

Structuring Inclusive Syllabi for Introductions to the Philosophy of Religion

Problem:

- The history of Western philosophy is to a large extent dominated by arguments about whether (and why) to believe in God.
- Teaching these arguments is important, but they presuppose a monotheistic and rationalist conception of religion.
- This does not naturally connect with non-Abrahamic religions, which can make the inclusion of writings from these tradition feel “forced”.
- But including especially Eastern authors is both important and was strongly desired by students when I taught a “traditional” course.

Solution:

- Questions about the nature of religion and religious belief pervade both Eastern and Western traditions.
- Thus we can structure overview courses along different ways to approach and answer this question.
- Arguments about the existence of God can be included as examples of a rationalist conception of religion.
- The dialogue between Eastern and Western thinkers led to much more engaged discussions.
- This setup also allowed students to share things about their own religious beliefs and cultural background and relate it to the overarching question.

Structuring question: What is religion?

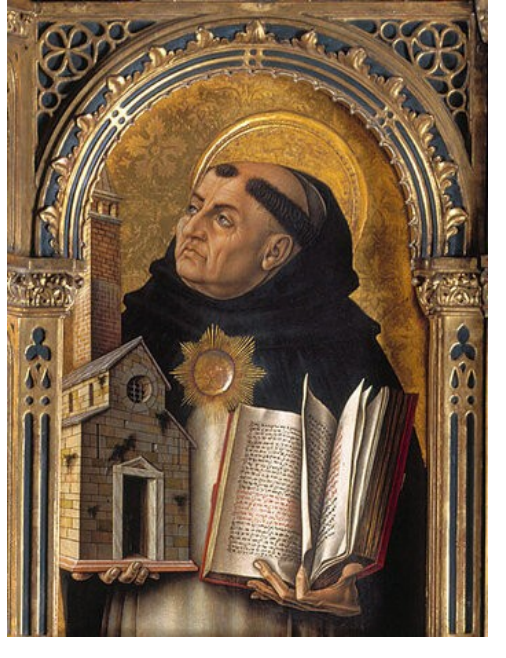
rational belief requiring proof

Matthew Tindal



- “Natural Religion”: all central truths of Christianity are discoverable by rational inquiry
- This allows salvation of those who lived before divine revelation.

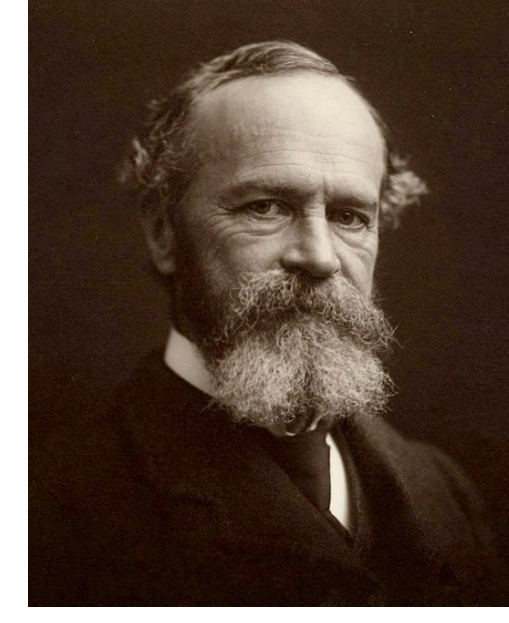
Thomas Aquinas



- Divine revelation and rational thought are in alignment.
- God’s existence can be proven by the cosmological argument.

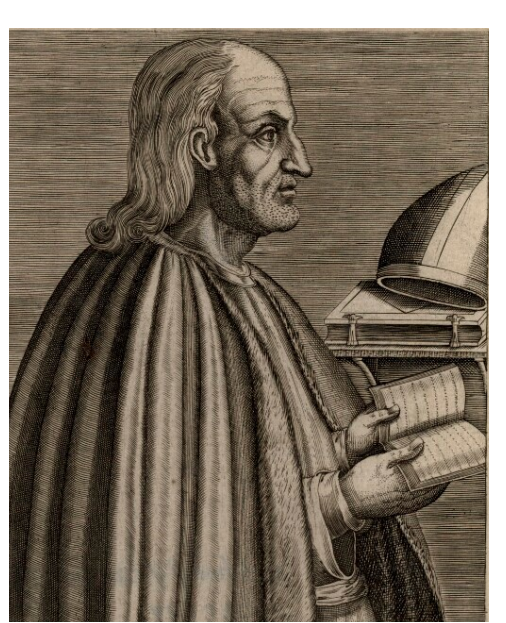
unprovable belief

William James



- We need to choose sides on whether to take up religion.
- If evidence does not settle this question, we can consider practical effects of each choice.

Anselm of Canterbury



- We can convince “the fool” who remains unconvinced of God’s existence despite revelation with the ontological argument.

non-belief

Nāgārjuna



- Human experience is “empty”, does not allow a clear determination of facts
- Even the Four Noble Truths of Buddhism are accepted only at a “conventional” level.

Zhuangzi



- Nature shows us many paths (*dào*s), but does not favor one in particular.
- Abstains from claims of a complete view of nature.

moral belief

Mencius



- Humans are good in nature, but we need to learn to follow our “greater part”
- This goodness is “what Heaven has given us.”

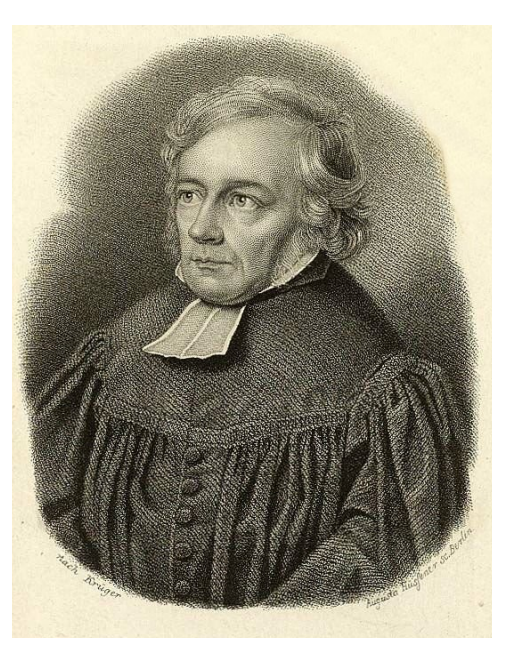
Immanuel Kant



- The existence of God cannot be proven by theoretical reason.
- But it is a precondition of the “highest good”, and thus a postulate of practical reason.

experience or feeling

Friedrich Schleiermacher



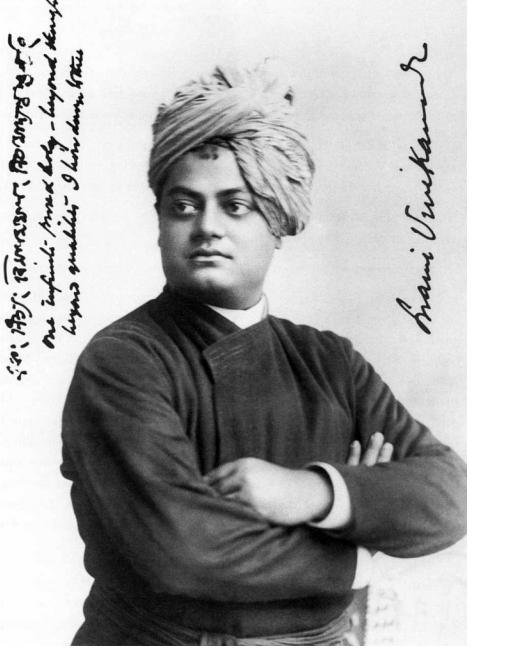
- Religion is fundamentally a “feeling of ultimate dependence”.
- Religion outside of the sphere of “speculation”.

Dōgen



- Enlightenment by “just sitting”.
- Meditation is not a means to an end, but an end in itself.

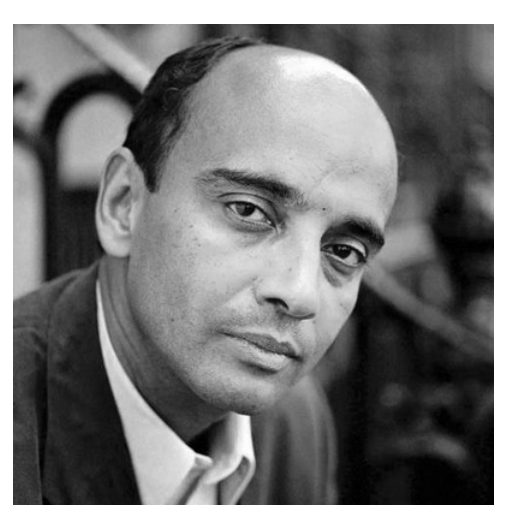
Swami Vivekananda



- “Religions without a book” want to allow first-hand experience of their truth.
- The “science of Yoga” gives a step-by-step manual for achieving religious experience.

no common denominator

K. Anthony Appiah



- The concept of religion was formed around Western religions.
- In applying it to other cultures, we have looked for the “closest match” to our religion, but often ended up with a misfit.