is often called reason, but in philosophy, it has a specific meaning and structure. The structure is called an *argument*, constituting of a *conclusion*—a proposition that one intends to establish and *premise(s)*— proposition(s) that one advances to establish the conclusion. The argument is the structure philosophy relies on to justify claims.

However, religion too, it may be argued, relies on arguments for justification. In fact, it’s a fairly common structure often employed in even regular discourses. Thus, religion definitely employs the structure of argumentation as philosophy does but doesn’t harness its potential as philosophy does. Premises and conclusions in philosophical arguments are open to challenge, and in the wake of newer information, if contradictions and inconsistencies emerge, philosophical arguments are able to make a course correction, which is entirely missing in the domain of religion. Also, in constructing arguments, philosophy attempts to keep at bay logical-fallacies* and cognitive-biases†, which, it seems, is not a particularly strong suit of religion. In the foregoing sense, Philosophy is *organic*, ever-growing, adding newer corpus

PONDER BOX -II

Usage of argumentation is not limited to the formal fields of enquiry. In fact, you employ them in your day to day discourses more often than you probably appreciate.

Look up the following forms of arguments:

Induction, deduction and abduction

Observe your discourses for how you and others around you employ these structures.

*Logical fallacies corrode the integrity of an argument. One of the ways in which they get actualised is by diluting the form or structure of the argument, i.e., by not adhering to the proper rules of inference, therefore suitably termed as formal fallacies. Informal fallacies are yet another manifestation of logical fallacies, where some devious instruments are advanced disguised as arguments

†Cognitive biases create a tunnel vision before us, hiding contradictions and inconsistencies that are often in plain sight. Cognitive biases remind us that we are not merely born in a physical world. We are also born in a socio-cultural environment, where before even getting to one’s full cognitive capacities, one is conditioned by the prevalent beliefs of one’s environment, preventing one from being considerate for the alternate views.

PONDER BOX - III

If you have been enthusiastic about the previous activities, you may have discovered arguments crucially shape your discourses, beliefs and decisions. In this sense, they shape your life, but you might not be as adept as you think you are in employing them in your life.

*Examine common **cognitive biases** and **logical fallacies** that plague your judgements.*

of knowledge. On the contrary, the claims of religious arguments, as explained in the previous section, are considered to be *absolute* truths and therefore can't be subjected to any challenge. Thus, in the event of inconsistencies or contradictions too, they remain *rigid*.

Thus, relying on the instrument of argumentation and espousing an attitude of reasonable scepticism for the apparent and the obscure in equal measures, philosophy

addresses some of the fundamental concerns. Very few concerns, if there are any, can be as fundamental as understanding the nature of reality itself. In philosophy, this domain of inquiry is labelled as metaphysics. Other fundamental concerns of philosophy are epistemology, the investigation into the nature of knowledge and its associated aspects, and value theory, which in its broadest sense is an effort to arrive at general principles that can guide evaluative judgements such as in the context of ethics, where philosophy strives to arrive at a sound basis to evaluate acts, behaviours and intents of individuals into categories of good and bad or right or wrong.

The above-stated pursuits and maybe a few others may occupy the bedrock of philosophy, but a *domain-specific confinement* of philosophy is probably ill-conceived, for philosophy embraces the mundane as it embraces the profound and the fundamental. The essence of philosophy, therefore, is probably not to be sought in the *domain* of exploration. Rather, it seems to reflect in the *act* of exploration, spurred by a penchant for scepticism and irreverence for authority, challenging the most fundamental of the assumptions and beliefs.

It is in the backdrop of the elements of philosophy revealed hitherto, the pursuit of philosophy of religion needs to be understood. The discussion thus far clearly demonstrates that the religious considerations and some of the fundamental concerns of philosophy share the same *domain*, but both approach these shared common provinces with a different set of pursuits. Where philosophy is an *enquiry* in such areas critically inspecting a wide range of possibilities, most religions *don't come across as an enquiry* into such domains. Instead, they mostly claim to be an exclusive, legitimate and unrivalled *repository* of the knowledge in such domains.

Philosophy of religion critically inspects such claims by religion, relying on a specific attitude and instrument underscored earlier. In doing so, it scrutinises religion from the point of view of identifying logical inconsistencies and incoherencies between its various concepts and claims. Also, it scrutinises the religious tenets in view of the developments and outcomes associated with general philosophical enquiry, scientific investigation and other competing, contending and even concurring positions. The rest of the section is an elucidation of how, philosophy of religion, as a second-order activity, subjects religious claims to an unrestrained scrutiny.

- Most religions, as stated in the previous section, claim to offer the architecture of reality, and although not always, but often in such religions, God is central to such an architecture. However, given there is pluralism in religious beliefs and other competing and contending belief systems such as atheism, agnosticism and scientific and philosophical positions, philosophy of religion scrutinises the claims and arguments offered for *the existence of God* in the light of opposing positions and available empirical evidence.
- Philosophy of religion also examines *the attributes of God* claimed by various religions and their implications. For an instance, most monotheistic religions ascribe omnipotence, omniscience, omnipresence, eternity and benevolence, etc. to God. In philosophy of religion, these attributes are scrutinised to demarcate their conceptual domain, to identify how different attributes relate to each other and to understand their implication in terms of consistencies and contradictions. For an instance, a philosophically challenging issue for many religions is ‘the problem of evil’, which brings to the fore the contradiction between two of the attributes of God, ‘benevolence’ and ‘omnipotence’. If God is omnipotent, i.e., all-powerful, and benevolent, i.e., who is kind and desires the wellbeing of its subjects, it seems fair to assume that evils such as crimes, wars, genocide, exploitation, socio-economic crisis, pandemics and epidemics, congenital disorders, natural disasters etc. shouldn’t impact the lives of innocents, infants and children, yet evil exists, meaning one of these two traits can’t be ascribed to God, or else these traits have to

PONDER BOX-IV

If you are in a habit of exercising your reflective prowess, you are likely to have reflected on the meaning of life. If you have not, you can do it now.

*Critically examine your own views on the subject in the light of **existentialism, absurdism** and **Nozick’s experience machine**.*

be understood in a different sense, something that most religions seem to have refrained from attempting.

- Many religions, as elucidated in the previous section, offer an answer to what the ‘meaning of life’ or the true purpose of life is. As stated, such answers often involve what constitutes our true nature, which, as alluded to in the previous section, happens to be ‘soul’ in many religions. Soul, it can be observed, has been conferred with a wide variety of attributes that derive their meaning from the larger context of reality professed by all such religions. Philosophy of religion scrutinises these *conceptions of soul in the context of investigating our true nature and the purpose of life*. For example, many of the attributes ascribed to soul such as vitality, consciousness, experience, rationality, emotions etc. seem to be untenable when looked at from the point of view of theory of evolution, neuroscience and molecular biology in particular. Philosophy of religion, therefore, examines the conception of soul or other contenders for our true self in light of a much broader set of arguments than what religion offers.
- Most religions claim to be the legitimate source of knowledge. Thus, philosophy of religion dons its sceptic visor to inspect such claims. In doing so, it inspects the premises advanced as a justification for a claim to be true, but, as stated in the previous section, religious claims appeal to authority for such justifications, and therefore are opaque to further investigation, but philosophical inquest is unbridled by such restrictions and consequently questions *the appeal to authority itself as a legitimate or reliable mode of justification*.

PONDER BOX-V

Although seeking and providing justification is central to philosophy, philosophy is not blind to the limitation of justification.

Can justifications be sought for every claim without slipping into an infinite regress?

If justifications can't be sought indefinitely, does it mean that some propositions/claims have to be taken as axioms or unjustifiable foundations for the rest of the knowledge system to be built over them, or are there ways to provide justifications without presupposing foundations?

- Again, as stated in the previous section, most religions define and demarcate the province of good and bad or right and wrong and issue *commandments/ imperatives to dictate actions, behaviours and intents in accordance with such conceptions*. However, philosophy of religion scrutinises such notions and imperatives in view of the

developments and outcomes of such developments in the domain of ethics, which strives to understand the notions the terms good or evil represent, how such notions have been constructed in the society and can there be a universal basis for such categorisations as religions seem to prescribe.

The foregoing is a glimpse of what philosophy of religion strives for. It may give an

PONDER BOX-VI
Revisit the list of decisions you earlier made under the influence of religious beliefs. Given the option, would you consider any change in them in the light of what you understood of philosophy?

impression that philosophy of religion is critical of religion. Such an impression is definitely true, but it may be reminded that philosophy at its core is a critique machinery that is fuelled by scepticism for *any* given. Thus, one may find it to be true as well that philosophy is equally critical of the claims of other domains such as that of psychology, polity, law and sciences, etc. Philosophy

displays the same level of scepticism for the arguments, conceptual apparatuses, modes of justification, standards of proof and the reality constructed and advanced by any such domains. Most of all, philosophy eyes its *own* corpus of knowledge, standards of truth, modes of investigation and justification too with an equal measure of scepticism.

Check Your Progress II

Note: a) Use the space provided for your answer.

b) Check your answer with that provided at the end of the unit.

1. Briefly discuss the relationship between religion and philosophy of religion?

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3.4 THEOLOGY

Theology is a systematic study of religion. The afore-stated may propel one to ask what it studies about religion that philosophy of religion doesn't. One crucial difference is that

theology, unlike philosophy of religion, is appended to specific religions, meaning most religions have their own theology, and in many cases, even the sub-sects of religions have their own theology. However, both, Philosophy of religion and theology, it may be argued, don't differ in the *content* as much as they differ in the *intent* of the study and the *attitude* with which they study religion.

Theology is the study of religion with the intent to systematize/ formalize/ organise its declarations and dictates into coherent and logically consistent doctrines. It has already been explained that the fundamental tenets of any religion are considered immutable on account of they being generally divine revelations or the words of a revered final authority and therefore act as justification for any practice, observance, ritual or belief endorsed by the follower of that religion. However, these fundamental tenets, regardless of their holiness, can appear ambiguous and incoherent and therefore are open to interpretations and often attract challenges.

Thus, to take the correct interpretation to the followers who can reliably practice, profess and preach with faith; to avoid ambiguities and vagueness; to pass the religious message to the subsequent generations and to those who are not yet in the fold of religion; and to prepare a defence against the challenges posed by philosophical scrutiny, scientific developments and other competing and contending beliefs, theology undertakes the intensive study of religion and strives to systematise and formalise it on a sound footing. The following are some of the instances where theology can be witnessed attempting the same.

3.4.1 Furnishing proofs for the existence of God

It has been expounded earlier that the conception of God is central to many religions. The collapse of this conception, therefore, may be coterminous with the collapse of such religions. Possibilities of such an occurrence for any particular religion often emerge from the challenges from other religions, philosophy and science. Consequently, one of the major tasks theologians of any particular religion have undertaken is to prove the existence of (their version of) God. To actualise the foregoing, theologians too, as philosophers do, rely on arguments, but, unlike philosophy, theology frames the argument with a foregone conclusion that God exists. Further, a refutation of challenges often requires theology to adopt argumentation as a tool for the purpose, yet, in adopting argumentation, appeal to authority is not renounced. Thus, theology, in the above-alluded sense, is stuck somewhere between the

need to *address the mounting challenges* of its time and the need to *preserve the absolute authority* of the religious tenets.

3.4.2 Interprets the notion of God and attempts to demonstrate the consistency between different attributes of God

One of the major contributions of theology in most religions is to clarify and crystallise the conception of God, which is not just consistent with the metaphysics that a particular religion advances but is also able to withstand philosophical scrutiny. Theology, in doing so, often relies on the traditional attributes of God in a particular religion such as theologies of most monotheistic religions rely on omnipotence, benevolence, omnipresence, eternity and omniscience to define God. However, some of these traits, on philosophical scrutiny, don't seem to be compatible with each other such as the ones cited in the previous section, viz., 'omnipotence' and 'benevolence' in the context of evil. Theologians, however, contest such contradictions on account of the existence of 'free-will'. Thus, non-intervention of God to prevent evil, from the vantage point of theology, doesn't pose any conflict between God's attributes. However, philosophical scrutiny still contends that such a conception of evil is very narrow as it leaves natural disasters, epidemics, diseases etc. unexplained. Be that as it may, the purpose of the aforesaid is not to demonstrate the strength or weakness of theological arguments. Albeit, it is to show how theology complements religion by attempting to bring together its various parts as a coherent whole.

3.4.3 Codification of ethical and moral precepts

Another significant task performed by theologians with implications for the organisation of society and directing the moral compass of individuals in the context of many religions has been the codification of ethical and moral principles and their interpretations. Most religions have commandments or imperatives that ought to be followed by a true follower, but mostly such principles are open to interpretations. Theology, in this backdrop, provides contextual interpretations to them and elaborates them for the reference of adherents, thereby playing a significant role in demarcating the right and wrong for a section of society. Such a role in many societies is not merely confined to the demarcations that can inform personal conscience. There are legal implications too, governed by religion instituted jurisprudence. Theology plays a crucial role in shaping and codifying its tenets. Most religions have their own schools of jurisprudence, dictating the legal dynamics of the societies where they are followed. For example, many countries of the world structure their whole legal system

around such doctrines whereas, in many others, a partial employment can be seen such as in India, where it is only confined to personal laws.

3.4.4 Clarifies the religion instituted ways to self-actualise

It has been mentioned earlier that the meaning of life or the higher purpose of life is a significant question that most religions address, but it is theology that strives to bring clarity to the attributes of true human nature that is in consonance with the true purpose of human life as religion conceives it. In doing so, it also, as in other instances, strives to address the challenges that other religions, philosophy and science mount on it. Theology also systematises the rituals and ceremonies to be performed while leading one's life according to the dictates of religion. It includes specifying the rituals to be performed, their modes of performance and when to perform them. Such systematisation often also includes prayers and modes of worship as well.

Above-mentioned are some of the instances to demonstrate how theology systematically studies religion to organise its imperatives and claims into coherent and logically consistent canons.

The preceding effort of demarcation in this unit may seem suggestive of a clear distinction between all three domains, but in practice, it has often been found that it's not as plain sailing as it seems. Various intersections between these domains do present situations where the subject content of one province can be mistaken for the other. Such errors in judgement are fairly common place. For instance, an oft-made error in judgement is to consider the arguments advanced regarding the existence and nature of God, soul, self, etc. as theological merely on the ground that the subject content involved is religious in character. However, philosophy of religion too can indulge in the same subject content, advancing the arguments with the same intent, i.e., to prove the existence of God or soul, to understand their nature; and in doing so, it is not stripped off its philosophical character in any way.

Likewise, advertently or inadvertently, theological arguments too are offered in the guise of philosophy. Argumentation is indeed central to both theology and philosophy of religion, but it is not sufficient to characterise a dialogue as philosophical. For example, if an argument is advanced to prove the existence of god, soul etc. *without abandoning the appeal to authority as the final justification*, can one call such arguments philosophical, where positions are rigid, truths are absolute, contending views are not given due considerations and the mode of justification is not questioned? On the other hand, philosophical arguments can also be made

for the existence of God and soul etc. with a critical scrutiny of one's own position and modes of judgement, an openness and due consideration for alternate and contending positions, an incessant vigilance for cognitive biases and fallacies. Philosophy is not hesitant to question the foundation of any knowledge system and if reason dictates, it is prepared to alter its position, meaning it is ever-cautious of slipping into an abyss of absoluteness.

Check Your Progress III

Note: a) Use the space provided for your answer.

b) Check your answer with that provided at the end of the unit.

1. In the event of already existing religious doctrines, what do you think is the role of theology?

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3.5 LET US SUM UP

As stated in the beginning, religion, philosophy of religion and theology represent an overlap of domains, which may evoke a false sense of resemblance. The effort has been made in the unit to present an uncluttered elucidation of their distinction.

Religion is a socio-cultural phenomenon represented by a set of beliefs, associated practises and observances that dictate and shape the way of life of its adherents. Its influence lies in its claim to offer answers to some of our fundamental concerns such as nature of reality and existence, our place in it, our nature and purpose in such a reality and a conception of good and evil within the contours of such a reality. In doing so, it uncompromisingly relies on the appeal to authority as a mode of justification, entailing that an adherent doesn't have any other recourse other than to rely on faith to embrace such a belief system.

Theology, on the other hand, is a religion-specific or even a sub-sect specific attempt to systematise and formalise religious tenets into a coherent organic whole. Such an endeavour is often undertaken with the intent to present an unambiguous version of religion to its

adherents to ensure their unhindered following, practices and observances, to impart religious teachings to the initiated and the uninitiated, and also to address the challenges mounting from other religions, philosophical examination and challenging scientific facts.

Philosophy of religion, however, in its scrutiny, adopts a posture of scepticism for religious tenets, and attempts to understand the soundness of religious belief systems within the larger context of theological formalism of religion, the outcomes and developments associated with general philosophical enquiries in other domains and incessant scientific developments and other opposing or concurring positions.

3.6 KEYWORDS

Philosophy of Religion: A second order activity that inspects aspects of religion(s) and the arguments advanced by their respective theologies with a critical eye.

Theology: An effort to systematise/organise/formalise religious tenets into a coherent body of beliefs for the adherents to practice, profess, preach and teach them with faith and for addressing the challenges posed by philosophical scrutiny, scientific developments of the time and other competing and contending belief systems.

3.7 FURTHER READINGS AND REFERENCES

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3.8 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Answer to Check Your Progress I

1. Religion is a core set of beliefs, associated practices and observances with crucial identifiable elements that demarcate its territory. The following are some of these elements that allow such a demarcation.

Firstly, most religions claim to provide the architecture of our reality, where our life, physical world and associated aspects are provided with a meaning often in a broader context than what is apparent. Such a context, for most religions, generally involves a detailed exposition of our true nature and a well-defined purpose of our life that is in consonance with such a nature and the rest of the reality. Secondly, the source of such knowledge, in most religions, is some religious authority, scriptures or revelations. Thus, inevitably, most religious doctrines hinge on faith and appeal to authority for justification. Thirdly, most religions demarcate the territory of good and bad, and by issuing commandments or imperatives which ought to be followed, they attempt to ensure ethical conduct that is coterminous with the religion defined purpose of life. Finally, most religions systemically institute modes of worship, rituals to be practised, prayers to be offered and ceremonies to be conducted as a meaningful part of their constructed reality.

Answer to Check Your Progress II

1. Philosophy of religion is a second-order enquiry into the beliefs, associated practices and observances that characterise religion, espousing an attitude of scepticism and relying on the tool of argumentation for justification. In carrying out its enquiry, it examines the concepts and propositions advanced by religion for logical inconsistencies and incoherence. Further, it also scrutinises the religious tenets in view of the developments and outcomes associated with general philosophical enquiry, scientific investigation and other competing, contending and even concurring positions. Religion, in the aforementioned sense, is the subject matter of philosophy of religion.

Answer to Check Your Progress III

1. Theology is the study of religion with the intent to systematize/ formalize/ organise its declarations and imperatives into doctrines. The task is undertaken to take the correct interpretation to the followers who can reliably practice, profess and preach with faith; to avoid ambiguities; and to pass the religious message to the subsequent generations and to those who are not yet in the fold of religion. Further, the emphasis of theology, in the foregoing context, is to weed out inconsistencies and establish coherency between various components of religion in a way that is also capable of addressing the challenges posed by philosophical scrutiny, scientific developments,

and other competing and contending belief systems. To give effect to its intent, theology, much like philosophy of religion, relies on the instrument of argumentation but in doing so it doesn't abandon the appeal to authority as its final means of justification.



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