

THE OXFORD HANDBOOK OF GOD

Edited by Francesca Aran Murphy, Balazs M. Mezei, and Troy A. Stefano

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1. Overview of the Handbook

The Oxford Handbook of God is a single-volume introduction to the meaning and function of the notion of 'God.' Today the question of God is widely implicated in the apocryphal story that tells of the birth of God in the jungle of the primitive mind and the death of God in the light of Western science. Over and against this story, this *Handbook* indicates the continuing vibrancy of the question of God. It focuses on the relation between our figurations of the world and configurations of God. There is a relation between how we symbolize reality and what we think about God. We aim to tease out this mutual influence.

There is a legend about a youthful Thomas Aquinas asking his teachers at Monte Cassino, 'what is God?' Their response is not recorded. Thomas spent much of his life pursuing the question in conversation with Christians, Muslims, Jews, and the Greek Aristotle. In pursuing such conversations, Thomas thought about the way that universal conceptions of God are embedded in ordinary language. At the end of each of his 'Five Ways,' Thomas adds, 'and this is what *everyone calls God*.' The impact of the idea of God is noted and reflected in conversations from the Vedas to the new Atheisms. We have selected the notion of mediation as being near universal in human conceptions of God. We are seeking ways of construing 'what everyone calls God.' Given that God, the subject of this handbook cannot be defined, its thematic unity consists precisely in the aspect under which this subject is considered: namely, the generative matrix that regulates the relationship between visible and non-visible, between figurations of the world and conceptions of God. Such universal notions of God as exist, do so by inhabiting major world religions, perennial philosophies, and culture.

In seeking universal notions of God, we are drawn to conceptualizations of God in mediatory structures such as religions, language, philosophy, and politics. How we think about God can condition how we consider art, language, philosophy, politics and community, and religion, and vice-versa. Human constructs, from art and metaphysics to politics and religion, are mediating structures which express and communicate notions of God. Sections of the book consider to what

extent these structures mediate different notions of God. The *Oxford Handbook of God* would examine how far ideas about God are factored into many aspects of human experience, and how that works in practice and in theory. The *Handbook* interrogates Thomas Aquinas' claim that every instance of human consciousness and action implies God and is never neutral with respect to God: 'in every act of thought and will, God is also thought and willed implicitly' (*De Veritate* XXII, a. 2, ad 1).

This *Handbook* is divided into two parts. Part 1 addresses the question of God today and its continuing vitality by focusing on God as figured and conceived in history, thought, and experience. In Part 2, we isolate five primary 'vectors' (in the sense of 'carriers' or 'conveyors' (*vec-tor* → *vehere*)) by which to articulate this relationship: God and aesthetics, God and logos and myth, God and God's others, God and modes of community, and God and religions. All the chapters are autonomous and written by leading experts, giving the volume a generous breadth.

2. Form and Content of the Handbook

The *Oxford Handbook of God* has two parts and seven sections, with a total of **60** chapters of six thousand words apiece including bibliography. Instead of an Introduction, each section in Part II (Sections 3-7) concludes with a brief article written by the editors which notes 'Prospects and Retrospects' in this area. These two-thousand-word 'Prospects and Retrospects' summarise and define the section, noting commonalities and differences between the chapters, providing a synthesis on the state of knowledge and current debates.

Part 1 inducts the reader into the question of God and explores the notion of God as figured and conceived experientially, historically, and intellectually. It is about the mystery of God and launches the debate about how far the concept of God is implicated in human practice and thought. Part 1 contains two sections.

Section 1 tackles 'God' as a question. The objective of these six chapters is to introduce the question of God by reference to narratives of the death of God, to initiate the discussion about the origin of the concept of God, and to start the ball rolling on controversies about human desire for God. A widespread narrative in our culture holds the question of God to be empty and unanswerable. We will put this narrative into conversation with secular and religious perspectives which maintain that the thorny question of God is worth examining, with subtlety, prudence and tact.

Section 2 is on 'The History of God.' It comprises metaphysical meditations about God, from traditional African religion, Hinduism, and ancient China through post-Biblical Judaism, the medievals, and Islamic mystics to postmodernity and recent analytic philosophy. This section tells the story of how God has been conceptualised over thousands of years. It shows how notions of God have engendered metaphysical systems, and how metaphysical systematisation has been anchored in philosophies and theologies of the divine mystery.

Part 2 examines how notions of art, language and thought, science, politics and community, and religion raise the question of God. Part 2 has 5 sections.

Section 3 is about aesthetic mediations of God. Many people get a taste of what religious belief is like through art, architecture, and artifacts. This section asks how beauty enters into the search for God. God is encoded and imprinted in religious art. This section asks about the mediation of God in the arts, beginning with archaic temples and the notion of society and of God they encapsulate. Primitives and mediaevals were not the only people to inhabit an inventive symbolic universe. We ask about the notion of God and the gods in modern poetry and in cinema. Focus on a geographic area is sometimes required by the contingencies of history, such as the predominance of England in the production of tragedy in the 16th century. It seems to us that the extraordinary production of popular, mythological and religious animated cinema in Japan over the past half century is one of these historical contingencies.

Section 4 is about God and 'Logos and Mythos'. Many myths are romantic or erotic, telling of the gods' love for humans (which usually ends badly), and, more rarely, of human love for the gods (usually punished). This section is about the mediation of notions of God in language (*Logos*) and, through language, in mythology (*Mythos*). An opening chapter will discuss the relations between God, language, truth, and logic. Historically, from Plato to Hegel, various notions of God have anchored (equally shifting) ideas of the truth of propositions. Does the notion of propositional truth really stand or fall with the notion of God? God-talk is problematic. From Plotinus to Derrida and Caputo, rivers of ink have flowed into the idea of God's unspeakableness. Equally important as the apophatic tendency is the 'mythological' orientation, which tells tales about God and the gods. This section covers both the 'Logic' of God (apophaticism from Plato to Kearney) and the 'Mythos' of God and the gods (kataphaticism from Hesiod to Plato).

Section 5 is about four ways of interpreting the relationship between God and everything that is not God. These four schematic bridges are analogical, univocal, equivocal and dialectical. Historically, the question of how to conceive of a God who is not a thing amongst other things has become a controversial topic in philosophical theology. This section lays out the history of this controversy and analytically presents four positions about the topic. One chapter considers univocity and equivocity as ways of conceiving the relation between God and God's others. Another chapter asks about how religious fundamentalism makes use of science to describe the relation. Are the designations of 'Creator,' 'Designer,' or 'Intelligent Design' literal or metaphorical? It asks about 'science' as a way of relating the cosmos to God, from Paley to intelligent design theory. Further chapters investigate the dialectical way to God and the way of analogy. Section 5 helps to link the various sections of part 2.

In *Section 6*, we ask to what extent ideas of human community mediate various notions of God. Are archetypal notions of God imaged in various ideas and practises of community and politics? Is the idea of God a destructive meme which undermines social cohesion? Does the idea of God engender political violence? The gods of the world's scriptures, from the Hebrew Bible to the Bhagavad-gita exhort their acolytes to violence. Should we revise Otto's definition of the holy to a *mysterium tremendens, fascinans ac vehemens*?

Section 7 locates the concept of God concretely in historical traditions and communities. One of the most important mediations of the idea of God is Scripture. The character of God is the most important revealed datum for each religion, expressing its idea of God. This section devotes

chapters to the idea of God in the scriptures of Hinduism, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. This section will discuss the similarities and differences of the notion of God that emerges from the different religious scriptures.

The volume concludes with a chapter on “God in the end,” written by the editors, which completes the book’s attempt at providing an ordered signalling of the breadth of significance of ‘God’ across the spheres of human existence.

4. Relationship to Other Oxford Handbooks

The OUP Handbook of Religion and Science, edited by Philip Clayton

The OUP Handbook of Philosophical Theology, edited by Thomas Flint and Michael Rea

The OUP Handbook of the Philosophy of Religion, edited by William J. Wainwright

The OUP Handbook of Atheism, edited by Stephan Bullivant and Michael Ruse

The OUP Handbook of Secularism, edited by Phil Zuckerman and John Shook

The OUP Handbook of Global Religions, edited by Mark Juergensmeyer

The OUP Handbook of Religion and the Arts, edited by Frank Burch Brown

The OUP Handbook of Catholic Theology, edited by Lewis Ayres

The OUP Handbook of Islamic Theology, edited by Sabine Schmidtke

The OUP Handbook of Islamic Philosophy, edited by Khaled El-Rouayheb and Sabine Schmidtke

The OUP Handbook of Abrahamic Religions, edited by Adam J. Silverstein and Guy G. Stroumsa

5. Target audience

In terms of readership, we intend to assemble an authoritative resource suitable for upper-level undergraduates, graduate students, academics and interested lay readers. While this volume will hold particular appeal for those in theology, philosophy, and literature, it will be accessible to non-specialists in the humanities and those in ministry.

6. Editors

Francesca Aran Murphy edited one OUP Handbook (*Christology* 2015, with the assistance of Troy Stefano) and has just completed co-editing an OUP handbook with Balazs Mezei (*Divine Revelation*, 2021). She is currently working on an OUP handbook with Tracey Rowland (Ratzinger, 2024). She has written seven books, including one with OUP (*God is not a Story*), translated three books, and edited five other books. She is professor of Systematic Theology at the University of Notre Dame du Lac, where she hosts an interfaith podcast with Munim Siri and Gabriel Reynolds, called *Minding Scripture*: <https://mindingscripture.com/>

Balazs M. Mezei is the main editor of *The Oxford Handbook of Divine Revelation*. He has published 47 volumes of philosophy and philosophical theology (including edited and translated works). He is Research Professor in Philosophy at Corvinus University. He is also the president of the Hungarian Society of the Academic Study of Religion.

Troy A. Stefano is Associate Professor of Systematic Theology, Historical Theology, and Metaphysics at St. Vincent de Paul Regional Seminary. He has published several articles, book chapters, and translations in the areas of historical theology and systematic theology. He is the assistant editor of the *OUP Handbook of Christology* (2015), the author of *The Trinity in Modern Catholic Theology* (Lexington Books/Fortress Academic, forthcoming), and is currently working on three book translations. He also serves as the Director of the Masters of Theological Studies (MATS) program.

7. Advisory Committee

We have discussed our project with some potential contributors and they have agreed to advise us as the book develops.

Wendy Doniger recently retired from her chair in Chicago Divinity school. A Sanskrit scholar, Professor Doniger has translated several Penguin classics including *Hindu Myths: a Sourcebook*, *The Rig Veda: An Anthology*. She is the author of many books about Hinduism, including most recently the controversial *The Hindus: An Alternative History*.

Philip Ziegler holds a Chair in Christian Dogmatics at the University of Aberdeen. He is the author of *Doing Theology When God is Forgotten: The Theological Achievement of Wolf Krötke* (2007), and co-editor of *The Providence of God* (2009) and *Explorations in Christian Theology and Ethics: Essays in Conversation with Paul L. Lehmann* (2009).

Paulinus I. Odozor, C.S.Sp., is professor of theology at the University of Notre Dame, with a focus on moral theology/ Christian ethics, world religions, and world church. He received his initial formation in Nigeria and did his graduate studies at St Michaels College, Toronto, Regis College, Toronto, and the University of Toronto. Fr. Odozor's scholarly interests are in Foundational issues in Christian ethics; history of Catholic moral theology; contextual theological issues, including questions pertaining to inculturation; theology and society; African Christian theology; and the

theology of marriage. Fr. Odozor is also an Africanist with interest in African history, African literature, African politics and questions relating to change and contemporary African societies. In addition to being the author of many articles in peer-reviewed publications in Africa, Asia, Europe, and North America, Fr Odozor has also authored or edited nine books. Fr. Odozor held numerous academic, administrative, and pastoral positions in Nigeria and Canada. He was president of the Governing Council of Spiritan International School of Theology in Enugu, Nigeria(2005-2017) and was appointed by Pope Benedict XVI as expert assistant to the 2009 Synod of Bishops for Africa.

Martin Mills is senior lecturer in Anthropology at the University of Aberdeen. He has published *Identity, Ritual, and State in Tibetan Buddhism*, and is the Director of the Scottish Centre for Himalayan Research.

Sabine Schmidtke is professor of Islamic intellectual history in the School of Historical Studies at Princeton University Institute for Advanced Study. Dr. Schmidtke is a scholar of Islamic intellectual history whose pioneering research has transformed perspectives on the interrelations and connections among different strands of intellectual inquiry, across time, place, religions, and philosophical schools. She has played a central role in the exploration of heretofore unedited and unknown theological and philosophical writings. Schmidtke has applied rigorous study to the edition and critical analysis of manuscripts in Arabic, Judeo-Arabic, and Persian, and her work extends from Arabic-speaking countries to Israel, Iran, Russia, and Turkey. Schmidtke is currently working on the history of Islamic thought in the post-classical period (thirteenth to nineteenth century), with a focus on reconstructing the textual heritage and the intellectual import of the Islamic intellectual world, from Iran and Central Asia to Turkey and Yemen. She is also engaged in a comprehensive study of the Muslim reception of the Bible, a topic on which she has published extensively over the past years.