

J. AARON SIMMONS
FURMAN UNIVERSITY

INTRODUCTION:
THE DIALOGICAL PROMISE
OF MASHUP PHILOSOPHY OF RELIGION

I first proposed the idea of “mashup” philosophy of religion in an essay that I wrote in response to Nick Trakakis’s critique of my attempt to bring new phenomenology together with some aspects of analytic philosophy of religion.¹ This special journal Issue explores possibilities for this framework within contemporary philosophy of religion. The specific hope of this issue is that by mashing-up continental and analytic approaches to the philosophy of religion, constructive work is possible despite some divisions that have traditionally been obstacles to discourse. I am extremely grateful to the editors of the *Journal for Cultural and Religious Theory*, Victor Taylor and Carl Raschke, for their support of this issue and their encouragement that the idea of mashup philosophy of religion is worth further exploration. In this brief introduction, then, I will sketch what I mean by the phrase/metaphor and explain why it is meant as more than just a matter of rhetoric. I do not intend it to serve as a rigid designator for a particular philosophical method, but instead as an expression of hope for dialogical charity and discursive hospitality to cut across philosophical traditions and disciplinary borders. *Mashup Philosophy of Religion*, then, is offered as a name for a promising way of encouraging philosophers of religion to hold such hope as a guiding principle for scholarship.

MASH-UP OR JUST MISH-MASH

I draw the notion of “mashup” philosophy of religion from the popular art form known as “mashup music.”² Mashup artists such as Girl Talk, The Kleptones, Max Tannone, and Danger Mouse have been instrumental in developing this mode of cultural expression that uses technology to bring different musicians, genres, and periods together to make something new (while remaining old). The

¹ See J. Aaron Simmons, “On Shared Hopes for (Mashup) Philosophy of Religion: A Reply to Trakakis,” *Heythrop Journal* 55, no.4 (July, 2014): 691-710. For Trakakis’s critical essay, see “The New Phenomenology and Analytic Philosophy of Religion,” *Heythrop Journal* 55, no.4 (July, 2014): 670-90. I have also explored “mashup” philosophy of religion elsewhere, see J. Aaron Simmons and Bruce Ellis Benson, *The New Phenomenology: A Philosophical Introduction* (London: Bloomsbury, 2013), especially chapter 7; see also, J. Aaron Simmons and Martin Shuster, “Mashup Philosophy as a Task for a Lifetime: An Interview with J. Aaron Simmons,” available online: <https://religiousunderstanding.wordpress.com/2014/12/01/mashup-philosophy-as-a-task-for-a-lifetime-a-conversation-with-j-aaron-simmons/> (accessed January 20, 2015).

² The “mashup” metaphor has also been used by John S. McClure in relation to theology and popular culture—see McClure, *Mashup Religion: Pop Music and Theological Invention* (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2011). For more philosophical analysis of mash-up music, see Christopher Bartel, “The Metaphysics of Mash-ups,” *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* (forthcoming, 2015).

skill of the mashup artist combines technological knowledge regarding how to pair otherwise divergent songs and styles in ways that are seamless and compelling, and musical knowledge regarding what songs and styles can most compellingly be brought together. In this way, we might say that the mashup artist combines the *logical* with the *poetic* in order to facilitate creation. As an example of such mashup music, Danger Mouse's *The Grey Album* (2004) is a mashup of Jay Z's *The Black Album* and the Beatles' *The White Album*. Finding enormous, even if unexpected, success, *The Grey Album* demonstrates the constructive possibilities that are available when music from different genres is brought together in ways unanticipated by the original artists. Impressively, *The Grey Album* invites fans of the Beatles who might not otherwise care for hip hop, or Jay Z fans that might not otherwise care much about early rock and roll, to open themselves to something that was previously apathetically ignored, or explicitly dismissed. In this sense, mashup music might be seen as a sort of gateway to alterity.

When done well, mashup music is not derivative, but original. This originality is deeply informed by a critical awareness of a complex, and plural, inheritance. Perhaps the most famous mashup song is "Numb/Encore," which is a Grammy-winning mashup of Jay Z's hip hop and Linkin Park's nu metal.³ Like *The Grey Album*, "Numb/Encore" allows for rock/rap engagement reminiscent of Run DMC's 1986 appropriation/remake of Aerosmith's "Walk This Way" (1975),⁴ or the *Judgment Night Soundtrack*, which offers a variety of such rock/rap combinations.⁵ The difference between such collaborations and genuine mashup music, however, is that collaborations tend to be original tracks that are co-written by artists coming from different backgrounds/styles, whereas mashup music is a constructive appropriation of two preexisting songs such that a new "third" thing is created by bringing them together. So, Linkin Park's "Numb" and Jay Z's "Encore" were both songs that previously existed on their own such that "Numb/Encore" functions to explore possibilities that occur when these two songs are reimagined in light of each other. In this way, mashups are often transformative in a way that collaborations may not be. While I think that collaboration and mashups are both important ways to explore new vistas, it is important to find ways of not just doing what one does *alongside* what others do differently (collaborations), but ways of doing differently what one does, in light of what others do *with* you (mashups). Ideally, mashups and collaborations will function together, though, such that mashups will invite constructive collaborations and those collaborations will be transformative for the artists and musical genres involved.

I believe that contemporary philosophy of religion can be productively renewed if scholars appropriate this "mashup" approach for academic inquiry. One might ask why such "renewal" is needed? There are a number of ways to make such a case depending on what aims (or hopes) one has for the discourse itself. For my own part, I am eager to think about constructive ways of drawing on a variety of

³ On the Jay Z/Linkin Park album, *Collison Course* (Roc-A-Fella Records and Warner Bros, 2004).

⁴ See Run DMC, *Raising Hell* (Arista, 1986).

⁵ For example, Helmet and House of Pain, Biohazard and Onyx, Slayer and Ice-T, Cypress Hill and Pearl Jam, etc. See Various Artists, *Judgment Night Original Soundtrack* (Immortal and Epic, 1993).

philosophical traditions in order to address pressing problems in the contemporary debates.⁶ Often, the very way that a question or concern is framed reflects assumptions that might be contested in an alternative tradition. As such, being willing to think about, and also draw upon, the diverse resources that are available across traditions allows for a hermeneutic awareness that is resistant to insularity and narrowness. I mention insularity and narrowness, here, quite intentionally. In a “manifesto” envisioning a renewal of philosophy of religion in relation to work occurring in the academic study of religion, more broadly, Kevin Schilbrack argues that traditional philosophy of religion is characterized by narrowness, insularity, and intellectualism.⁷ For Schilbrack, the specifics of this critique are such that philosophy of religion has traditionally been primarily theistic (narrow), concerned mainly with the cognitive dimensions of religion (intellectualist), and not engaged with work on religion occurring in other disciplines (insular). Even though counterexamples to Schilbrack’s account can be offered, it is important not to too quickly dismiss his critique as an important challenge to the hegemonic tendencies that can be identified in the field. Mashup philosophy of religion can make significant strides toward addressing such tendencies and, thus, facilitate productive responses to the narrowness, insularity, and intellectualism that too often characterize traditional work in this area.⁸

Although Schilbrack sees both analytic philosophy of religion and also continental philosophy of religion to be guilty, perhaps in slightly different ways, of these three tendencies, I think that exploring how these two traditions (which are already representative of a plurality of approaches, methodologies, histories, trajectories, etc.) might be mashed-up is a good first step for then engaging in other (more expansive) mashups and collaborations in the future.⁹ There are a variety of ways mashup philosophy of religion might look, a mash-up of religious studies and philosophy, of feminist philosophy and traditional apologetics, of cognitive science and theories of religion, etc. In the effort of encouraging such work in the future, this Issue intentionally focuses on ways in

⁶ There are many scholars who have been exemplars of this sort of work, so I do not mean for my proposal of mashup philosophy of religion to be understood as itself inviting something radically original. Instead, my hope is that this frame encourages the engagement with diverse philosophical and religious traditions as an explicit orientation for philosophy of religion itself. As just a few examples of scholars who I consider to be models for possible analytic/continental mashup work, consider Nicholas Wolterstorff’s engagement with Derrida and Ricoeur in *Divine Discourse: Philosophical Reflections on the Claim that God Speaks* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995); Merold Westphal’s embrace of both hermeneutic phenomenology and some aspects on offer in reformed epistemology in “Taking Plantinga Seriously,” *Faith and Philosophy* 16, no.2 (1999): 173-81; and especially William Wainwright’s attempt to think about the different cultures of philosophy of religion that operate in the American Philosophical Association and the American Academy of Religion (Wainwright, ed. *God, Philosophy, and Academic Culture* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1996).

⁷ Kevin Schilbrack, *Philosophy and the Study of Religions: A Manifesto* (Malden and Oxford: Wiley Blackwell), especially chapter 1.

⁸ I have argued this basic point in more detail elsewhere. See, J. Aaron Simmons, “Vagueness and Its Virtues: A Proposal for Renewing Philosophy of Religion,” *Philosophy of Religion After “Religion,”* eds., Richard Amesbury and Michael Rogers (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck).

⁹ See Schilbrack, *Philosophy and the Study of Religions*, 9-10.

which the often cited stylistic differences on offer in analytic and continental philosophy, which may or may not reflect real alternatives in content, might not have to be seen as an obstacle for inquiry, but as an opportunity for constructive reflection. In so doing, my hope is that we can avoid problematic, though perhaps well-intentioned, calls to “overcome the analytic/continental divide.” Such calls often end up suggesting that one tradition should simply be revised so that it now looks just like the other tradition. Attempting to *overcome* the divide in such ways would be akin to overcoming the divide on college campuses between athletics and academics by simply eliminating athletics from college life. When it is suggested that philosophy is best served by eliminating the diversity of approach, style, method, and history on display in philosophy, it is difficult not to conclude that the goal is no longer truth, but a reinforcement of the power of those whose preferred approach, style, method, and history is presented as the only “legitimate,” “rigorous,” “meaningful,” “existentially relevant,” option.

Importantly, though, philosophical diversity is not necessarily intrinsically valuable on its own. For example, although it is possible that some philosophers might say that by using crayons instead of computers to write books some new phenomenological experience is available that enables an embodied relation to one’s thought in constructive ways, I would hope that such an approach would not be given much credence in the contemporary debates. My hope, here, is motivated by a reasoned belief that such *crayonists*, as we might term them, would not offer anything of value to philosophical inquiry. Novelty, on its own, should not be the point—quite a bit of mashup music is not much more than a mish-mash of stuff that is better left alone (again, a high degree of technical and musical knowledge is crucial for the novelty to be worthwhile). Alternatively, being dismissive of the new, out of hand (i.e., simply because it is new), is dangerous. Finding ways of working within the standards of a discursive community (professional philosophy of religion, say) while opening that community to new discursive possibilities is the aim. Specifically, given the theme of the present Issue, the thought is that although continental approaches are potentially made better by engaging analytic alternatives, and vice-versa, both should still be understood as *philosophical* discourses. Drawing again on music, we might similarly say that although hip hop and metal are far from each other in many ways, they both operate according to generally agreed upon conceptions of musical form, structure, and purpose such that the rock/rap mashups are frequently quite successful. Such initial work mashing up various traditions *within* philosophy can then better position philosophy of religion to *open onto* the sort of interdisciplinary and cross-cultural engagement that Schilbrack (along with some of the contributors to this Issue) rightly suggests to be needed if the future of philosophy of religion is to remain as bright as possible.¹⁰ Indeed, in the final essay of the Issue, Schilbrack himself responds to two analytic essays. As a philosopher of religion who approaches the topic from a broader perspective of the academic study of religion (and especially the critical theory of religion), Schilbrack demonstrates how the particular focus of this Issue can indeed open onto a variety of future mashups and collaborations.

¹⁰ As an example of what such a cross-cultural and interdisciplinary approach might look like, see Purushottama Bilimoria and Andrew B. Irvine, eds. *Post-Colonial Philosophy of Religion* (Springer, 2009).

Mashup philosophy is not promising simply because it embraces diversity. It is promising because it puts the already existing diversity occurring in the various traditions of philosophy of religion into productive dialogue such that the wider shared community is recognized as already diverse in important ways. Accordingly, overstating the divide between continental and analytic is unhelpful. Yet, the very call to “overcome” the divide can make it seem that there is a mutual ground where all differences can be, and will be, resolved. Such a Habermasian rapprochement, we might say, is, in this case, not only unlikely but potentially dangerously triumphalist.¹¹ In light of the mashup framework, the best option for philosophers of religion, I believe, is to abandon the notion that such “overcoming” is the goal. Rather, finding ways to appreciate and appropriate the values of the other tradition(s), while allowing differences to remain such that one appropriates the other tradition(s) while still working within one’s own, is a better model. Jay Z does not need to form a metal band; Linkin Park does not need to become hip hop group. Rather, it is only by remaining true to their respective “traditions,” we might say, that the mashup of their songs so productive. The third space is opened because the other two spaces remain in place, but no longer understood primarily as in opposition to each other. Indeed, it might be that the formerly conceived opposition can be reconceived as productive tension. There may or may not be ultimate agreement and harmony in such mashup philosophy of religion, but just as in music, the resolution of dissonance is not always the *best*, and certainly not the *only*, way to conclude a song. The task of mashup philosophy of religion, as specifically considered in this issue, is not to *overcome* the divide between continental and analytic traditions, but to stop thinking that the divide is something that requires oppositional antagonism or unreflective disregard.

We must be diligent not to allow such mashup philosophy to become nothing more than a mish-mash of traditions that make most sense when left to their own devices. And yet, in light of Schilbrack’s challenge, it seems important at least to see if the logical and poetic skill on display in the best mashup music translates beneficially to the logical and poetic emphases of the analytic and continental traditions. I believe that it can. Notice, though, that this requires that we not assume that *our* tradition gets it *all* right. The humility of realizing that the skill set required for reaching beauty, goodness, and truth might best be achieved through engagement means that we must not ignore the distinctions but appreciate them as opportunities for self-critical reflection and potential transformation. In this way, the logical and poetic are not positioned as a stark dichotomy, but instead as important aspects of each other. Without the poetic dimension, mashup music can degenerate into not much more than a computer

¹¹ See Alvin Plantinga’s worry about the triumphalism that might threaten contemporary Christian philosophy (“Response to Nick Wolterstorff,” *Faith and Philosophy* 28, no.3 (July, 2011): 267-8). In light of recent trends in analytic theology, on the one hand, and proclamations of the “end of philosophy of religion,” on the other hand, it seems to me that a real danger of thinking that one could “overcome the divide” is that instead of a view that incorporates dimensions of both traditions, it is plausible that one or the other would simply be swallowed up in the other. See, Oliver D. Crisp and Michael C. Rea, eds., *Analytic Theology: New Essays in the Philosophy of Theology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009); Nick Trakakis, *The End of Philosophy of Religion* (London: Continuum, 2008); Timothy D. Knepper, *The Ends of Philosophy of Religion: Terminus and Telos* (New York: Palgrave, 2013).

program; without the logical dimension, mashup music can remain an unactualized idea. It is at this point that the commonly heard critiques of analytic philosophy as existentially removed, and critiques of continental philosophy as lacking rigor, are important to keep in mind. Nothing is gained by trafficking in such stereotypes, but appreciating why such stereotypes are often deployed is helpful for thinking creatively in light of the realities that might have given rise to them.

Just as the best mashups might, then, invite unexpected collaborations, I hope that this issue invites engagements that currently could only be dimly envisioned. With that in mind, the contributions to this issue are meant to approach the particular mashup of analytic philosophy of religion and continental philosophy of religion from a variety of directions. And, as an attempt to anticipate subsequent collaborations, the issue concludes with two such collaborative ventures—the first offers two essays written by continental thinkers to which an analytic thinker responds, and the second offers two essays written by analytic thinkers to which a continentally informed scholar working in the academic study of religion, more broadly, responds.

Reminiscent of the verse, chorus, bridge progression of so much of contemporary music, this Issue also unfolds in three movements. The first section, “Propaedeutic Explorations,” features essays by J.L. Schellenberg, Martin Kavka, Martin Shuster, Nathan R.B. Loewen, Timothy Knepper, and N.N. Trakakis. These essays cover a wide range of specific concerns about how mashup philosophy of religion might be understood and the obstacles that it might face. Importantly, though, all of these essays participate in mashup philosophizing while attempting to think through such propaedeutic concerns. In particular, Schellenberg considers how “deep time” might motivate epistemic humility in ways that would invite work drawing mutually on analytic and continental resources. Kavka and Shuster both approach the philosophy of religion through an analysis of language. Kavka brings Emmanuel Levinas into conversation with Wilfrid Sellars, and Shuster bring Levinas into a rich engagement with Donald Davidson and Stanley Cavell. For both Kavka and Shuster, philosophy of religion is benefited when language is not seen as static or reductively naturalized, but instead is understood as a dynamic, and decidedly moral, dimension of human intersubjective existence. Loewen and Knepper both offer important reminders to any mashup philosophy of religion that would threaten to fall back into the narrowness and insularity about which Schilbrack warns. For Loewen, this danger occurs when it comes to the continued theistic orbit in which so much of traditional philosophy of religion (whether analytic or continental) occurs. Subsequently, Knepper argues that the engagement between analytic philosophy of religion and continental philosophy of religion is itself insular if it does not expand outward to engage broader work in the academic study of religion. The final essay in this section, by Trakakis, takes a step back and engages in meta-philosophical reflection about the professional and political obstacles that stand in the way of any attempt at renewing philosophy of religion.

Although setting the stage and clearing the ground for mashup philosophy of religion is invaluable, it is important to be willing to enter the stage and build upon such cleared ground. Hence, the second section, “Risks Worth Taking,” offers examples of constructive mashup philosophy concerning a variety of

philosophical questions. This section features essays by Christina M. Gschwandtner, A. G. Holdier, Christy Flanagan-Feddon, and Markus Weidler. Gschwandtner directly tackles Schilbrack's charge of "intellectualism" and considers how faith might be understood as variously as belief or practice and how such alternatives are present in both analytic and continental discourse. Holdier brings William Lane Craig and John Caputo together in an unlikely, but productive, consideration of how a postmodern approach to apologetics might be constructively envisioned in a way that allows C.S. Lewis to be read as a mashup philosopher of religion. Flanagan-Feddon turns to the important issue of what one takes "religion" to mean in philosophy of religion. Drawing on a wide range of influences, Flanagan-Feddon suggests that Ludwig Feuerbach is an instructive contributor to debates that often seem to create a stark dichotomy between a phenomenological essentialism on the one hand and a reductive pragmatism on the other hand. Finally, Weidler turns to the work of Slavoj Žižek and Robert Glenn Howard in order to consider how mashup philosophy of religion might be helpful for rethinking fundamentalism and the way that it has begun to emerge as a virtual phenomenon.

The final section, "New Vistas: From Mashup to Collaboration," features the two collaborative endeavors I mentioned previously. In the first, a consideration of emotion and virtue occurs in essays by Jack Mulder, Jr., Michael Kelly, and John Greco. In the second, a consideration of the relation of God, faith, and argument occurs in essays by Scott F. Aikin, Paul K. Moser, and Kevin Schilbrack. Again, in both of these "collaborations," the idea is that transformative engagement occurs by bringing together voices working in different traditions to think together in productive ways – these essays are not, themselves, necessarily mashups, but the collaboration occurring across the essays is something that I think that mashup work can foster. This final section, then, is meant to demonstrate that mashup philosophy (in some form) can occur even without expecting an individual thinker to be conversant with multiple traditions. All that is required is a willingness to converse with those who might approach things differently while allowing that one's own work might be made better as a result.

There are genuine risks that accompany mashup philosophy of religion as envisioned here and this Issue can only go so far. But, as the title of the second section attempts to convey, these are risks worth taking. This special journal Issue is only a first step, but I believe it is a step in the right direction. Ultimately, I hope that this Issue *settles nothing as concerns the only way to do philosophy of religion, but that it unsettles quite a bit when it comes to assumptions about the best way to do it.*

J. AARON SIMMONS is Associate Professor of Philosophy at Furman University. His books include *God and the Other: Ethics and Politics After the Theological Turn* (Indiana), and (with Bruce Ellis Benson) *The New Phenomenology: A Philosophical Introduction* (Bloomsbury).