It is possible to see the beginning of the general Enlightenment’s philosophy of religion in the systems of thought of some philosophers who preceded Spinoza and influenced him—especially Descartes and Hobbes. However, the great revolutionary transition and the new beginning are marked by the position of Baruch Spinoza as a philosopher, who stood beyond Judaism yet did not convert to Christianity, thus choosing to define himself as a free, secular individual. His landmark status can be seen in many respects. First, he drew on his full historical awareness of the problem of philosophy-in-religion and the problem of religion-in-philosophy, in order to address the process of secularization in the modern period. Second, one does not exaggerate his influence in saying that he set the agenda of modern philosophy of religion in all its ramifications, down to our time. Finally, standing at the crossroads of Jewish and general (read: Christian) philosophy of religion, he crucially shaped the terms in which each defined itself vis-à-vis the other historically in the modern period.

Spinoza’s greatness and the strength of his influence on modern philosophy of religion, in all its permutations up until twentieth century existentialism, is rooted in the identity that he fashioned between his personality and his life’s destiny, against the backdrop of his age, with his philosophical doctrine.

It is worth expanding on this broad generalization, for it is a fitting starting-point for the study of philosophy of religion in our age. The connection that was fashioned (and that persisted continually) between philosophy and religion in the Western, monotheistic tradition was rooted in the all-inclusive, fundamental position that each aspired to occupy. In this respect, they either had to compete for supremacy or complement each other. Each sought to offer to all human beings, as individuals within their societies, a comprehensive world-outlook and a way of life that aimed at realizing it. In the cases of monotheistic faith
and philosophy, we are not talking of partial disciplines, each of which realizes one aspect—intellectual, emotional, practical—of human life but of a total world-view whose adoption (to the point of identifying with it) commits one to realizing it as a way of life.

This account of the essence of philosophy and of religion can be seen in religion to this day, especially in its orthodox forms. Religion was forced, however, to renounce custody and realization of most of the domains of knowledge, feeling, and activity pertaining to worldly human life, in favor of other disciplines, whereas for philosophy that was scarcely the case. This is a key to the current vexing problems of religion, as well as for humanistic culture. These problems come up for discussion in the philosophy of religion and ethics to our own day. Like religion, philosophy was intended to serve as a holistic way of life, not a restricted intellectual discipline. In this respect, the philosophers who constructed the great thought-systems are similar to prophets who found religions. As individuals, their teachings were identified with their personalities, with their way of life, and with the personal destiny that they chose for themselves and shaped out of a sense of mission.

This holistic conception attended the creation of philosophical as well as religious thought throughout antiquity and the Middle Ages. Philosophy, like religion, was studied not only for intellectual guidance but to actively realize a way of life. For this reason, when it was institutionalized it was conceived as an academic discipline that should unite in itself all the disciplines of the life of the culture—including psychology, ethics, economics, and politics—for it was interested in the life of inquiry and feeling, as well as the life of action.

The revolutionary transition caused by secularization had its impact on this nerve-center, as its purpose was to change the status of religion in the life of individuals and of the society. As a consequence, the status of philosophy was changed as well, not only in its relationship to religion, but also to the culture. At the outset, the new philosophers saw their task as fulfilling the mission of an all-inclusive truth, which should be properly realized beyond religion, or in place of it. This was the sense of mission of the founders of the new thought-systems. But it turned out that the process of secularization fostered the establishment of separate intellectual disciplines. This meant that not only religion in its domain but also philosophy in its domain found themselves isolated within the culture. They were two separate disciplines fighting with each other for the hegemony that religion had lost and philosophy had not succeeded in attaining.