

KEVIN SCHILBRACK
APPALACHIAN STATE UNIVERSITY

THE WEIRD PLACE OF GOD DEBATES
IN THE ACADEMIC STUDY OF RELIGIONS

I support mash-ups between analytic and Continental philosophy of religion as a site of creativity in the future of the discipline.¹ But my focus in this brief comment concerns not the possibility of mash-ups within philosophy of religion but instead the possibility of mash-ups between philosophy of religion and other disciplines in the academic study of religions.

The central activity in philosophy of religion has traditionally been debating whether God exists, what something would have to be like to be God, and how people can know the answers to these questions. In *Philosophy and the Study of Religion*, I described these traditional questions as focused on “the rationality of theism.”² William Wood has objected to that description, pointing out, rightly, that present-day philosophers of religion are less worried that belief in God might not be rational.³ It is true that philosophers of religion in these post-positivist days are less defensive and more confident about exploring questions regarding religious experience, God’s attributes, prayer, how to think of the possibility of truth or salvation in other religious traditions, and other aspects of theistic belief and practice. In addition, many philosophers today are more confident about focusing on philosophical questions about religious doctrines that are specific to Christian belief and practice like the incarnation, the resurrection, and the atonement. But my general point still stands that philosophy of religion today almost always limits itself to the philosophy of theism, or to the philosophy of Christian theism.

The theistic questions that have had such a central place for traditional philosophers of religion do not figure in the other disciplines in the academic study of religion. Anthropologists of religion do not ask or seek to answer whether God exists, what something would have to be like to be God, and how people can know the answers to these questions. The same is true of historians of religion, comparativists, philologists, sociologists, and so on. In fact, as I read the trends in theorizing religion today, there is growing mistrust of the idea that the

¹ For a nice example of analytic/Continental mash-up philosophy, see Joseph K. Shear’s *Mind, Reason, and Being-in-the-World: The McDowell-Dreyfus Debate* (New York: Routledge, 2013), which brings together the work of John McDowell and Dreyfus on the question whether there are forms of intelligibility in human experience that elude our abilities to conceptualize them. On how assumptions about non-conceptualism have shaped the study of religious experience, see Terry Godlove, *Kant and the Meaning of Religion* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2014), chapter 1.

² Kevin Schilbrack, *Philosophy and the Study of Religions: A Manifesto* (London: Wiley-Blackwell, 2014), chapter 1.

³ William Wood, “Review Essay Roundtable,” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 83:1 (March, 2015): 248-53.

secular academy should be in the business of arguing for or against people's religious views. In other words, there is a growing mistrust of the academic appropriateness of God debates. I think that if one were to set aside those in philosophy of religion (and theology and religious ethics) who deal with normative questions, one could divide the rest of the scholars working in religious studies into two camps. In the first camp are those who do not read traditional philosophy of religion for their own work, nor assign it to their classes, because the God debates do not illuminate any of the interpretive and explanatory tasks in their teaching and scholarship. In the second camp are those who agree with the first camp, neither reading nor assigning traditional philosophy of religion because it does not illuminate their teaching or scholarship, but who also judge that arguing for or against religious views is not an appropriate task in the secular academy. Unlike the irenic first camp, the latter group seeks to redescribe the academic study of religions in such a way that the field would not include such "theological" pursuits. According to this group, the study of religion should be limited to describing and explaining—but not evaluating—religious phenomena.

When I say that God debates have a "weird" place, therefore, I mean that these debates have been central to or even definitive of traditional philosophy of religion, but they have little or no place in the rest of religious studies, and including them in the secular academy is increasingly opposed by many. Given how vibrant the discipline of philosophy of religion is today, and given the appeal of philosophy of religion classes to undergraduates, it may too strong to say that God debates are in an academic ghetto. But it is hard to see how they might be mashed up with the work of other scholars of religion who ignore them—or even reject them.

I was invited to comment on the two papers in this Special Issue by Scott F. Aikin and Paul K. Moser not to join their discussion as an analytic philosopher, but because I have argued for bridge-building between traditional philosophy of religion, other branches of philosophy, and other disciplines in the academic study of religions.⁴ These two essays are exemplary of contemporary analytic philosophy of religion, and so they give us a good illustration of the obstacles to mash-ups between that approach and those of other disciplines in religious studies, but I will argue that the central concern of these papers also points the way to an important and overlooked opportunity.

The central goal of Aikin's paper is to argue for the meta-philosophical claim that despite the apparently unresolvable debates between theists and atheists, the two sides should remain committed to the idea that justification has an ineliminably intersubjective or public feature to it. They should remain committed, in other words, to the necessity of argument for justification, a position that Aikin calls argumentism.⁵ Many Christian philosophers today, however, argue that theism can be justified by experiences that cannot be shared, and Paul Moser has proposed that the assumption that justification must be in the form of a shareable argument is precisely what explains why those debates have been so

⁴ Schilbrack, *Philosophy and the Study of Religions*.

⁵ Cf. Moser, Paul K., "God without Argument," in Corey Miller and Paul Gould, eds., *Is Faith in God Reasonable? Debates in Philosophy, Science, and Rhetoric* (New York: Routledge, 2014), 70-5.

interminable. Moser proposes that religious experience can count as a form of non-discursive justification for theism, just as the experience of a toothache would provide non-discursive justification that the toothache is real.⁶ Against this position, Aikin argues that religious and non-religious experiences are too dissimilar for this analogy to work. First, we know the conditions under which we have (and can improve or impede) veridical experiences about, say, apples, but we don't know the conditions under which people have (or could improve or impede) veridical religious experiences. Second, the content of apple experiences can be put into words in a straight-forward way (e.g., "within arm's reach," "tart,"), but the content of religious experiences cannot. For these reasons, and given the wide disagreement about and variance in accounts of religious experience, Aikin holds that the appeal to private religious experiences should not lead us to give up the commitment to public reason-giving. For theists to consider their views justified (even to themselves), they need to be able to argue for them.

There is some confusion here in Aikin's claim that that "argument is supreme," since Aikin introduces argumentism as the view that justification for one's beliefs is exhausted by one's public arguments, but then says that an argumentist can concede that private experience also provides non-discursive justification. The latter is precisely Moser's thesis in rejecting argumentism,⁷ and this may explain why Moser's paper largely ignores Aikin's meta-philosophical claim about argumentism and treats Aikin's paper as simply another argument for atheism. Moreover, Aikin claims that God's non-existence provides a better explanation for the continued debate problem than a theistic account; he claims, that is, that God's non-existence (or, at least, divine hiddenness) explains why the debate continues. But if the debate itself is evidence for one side in the debate, then this seems more like a resolution of the debate—that is, an argument that the debate should cease—and not an explanation for its continuation.

By contrast, Moser works with an Anselmian definition of God as that which is worthy of worship and then argues that such a being worthy of worship would be perfect, that a perfect being would aim to cure self-exalting human pride, and that therefore God would not give the kind of evidence of God's existence that could be shared. According to this line of argument, God not only could be but would necessarily be "subtle and elusive in divine self-revelation"⁸ in such a way that none who believe in God would have reasons they could share with others. Although this sounds like a just-so story developed to meet contemporary challenges in philosophy, and so it is ironic that Moser repeatedly admonishes those who develop their philosophy of religion based on their contemporary intellectual needs, it is possible that God would not provide people with any evidence they could share with others, and this possibility may be all that Moser needs to defend belief in God given divine hiddenness. In my judgment, some of Moser's other critiques of the argumentist position hit straw men. For example, the argumentist does not say or imply that God is merely a conclusion, a

⁶ Moser, "God without Argument," 74.

⁷ In Moser, "God without Argument."

⁸ Paul K. Moser, "God and Epistemic Authority," *The Journal for Cultural and Religious Theory* (April, 2015).

statement, or a proposition⁹—any more than an apple is. But Moser is right on the central point that one can be justified in one's belief without being able to share one's evidence.¹⁰

In the opening of this paper, I noted that God debates like these are in a weird place, in the sense that they are central to traditional philosophy of religion but have little or no connection to the work done in the rest of religious studies. Both the substance and the form of the essays by Aikin and Moser illustrate why this is unsurprising. In the first place, the subject matter of those two essays is the justification of religious claims. Debates like these about how one might justify belief in God seek to clarify what constitutes rational belief, what forms of evidence one might expect, and whether one can share one's reasons for religious claims. Literary, historical, and social scientific approaches do not share these normative questions. In the second place, these two essays also operate in a style—typical of most analytic philosophy of religion—which makes mash-up or collaboration with other disciplines difficult. For example, they do not consider religious claims that would not be found among Christians; they abstract the religious beliefs they consider from their practical and cultural contexts; and they are not reflexive about the historical and institutional sources of their own concepts. Moreover, the essays themselves show no interest in a mash-up with Continental philosophy. Of course, philosophers of religion can work in a style that is historically informed and that takes seriously the cultural location of the philosophers studied (for an eloquent example of this, see John Clayton's *Religions, Reasons, and Gods*).¹¹ But the prospects for mash-ups with analytic philosophy of religion are understandably poor.

In closing, however, let me make two points about the philosophical focus on the justification for religious claims. The first point identifies a situation in which philosophers should resist mash-ups, and the second identifies a situation in which philosophy ought to come to see that mash-ups are crucial.

First point. Philosophical discourse traditionally concerns what is good, and real, and true, and just—and it is important to insist that the reasoned asking and answering of these normative questions is perfectly appropriate for the academy, and that the reasoned asking and answering of these normative questions regarding religious phenomena is equally so. My own view is that judgments about what is good, real, true, and just are always already assumed in all of our social practices, and therefore they are ineliminable from the work of the academy.¹² Philosophy is simply explicit reflection on them. (In fact, “presuppositional analysis” is not a bad appositive for philosophy.) As a consequence, the practice of explicitly asking and answering normative

⁹ Moser, “God without Argument,” 71.

¹⁰ Moser also raises a provocative idea that one might “probe” for God via obedient action. Given how often people learn about what is real through their embodied practices, including religious practices (a theme I develop in *Philosophy and the Study of Religions*, ch. 2), this strikes me as promising line of thinking for future philosophy of religion.

¹¹ John Clayton, *Religions, Reasons, and Gods* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006).

¹² Many of the scholars in the academic study of religions who wish to exclude normative questions from the field also take the goal of their work to be strengthening or weakening the religious commitments of their audience. Their lack of self-awareness can be astounding.”

questions about religious phenomena contributes something distinctive to the academic study of religion. It addresses questions that other disciplines in the field do not, and it does so in a way that is appropriate for the academy. If a mash-up between philosophy of religion and, say, history of religions would mean that the traditional philosophical interest in normative questions would be abandoned, then such mash-ups should be resisted. It is to avoid that result that I recommend speaking of the academic study of religions as a multi-disciplinary field rather than as an inter-disciplinary field.¹³

Here is the second point. Part of the task of understanding a claim is grasping what would make it true. It follows, then, that the interpretive work involved simply in understanding a religious claim is not separable from questions about how that claim might be justified. Some answer to the questions about what constitutes rational belief, what forms of evidence one might expect, and whether one can share one's reasons for religious claims will inform the work of every interpreter of religion, whether or not the scholar is a philosopher. This does not mean that everyone in religious studies has explicitly to ask and answer the question of what religious beliefs are true; that can remain a part of philosophy of religion. But it does mean that to interpret religious discourse or practice or institution *as intelligible* always presupposes some view of rationality, evidence, and reasons. In other words, because what one takes as intelligible is not separable from what one takes as true, a mash-up of the normative and the interpretative is inevitable.

If this second point is correct, then religious studies scholars in disciplines other than philosophy ought to welcome the traditional philosophical focus on justification as an appropriate and indeed necessary branch of our multidisciplinary field. In other words, they ought to take the irenic stance mentioned above, in which the explicit asking and answering of normative questions is not something that every religious studies scholar must do, but it is a task that belongs in the field. They ought to reject those scientific or genealogical circumscriptions of the field that exclude normative questions. If this second point is correct, then philosophy of religion should keep in mind that the interpretive question about "what religion is" is not a question that philosophers can simply ignore or leave for others. This question was not uncommon in philosophy of religion textbooks of the past, but in the past several decades it seems increasingly to have been left out as philosophers have narrowed their understanding of their task to a defense of or a critique of the Christian faith. Insofar as the interpretation of religion involves an unavoidable normative element, however, philosophers of religion ought to see theorizing about religion as a topic on which philosophy of religion and other scholars in the academic study of religions have to work together.

¹³ It is because, like Aikin and Moser, I hold that religious belief and practice *are* susceptible to truth-evaluation and rational critique that Gardiner calls my "manifesto" (merely) a reformed vision for philosophy of religion, rather than a revised one (Mark Q. Gardiner, "Reforming Philosophy of Religion: Some Methodological Cautions," *Method and Theory of the Study of Religion* (2015)).

KEVIN SCHILBRACK is Professor and Chair of the Department of Philosophy and Religion at Appalachian State University. He is author of *Philosophy and the Study of Religions* (Blackwell, 2014), and editor of *The Blackwell Companion to Religious Diversity* (Blackwell, forthcoming), *Thinking Through Rituals: Philosophical Perspectives* (Routledge, 2004), and *Thinking Through Myths: Philosophical Perspectives* (Routledge, 2002).