

NICHOLAS WOLTERSTORFF
NOAH PORTER PROFESSOR EMERITUS OF PHILOSOPHICAL
THEOLOGY, YALE UNIVERSITY
SENIOR RESEARCH FELLOW, INSTITUTE FOR ADVANCED
STUDIES IN CULTURE, UNIVERSITY OF VIRGINIA

PREFACE TO SPECIAL ISSUE
ON "MASHUP PHILOSOPHY OF RELIGION"

Everybody who has earned an undergraduate degree in philosophy knows that there are two traditions of contemporary philosophy in the West: the analytic and the continental. Almost all of these philosophy majors will have been inducted into just one of these two traditions. Almost all will have heard derogatory comments about the other tradition. And should the occasion arise for the student to listen to a lecture or read an essay by a philosopher from the other tradition, almost always she will be either baffled or annoyed – or both.

I was trained in the contemporary analytic tradition of philosophy. I have read a fair amount in the continental tradition, however. So let me try to put into words what I find significantly different about contemporary continental philosophy.

Many analytic philosophers would lead off by saying that analytic philosophy is much more clear and rigorous than is continental philosophy. I regard that as a red herring. Continental philosophy exhibits not a lack of clarity and rigor but a different kind of clarity and rigor. That difference is due, in good measure, to a different rhetorical style. Analytic philosophers are chary of using metaphors, similes, hyperboles, and the like. They much prefer literal speech. That buys them a certain sort of lucidity, indeed. But as a good many commentators have noted, the price paid for that lucidity is that the analytic style of writing is typically dry and non-evocative.

It's typical of continental philosophers to happily use the full range of literary tropes. Thus it is that if someone trained in the analytic tradition is to read continental philosophy as it should be read, he has to learn to interpret a different kind of philosophical rhetoric. Not all of them are willing to do that. So when they come across the sentence in Derrida, "Outside the text, there's nothing," they do not interpret this as metaphorical and hyperbolic. They interpret it as literal, and profess to be shocked that someone who holds a prestigious chair in philosophy could say something so absurd as that reality consists entirely of texts.

Continental philosophy is also characterized by a different style of argumentation. Part of the difference is that continental philosophers are less interested in implication relations among propositions. Part of the difference is that they are less interested in "what is it?" questions: what is knowledge, what is justification, etc. And part of the difference is that analytic philosophers use examples and counter-examples in their arguments far more frequently than do

their continental counterparts, these examples and counter-examples often including thought experiments that are, by anyone's lights, bizarre. A result of this difference in style of argumentation is two quite different relations to *factuality*. The analytic philosopher sticks close to his examples and counter-examples but happily goes off into flights of fantasy in imagining examples and counter-examples. The continental philosopher sticks close to how things actually are but operates at some height above them, not much concerned to tie down what he says to examples and counter-examples.

Further, the twentieth-century texts that these two traditions treat as canonical are different. Students in the analytic tradition cut their teeth on the writings of Russell, Moore, Quine, Davidson; they do not read Husserl, Heidegger, Levinas, Derrida. The opposite is true for students in the continental tradition. And not only are the canonical texts different. What strikes me when I read continental philosophy is that young philosophers in that tradition relate to their twentieth century predecessors in a way that is very different from the way in which young philosophers in the analytic tradition relate to their twentieth-century predecessors. Words fail me in trying to capture the difference. But let me try.

In the continental tradition, a few contemporary thinkers are accorded mythic status: Husserl, Heidegger, Habermas, Levinas, Derrida, perhaps Ricoeur, perhaps Marion. Young philosophers are expected to do their philosophizing in dialogue with one or another of these mythic figures. If they prove exceptionally creative in doing so, they will themselves be accorded mythic status. Nothing of this sort happens in analytic philosophy. I have occasionally been asked, "Which contemporary philosopher do you follow?" From the day I first set foot in the guild I have answered, "None." Most of my fellow analytic philosophers would give the same answer.

Richard Rorty once remarked to me that he saw contemporary analytic philosophy as an adaptation of Kant and contemporary continental philosophy as an adaptation of Hegel. I think there is a good deal of truth in that comment. Kant worried over what is left for philosophy to do as empirical sciences emerge to take over domains of inquiry that were once the province of philosophy. His answer, essentially, was that philosophy deals with necessities (of a certain sort). Hegel's view concerning the task of philosophy was that philosophy gives a deep description and analysis of ourselves and our practices.

I could point to additional significant differences; the conceptual frameworks employed by these two traditions are strikingly different, for example. But enough has been said to explain why there has been mutual incomprehension and denigration between the members of the two traditions. These traditions represent two very different styles of philosophical thought and rhetoric.

Both traditions are unmistakably philosophical, however; and they share the same pre-twentieth century philosophical tradition. So despite the differences, in my own work I have interacted with some contemporary continental philosophers, especially Ricoeur, Derrida, and Habermas. I have not done this out of some inexplicable desire to be ecumenical; I have done this because I came to realize that there were continental philosophers who were thinking and writing about some of the same issues that I was thinking and writing about, and

that there were things I could learn from them and arguments that were worthy of being taken into account.

It's this same impulse that inspired this special issue on "Mashup Philosophy of Religion"; and Professor Simmons is to be applauded for organizing it. The project is to bring these two traditions into dialogue with each other on topics in philosophy of religion: philosophers of religion from the analytic tradition breaking out of their habit of taking account only of what analytic philosophers say on some topic and taking account as well of what continental philosophers say on that topic, and philosophers of religion from the continental tradition doing the same thing in reverse. In his Introduction, Professor Simmons states the aim of the project thus: "the task of mashup philosophy of religion, as specifically considered in this issue, is not to *overcome* the divide between continental and analytic tradition, but to stop thinking that the divide is something that requires oppositional antagonism or unreflective disregard." The result in some cases will be that the philosopher appropriates, into the mode of thinking and writing typical of her own tradition, what she has learned from the other tradition; the result in other cases will be that a genuine fusion takes place, a "mashup."

In the course of their discussions, several writers take note of the narrowness of analytic philosophy of religion of the past forty years. Analytic philosophers of religion have focused almost all of their attention on four topics: the nature of God, the epistemic status of beliefs about God, the epistemic significance of mystical experience, and the problem of evil. If someone who knew nothing about the religious life drew conclusions about such a mode of life from reading this literature, she would come to the view that, apart from the mystical experiences of a few people, the religious life is all about beliefs concerning God. Those writers in this collection who take note of this narrowness of analytic philosophy of religion express the hope that bringing the two traditions into dialogue with each other will have the effect of broadening the scope of philosophical discussions of religion.

In his contribution to this collection, Nathan R.B. Loewen tempers this hope while nonetheless sharing the goal. He argues that though it is less obvious that continental philosophy of religion is likewise focused on "classical theism," close scrutiny shows that "their discourses [also] share a nearly exclusive treatment of conceptions and understandings related to variations on theism." If Loewen is right about this, then taking account of continental philosophy of religion does not require, on the part of the analytic philosopher, a broadening of focus; it just requires that he look at classical theism from a somewhat different angle and with a different conceptuality.

I share the conviction that philosophy of religion should expand its focus; and one of my hopes for mashup philosophy of religion is that those who engage in "mashing up" these two traditions will also be motivated to burst out of the narrow confines of these traditions. The religion of most people is not confined to beliefs. It's a way of life. And for most adherents of most religions, prominent in that way of life is participation in the rituals and liturgies of their religion. I hold that we who are philosophers of religion should pay far more attention than we have thus far to ritual and liturgy.

Would philosophical reflections on ritual and liturgy be absorbed into religious studies, as Kevin Schilbrack describes that field of inquiry in his essay? Not at all. In thinking about ritual and liturgy, philosophers will take account of what anthropologists, sociologists, and culture theorists say about these; but his way of thinking about them will be significantly different. He will be interested in different questions, bring a different literature to bear on the issues, employ a different conceptuality, and so forth.

Schilbrack writes, "The theistic questions that have had such a central place for traditional philosophers of religion do not figure 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." He goes on to note, "Given how vibrant the discipline of philosophy of religion is today, and given the appeal of philosophy of religion classes to undergraduates," one cannot 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."

If philosophers of religion do begin to describe and analyze rituals and liturgies, I see no reason why they should not acknowledge that most people who participate in these see themselves as engaging God in some way. And if the philosopher herself participates in rituals or liturgies, and sees herself as engaging God in so doing, I see no reason why she should conceal that fact. I see no reason why she should be a methodological atheist. It's my guess that most of my fellow analytic philosophers of religion agree with me on this. If so, that too will mark a difference between how analytic philosophers discuss and analyze rituals and liturgies and how religious studies scholars discuss and analyze them.

NICHOLAS WOLTERSTORFF is retired. His books include *Reason within the Bounds of Religion* (Eerdmans), *Divine Discourse* (Cambridge), *Inquiring about God* (Cambridge), and *Practices of Belief* (Cambridge). He is currently working on a book of philosophical reflections on liturgy, tentatively titled *Acting Liturgically*.