

Philosophy of Religion

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Australia and New Zealand are often portrayed (by secularists and church figures alike) as godless nations where materialism, in both its philosophical and sociological guises, runs rife (see, e.g. Frame 2009). Census reports on religious identity are sometimes used to substantiate this image (e.g. the 'No Religion' category rose in Australia from 0.3% in 1947 to 18.7% in 2006, and in New Zealand from 0.7% in 1945 to 29.6% in 2001). Despite this, it has been argued—by, e.g. Bouma (2006) and Matheson (2006)—that religion has not died out in Australia and New Zealand, but shows signs of renewal and revitalisation. In Australia in particular, a distinctive religious and spiritual ethos seems to have emerged. Borrowing the phrase 'a shy hope in the heart' used by Manning Clark to describe the ANZAC spirit, Bouma writes that this phrase aptly expresses the nature of Australian religion and spirituality: 'There is a profound shyness—yet a deeply grounded hope—held tenderly in the heart, in the heart of Australia' (2006: 2). Perhaps something similar can be said about the way in which the philosophical study of religion tends to be approached in Australasia: a spirit of openness and tentativeness, as opposed to one that is doctrinaire and dogmatic, has prevailed.

Early Contributions

If Samuel Alexander can be considered an Australian philosopher, despite leaving his home town of Sydney at the age of eighteen for Oxford, and never to return, his *Space, Time, and Deity* (1920) would count as the first substantial Australasian contribution to the philosophy of religion. Alexander developed a grand system of speculative metaphysics, one of the last of its kind, that was part of the widespread movement towards **realism**, and against **Idealism**, in philosophy. In Alexander's system the basic reality is **spacetime**, out of which everything evolves. This evolutionary system is marked by an ongoing process that is driven towards the production of new and increasingly complex qualities, particularly one that has yet to be realised, called 'Deity'. As in the process theism developed by his contemporary, A. N. Whitehead, Alexander thought of God as both existent and forever in process of realisation: 'God as actually possessing deity does not exist but is an ideal, is always becoming; but God as the whole Universe tending towards deity does exist' (1921: 428).

On the Idealist side, W. R. Boyce Gibson arrived in Victoria in 1912 having already published *God With Us* (1909), a work heavily influenced by the German Idealist philosopher, Rudolf Eucken, and advocating a theistic version of 'personal Idealism' in opposition to both Absolute Idealism and **naturalism**. (See also

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Gibson's four-part series on 'Problems of Spiritual Experience' in the 1924–25 issues of the *Australasian Journal of Psychology and Philosophy* [1924a, 1924b, 1924c, 1925b]). Alexander ('Sandy') Boyce Gibson succeeded his father in the chair of philosophy at the **University of Melbourne** in 1935 and also took a strong interest in the philosophy of religion, publishing after his retirement one book on the interplay between religious faith and doubt in Dostoevsky's life and novels, and another on becoming empirically acquainted with the non-empirical and thus overcoming the divide between theism and empiricism (Gibson 1970; 1973).

Although **John Anderson** had little to offer the philosophy of religion, his atheism played an important role in setting up naturalism as the dominant paradigm in subsequent Australasian philosophy. Anderson rejected the traditional arguments for the existence of God (e.g. in a 1935 paper he discusses, and seeks to strengthen, the critique of the design argument offered in Hume's *Dialogues concerning Natural Religion*, though curiously he makes no appeal to evolutionary theory), but he did not attempt to derive his atheism from any arguments in the philosophy of religion, such as the argument from evil. Rather, his atheism was the product of a thoroughgoing empiricism and realism, according to which there is only one way of being, that of ordinary things in **space** and **time**, and hence there are no supernatural beings such as God. But it was Anderson's resolutely secular conception of education that was to give him greatest notoriety. Education, Anderson argued, is essentially concerned with free inquiry and **critical thinking**, whereas religion promotes dogmatism, servility and indoctrination, and so the two are flatly opposed. After public addresses espousing such views, Anderson was condemned by the Sydney press and church officials, and was even censured by the NSW Parliament (Baker 1979: 118–21).

Natural Theology and Atheology

Over the last few decades Australasian philosophers have made significant contributions to the projects of natural theology and atheology, where the case for and against the existence of God is assessed on the basis of rational argumentation alone, unaided by religious faith or divine revelation. A case in point is Peter Forrest (1996a), who under the banner of 'scientific theism' has attempted to show that belief in God is the best explanation of various features revealed by, or implicit in, modern science. Forrest engages in what he calls 'the apologetics of understanding', the project of defending theism by showing that it enables us to understand or explain various things (such as the world's beauty and its suitability for life) better than its rivals, especially **naturalism**. But the explanations posited by Forrest are not supernatural explanations: 'I am an antisupernaturalist without being a naturalist', he writes (1996: 2). Forrest's theism avoids the supernatural insofar as it eschews any violations of the **laws of nature** and any entities that do not have a precedent in well-confirmed scientific theories. More recently but more controversially, Forrest (2007) has defended a highly speculative and unorthodox conception of divinity where God (and not simply our conception of God) develops over time. On this view, God initially is neither personal nor

lovable, but is pure will and unrestricted agency. A series of events, however, results in God becoming a community of divine love, the Holy Trinity, with one of the Persons of this Trinity becoming fully human to show us divine love.

Important contributions to each of 'the big three' arguments for the existence of God have been made by Australasian philosophers. Barry Miller (1992) defends a version of the cosmological argument, relying not on the principle of sufficient reason, but on the premise that the existence of the universe or any of its parts (logically) could not be a brute fact. Subsequently, Miller went on to argue that the creator of the universe whose existence his earlier work attempted to demonstrate is not to be identified with the anthropomorphic God of perfect-being theology, but with the Thomistic God conceived as Subsistent Existence (identical with his existence) and thus as radically different from any other being, possible or actual (Miller 1996). In the final part of his 'trilogy' (Miller 2002), he defends the view, presupposed in the idea of Subsistent Existence, that existence is a real property of individuals and 'exists' is a first-level predicable.

Graham Oppy, on the other side of the theist/atheist divide, engaged in prolonged debate in the journals during the 1990s with William Lane Craig and others over the *kalam* cosmological argument. A useful but neglected question in debates of this sort is: When should someone who presents a philosophical argument be prepared to concede that their argument is unsuccessful? Oppy (2002) takes up this topic, and argues that Craig ought to admit that his *kalam* argument is a failure. Oppy has also considered and criticised some new versions of the cosmological argument advanced by Robert Koons, Richard Gale and Alexander Pruss.

Mark Wynn (1999), at the time at the **Australian Catholic University**, offered a defence of the argument from design. But unlike traditional formulations of this argument, Wynn's argument is rooted in features of the world that are charged with valuational significance (e.g. the world's beauty and its tendency to produce richer and more complex material forms) and attempts to break away from anthropomorphic conceptions of God as a human artisan writ large. Nowadays, however, design arguments usually make appeal to fine-tuning, the fundamental structure and properties of the universe that are finely adjusted to allow for the existence of life. Fine-tuning arguments have come in for some heavy criticism at the hands of Australasian philosophers, including M. C. Bradley (2001) and Mark Colyvan, **Graham Priest** and Jay Garfield (2005).

Somewhat peculiarly for a nation that takes pride in the empirical, Australia has witnessed a flurry of activity over the *a priori* ontological argument. Max Charlesworth (1965) led the way with a new translation of, and a running commentary on, Anselm's *Proslogion* and the texts of the subsequent debate between Anselm and Gaunilo. Soon thereafter Richard Campbell (1976) presented a new interpretation of Anselm's argument, and defended it against the objections of Gaunilo, Kant and others. But it was Graham Oppy's *Ontological Arguments and Belief in God* (1996) that raised the discussion to new heights, providing the most detailed and rigorous examination of the ontological argument to date. In this work Oppy develops and defends a general objection that is intended to apply to all

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formulations of the argument (though this general objection was later recanted in Oppy 2001 and 2006), and concludes that ‘ontological arguments are completely worthless: While the history and analysis of ontological arguments makes for interesting reading, the critical verdict of that reading is entirely negative’ (1996: 199). An equally negative conclusion is reached in Oppy’s follow-up study, *Arguing about Gods* (2006a), where he examines classical and contemporary arguments for and against the existence of God, and concludes that ‘no argument that has been constructed thus far provides those who have reasonable views about the existence of orthodoxly conceived monotheistic gods with the slightest reason to change their minds’ (2006a: 425). The meticulous and thorough scholarship that lies behind these verdicts justifies the remark Paul Helm once made that, ‘an “oppy” is clearly a creature with the eye of an eagle and the pen of a ready writer’ (Helm 1997: 477).

Across the Tasman, John Bishop in *Believing by Faith* (2007a) also thinks that the arguments of natural theology and natural atheology are unsuccessful. Specifically, Bishop holds that the core theistic truth-claims are ‘evidentially ambiguous’ in the sense that our total available evidence is equally viably interpreted either from a theistic perspective or an atheistic perspective. Given the evidential ambiguity of theism, argues Bishop, it can under certain circumstances be morally permissible to ‘believe by faith’, or to ‘make a doxastic venture’ in the direction of theistic faith-commitment. Bishop thus defends a modest version of fideism that is inspired by William James’ 1896 lecture ‘The Will to Believe’, and defends it against various objections, including those put forward by ‘hard-line’ evidentialists, who insist that commitment to religious belief without evidential support can never be justified.

Arguments from evil, of course, often play a crucial role in the atheologian’s case against God, but since Australasian philosophers have made a quite distinctive contribution to this topic, it is dealt with under a separate entry.

Miracles

Australasian philosophers have also been active in discussions of miracles. Bruce Langtry, for example, challenged the arguments Hume and Mackie put forward against miracle-reports as evidence for theism (Langtry 1972, 1975, 1985, 1988). Levine (1989) offers a more systematic explication of Hume’s argument against justified belief in miracles, showing how it follows from Hume’s analysis of **causation**. Hume’s position on miracles, according to Levine, has not been properly understood, since its connection to his views on causation has never been adequately examined. Levine also argues, against Hume, that a justified true belief in the occurrence of an event justifiably thought to be a miracle is possible. Stephen Buckle (2001) also takes up Hume’s case against belief in miracles as developed in Section X of the *Enquiry* (as well as Hume’s case against the design argument in Section XI). Buckle spends much time in contextualising Hume’s critique of religion, showing that the critique can properly be understood only if it is placed within the context of the wider sceptical argument of the *Enquiry*.

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Apart from these studies of Hume, other historical studies in philosophy of religion include Julian Young's *Nietzsche's Philosophy of Religion* (2006). According to Young, Nietzsche's early thought, or his 'Wagnerianism', is *communitarian* (in the sense that the highest object of its concern is the flourishing of the community as a whole), and *religious* (for it holds that a community cannot flourish without a festive, communal religion). Young argues that this religious communitarianism is not, as is often thought, something that Nietzsche went on to renounce, but persists through the entirety of Nietzsche's writings. Young therefore interprets Nietzsche as a religious reformer rather than an enemy of religion, and as someone deeply concerned with community rather than an individualistic philosopher. Mention may also be made of the five-volume *History of Western Philosophy of Religion* (2009), edited by Oppy and Trakakis, and consisting of over 100 essays on philosophers and religious thinkers from ancient to contemporary times.

Continental Philosophy of Religion

A seminal publication in this area, in Australasia and beyond, is **Kevin Hart's** *The Trespass of the Sign* (1989, reissued 2000). At the time of publication, Hart was lecturing in Literary Studies at **Deakin University**, though he was already well-versed in both philosophy (completing his Ph.D. in philosophy at the University of Melbourne in 1986) and theology. By this time, also, Hart had converted to the Catholic Church (having grown up in an Anglican family), and he had (as he put it) 'gone continental' in his philosophical orientation, 'yet without repudiating what I had learned in the analytic tradition' (2000: xii). In many ways, then, Hart was well-positioned to see past the misconceptions about deconstruction and religious faith prevalent at the time. Unlike those who saw deconstruction as directed against theology as such, or as a refinement of the Nietzschean doctrine that God is dead, Hart offered deconstruction as 'an answer to the theological demand for a "non-metaphysical theology"' (2000: xxxv) of the sort that is found in the mystical and apophatic traditions of Christianity, thus rejecting Derrida's view that even mystical theology is embroiled in metaphysics.

Since leaving for the U.S. in 2002, Hart has authored or edited works on Blanchot and the sacred (Hart 2004), on Derrida and religion (Hart and Sherwood 2005), on the experience of God (Hart and Wall 2005), on Marion's phenomenology and its relation to Christian theology (Hart 2007), and on the implications of Levinas' philosophy for Jewish-Christian dialogue (Hart and Signer 2010). Hart's students in Australia have gone on to make important contributions of their own, particularly Robyn Horner. In *Rethinking God as Gift* (2001), Horner looks at the two main protagonists in phenomenological discussions of the gift, Derrida and Marion, and the theological implications of the debate, particularly as it bears on the possibility of conceiving God as pure gift. (The 'theological turn' in **phenomenology** was made the subject of a