

Philosophy of religion
an historical
introduction
philosophy essay



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Linda Trinkaus Zagzebski is a highly qualified American writer. She has done her PhD from University of California, Los Angeles, MA from University of California, Berkeley and BA from Stanford University. At the moment she is a Research Professor of Philosophy at the University of Oklahoma. Other books by the same author include On Epistemology, Divine Motivation Theory, Intellectual Virtue: Perspectives from Ethics and Epistemology, Virtue Epistemology: Essays on Epistemic Virtue and Responsibility, Virtues of the Mind, The Dilemma of Freedom and Foreknowledge, Rational Faith: Catholic Responses to Reformed Epistemology and Readings in Philosophy of Religion: Ancient to Contemporary.

Summary of the Book

The writer has written at length on a subject that is of immense interest to the students of philosophy. The writer has given a historical perspective of philosophy but not in a chronological order. She has adopted the conventional approach of dividing chapters into topics. The book has many ancient, medieval and modern examples on philosophy of religion. Book contains a lot of references and the writer has given her own views and

position and not just the review / survey of literature. The writer has elaborated some of the standard issues regarding philosophy of religion. The chapter on the problem of evil includes issue of value. The chapter on immortality deals with the question that whether death is bad. The chapter on divine nature dilates on personhood and revelation. The chapter on religious diversity addresses the question why this issue has gained importance in modern period. The core topics included in this book are the relationship between religion and philosophy, the existence of God, religion and morality, the problem of evil, death and afterlife and the problem of religious diversity. The book is lucid, elegantly written and an outstanding introduction to the field of philosophy of religion.

Author's Thesis

Chapter 1 deals with the Philosophical Approach to Religion. In this chapter, the writer discusses relationship between religion and philosophy. Then the writer tells us about origin of religion. She defines religion as a complex human practice. A commonality between all religions is a sacred space. The concept that what should one believe about the ultimate matters of universe, actually marks the intersection of philosophy and religion.

Philosophy originated in the 6th Century. A lot of great thinkers Confucius, Mahavira, Hebrew Prophets, Socrates, Plato and Aristotle lived at the same time. This age is known as Axial Age. Afterwards writer discusses the idea of god in different religions. Then the writer compares religion and philosophy that they were not always in harmony with each other. Philosophers did not necessarily approve of the rationale in the religion.

Chapter 2 deals with the Classical Arguments for the Existence of God. The writer in this chapter deals with the very question that "Does God Exist"? She gives the theist and atheist perspective. She argues that religion should have philosophical and scientific reasons, only then in the modern era masses will get convinced. She says that some providential designer of the universe exists. Existence of nature, planets everything is not by chance and has been intelligently maintained and designed.

Chapter 3 deals with the Pragmatic Approach to Religious Belief. In this chapter writer tells us that Pascal believed that religion cannot solely rest on reason. According to him faith is higher than reason. Pragmatic arguments are benefit directed. She says that it is better to believe in God than not to believe at all.

Chapter 4 deals with Who or What is God? God is the supreme being, designer of the universe and the creator. All these characteristics can only be attributed to one greatest conceivable being. We only know what god is not, rather what he is. So we can only picturize what he is not. Writer discusses at length the omnipotent and omniscient characteristics of God.

Chapter 5 Deals with Fate, Freedom and Foreknowledge. All the civilizations had the concept of fate and destiny. Greek gods knew about the future but could do nothing to stop it. Anything that happens is because of God's will. God knows what is going to happen.

Chapter 6 deals with the Problem of Evil. The concept of evil has given rise to atheism. How can there be evil if there is a perfectly good god. The writer says that if god is the god of the whole humanity then why some people
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suffer and some are blessed. Why evil is ever increasing. There is no good without evil, good requires evil to differentiate.

Chapter 8 deals with the Death and the Afterlife. Writer says that every person fears death and according to Aristotle one's death is according to one's life. She explains concept of death by giving example of the views of Epicurus. What makes a person the same person? Is it body or stream of conscious state held together in memory?

Chapter 9 deals with the Problem of Religious Diversity. The writer says that in ancient times there was no conflict in religions. Pantheons of god of one ancient group were not rivals of the gods of the other. If you want to follow a new religion or get an opinion then ask someone who is neutral and is a follower of no religion, only then he/she can give you objective description and not a subjective one. It is only when the people we admire have a different opinion that we begin to think and question our own ideas.

Chapter 10 deals with Faith, Reason and the Ethics of Belief. In this chapter the writer takes on the very question that she took in the first chapter that What should I believe about the ultimate matters of universe? According to writer reason and revelation cannot be in conflict. Writer says that miracles were given to prophets as a sign and testimony that revelation is from God. Prophets were given powers to perform miracles.

Critical Analysis of the Book

First of all this book should not be made part of the Book Review. According to Imam Haddad in his book “ Book of Assistance” Muslims should not read literature that is contrary to the Muslim Belief of God. Chapter 2 and 4
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(Existence of God & Who or What is God) are very disillusioning. It is not encouraged in Islam to read such literature.

For someone who is not a student of philosophy, this book is fairly complex and complicated. The writer has given examples which a reader with no prior knowledge of philosophy cannot comprehend easily.

This book is fairly concise, consisting of ten chapters that cover nearly all of the traditional topics. However, she doesn't even mention the Islamic version of philosophy of religion in the explanation and elaboration of different chapters. Islamic concept of Death and Afterlife is not given, Islamic concept of God and the purpose of mankind to worship Allah (SWT) is not shed light on.

This book is more historically informed. Book is full of references, arguments and quotations from Cleanthes and Plato to Ramakrishna and Aquinas, which makes it cumbersome to read and the reader loses interest.

To her credit, Zagzebski does not try to hide this fact. At the end of chapter one, for instance, she concedes that some remaining chapters do not make sense, if there is no God. Furthermore, she admittedly assumes that God exists in her discussion of the concept of God.

One wonders what exactly Zagzebski has in mind when she refers to God as the " perfectly good" being. Zagzebski thinks she has located in her theory a position that " eliminates the problem of evil at the level of the metaphysics of value" (158). Her ideas in the chapter of Who and What is God are not very convincing.

I cannot let some of Zagzebski's metaphors go without comment. In her introduction to the problem of evil, moreover, while addressing the difficulty of understanding God's motives in allowing human suffering, she compares humans to dogs (143). This was a very vague example.

In Chapter 9 while discussing Faith and Reason (213), she criticizes that Abraham sacrificed his son thinking its the commandment of God, its unreasonable to kill an innocent child. In my opinion Islam gives a detail account of the event and the reason and rationale behind this act, which the Muslims all over the world still cherish.

Conclusion & General Recommendations

It is a very well written book and has been thoroughly investigated and footnoted. There is a bibliography and index at the end. This book is highly recommended to the students of philosophy at the post graduate level due to its complexity.