

# Philosophy, Culture, and Traditions

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## CONTRIBUTORS

Leslie Armour is a Research Professor in Philosophy at the Dominican University College, Ottawa, and a Fellow of the Royal Society of Canada. He is the author of a number of books and articles in the history of philosophy, the philosophy of culture, and the history of ideas (including *The Idea of Canada and the Crisis of Community*), and was principal Editor of the *International Journal of Social Economics* (UK).

Katherine Bischooping is an Associate Professor of Sociology at York University, Canada. She has published in the *Socialist Studies Bulletin*, the *Journal of Genocide Studies*, *The Canadian Journal of Higher Education*, and the *Public Opinion Quarterly*. Her latest projects are on health and safety issues in cultural work, family story-telling about the Third Reich, and the use of genre fiction to explore discourses about fear and trauma.

David Brubaker teaches at the University of New Haven, West Haven, CT., USA He holds a Ph.D. in the Philosophy of Art from the University of Illinois at Chicago, and teaches courses in philosophy, art history and studio art. He has published in *Analecta Husserliana*, *Journal of Contemporary Thought*, *Journal of Value Inquiry*, *Film and Philosophy*, and the *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*.

Jean-Nil Chabot studied at the University of Alberta and the Université Saint-Paul, and obtained a PhD in philosophy on “Suprématie de Dieu et primauté du droit” from the Université Laval. He has taught philosophy at the Seat of Wisdom Academy, Barry’s Bay, ON, and is the author of several works of fiction, including *The Redeeming of Ingeborg*, *The Triumph of Melchior Zedec*, and *Kari et le curé de Sainte-Anne*.

Mario D’Souza is Dean of Theology at St Michael’s College, University of Toronto, Canada, and is cross-appointed to ‘Theory and Policy Studies’ in the Faculty of Education. An authority on the philosophy of education of Jacques Maritain, D’Souza’s research on religion, human personality, and cultural unity has been informed by his studies in Ireland, Canada, and the United States.

David Klassen holds degrees in law and philosophy, including a PhD in Philosophy from the Catholic University of America. He is a lecturer at Corpus Christi College, University of British Columbia. He teaches philosophical anthropology and writes on humanism within western cultural traditions.

Solange Lefebvre holds degrees in social anthropology and theology and is Professeure titulaire and holder of the “Chaire religion, culture et société” at

the Université de Montréal. She is author of *Cultures et spiritualités des jeunes* (2008) and (as editor) *La religion dans la sphère publique* (2005).

Hugo Meynell taught at the University of Leeds before moving to the University of Calgary as Professor of Religious Studies. Among his books are *The Intelligible Universe: A Cosmological Argument* (1982), *The Theology of Bernard Lonergan* (1986), *Is Christianity True?* (1994), and *Postmodernism and the New Enlightenment* (1999). He is a Fellow of the Royal Society of Canada.

Sari Nusseibeh is President of Al-Quds University in Jerusalem as well as Professor of Philosophy. Founder of “Middle East Nonviolence and Democracy,” and a former Fellow of the Baker Institute for Public Policy at Rice University, he holds graduate degrees in philosophy (Oxford) and in Islamic Philosophy (Harvard), and is author of texts in philosophy as well as applied social issues, such as *Al-Hurriyyah Bayn Alhadd Wa'l Mutlaq (Absolute and Restricted Freedom)*

Uchenna Okeja studied philosophy, theology, and management in Nigeria and at the Pontifical Urban University, Rome, and is currently a PhD candidate in Philosophy at the Johann Wolfgang Goethe Universität Frankfurt am Main. His principal area of interest is on the normative grounds for a global ethic.

Riley Olstead is an Assistant Professor of Sociology at St. Francis University, Canada, and does research in the area of gender, fear and identity. Recent projects include a study of men's and women's accounts of panic.

Rajesh Shukla is Assistant Professor in the Faculty of Philosophy at Saint Paul University, Ottawa. He is a co-editor of *Technology and the Changing Face of Humanity* (2010), and has published in *Existenz*, *The Journal of East and West Thought*, and *Frontiers of Philosophy in China*.

Walter Schultz is Research Professor in the Faculty of Philosophy at the Dominican University College, in Ottawa, Canada. He also teaches and works in Program Design for the Dufferin-Peel Roman Catholic Separate School Board, Mississauga, Ontario. He is President of the Canadian Jacques Maritain Association and Editor of the journal *Etudes maritainiennes/Maritain Studies*.

Norman K. Swazo is currently Interim/Acting Dean and Professor of Philosophy and Biomedical Ethics in the College of Science and General Studies, Alfaisal University, Riyadh, Saudi Arabia. He specializes and publishes on topics in recent European philosophy, ethics in international affairs, and biomedical ethics.

## INTRODUCTION

This volume of *Philosophy, Culture, and Traditions* continues the theme of the previous issue, “Cultural Clash and Religion.” As noted in Volume 6, while the general thesis of a clash of *civilizations* has been challenged by a number of authors, it nevertheless seems plausible to claim that there are clashes of *cultures*, particularly when religion is involved.

In the previous volume, a number of papers focused on examples, from the mediaeval to the contemporary period, of cultural clash where religion had a central role. Other papers sought to provide some explanation of cultural clash – that the origins of clash might lie in epistemological or axiological presuppositions – or indicate how one might respond to apparent or real clashes.

This volume pursues the theme by looking at a number of recent discussions of ways of responding to cultural clash – particularly in the writings of Charles Taylor, Hans Küng, and Jacques Maritain. It also reviews some attempts that argue for a positive role of religion in responding to such clash. Finally, this volume contains papers in which a particular appeal is made to religion as a unifying – and not, as some would have it, a divisive – force.

The primary aim of the essays in this and the preceding volume has been to clarify the issue of cultural clash from a variety of perspectives: philosophical and religious, but also historical, sociological, theological and political. Both of these volumes seek, as well, to show some positive ways of responding to clash, and to indicate what directions further exploration of this issue might take.

The present volume contains, as well, several papers on themes which, while not directly related to the question of cultural clash, bear broadly on topics of philosophy and culture.

In “Two Ends of Practical Reason,” Hugo Meynell revisits the question, ‘Is it rational to be good?’. Meynell argues that there are two distinct ends of practical reason – general happiness and individual well-being – and that one can, in principle, be rational and pursue one of these ends in a way that is actually destructive of the good. Thus, Meynell claims, by itself – without a relation to religion – prudence and the pursuit of individual well-being can be rational, but do not suffice for morality or general happiness.

David Adam Brubaker’s article, “Faith and Flesh: Iqbal, Merleau-Ponty, and Changing Paradigms,” discusses the challenge of harmonizing the understanding of self and nature in a way that respects the scientific quest for empirically-testable knowledge and, at the same time, accepts knowledge based on introspective experience of one’s self. According to Brubaker, there are, in fact, some resources in Western European and Islamic philosophy – specifically, the work of Maurice Merleau-Ponty and Muhammad Iqbal – which meet this challenge and provide a counterinstance

to a materialist account of nature. Such views, Brubaker argues, are able to preserve the special character of our knowledge of and about the self.

In “A Durkheimian Reading of Gender and Morality in the Anonymous Letter Mystery,” Riley Olstead and Katherine Bischooping take the literary phenomenon of the ‘anonymous letter mystery’ as offering a means of understanding some problems of the moral order and the social sphere. Drawing on the work of the French sociologist Emile Durkheim, who sees moral and social life as a set of socially-ascribed ideals and purposes, the authors examine a number of these novels, and argue that these texts provide an account of moral bonds and of gender.

Rajesh Shukla (“Tolstoy, Gandhi, and the Art of Life”) considers two approaches – one from Asia, the other from Europe – on the meaningfulness of life: those of Mohandas (Mahatma) Gandhi and Leo Tolstoy, respectively. While Gandhi’s intellectual debt to Tolstoy is well-known, Shukla explores this relation and identifies important similarities in their respective accounts of meaningful life. Shukla notes that the love of others that both figures call for has its ultimate roots in God, and that this faith can properly anchor one’s life and give it sense.

Finally, in “A Meditation on Heresy and Rational Ignorance,” Norman K. Swazo considers Edwin Curley’s challenge to the free will defence to the problem of evil and, thereby, the claim that God’s permission of evil presupposes a kind of utilitarianism. Swazo asks whether Curley is right to be indignant – and, as Curley himself allows, heretical – about any justification that seeks to legitimate actions that grossly violate our sense of justice. Swazo turns to Sylvain Bromberger’s discussion of human cognitive adequacy, suggesting that human judgement (e.g., of the adequacy of a putative justification of extreme evil) cannot serve to evaluate divine action or even to raise the question ‘Why could God allow such evil?’ – and that the most that one can do is to adopt an epistemological scepticism concerning whether such a question can be answered.

In the papers in this volume of *Philosophy, Culture, and Traditions*, then, one sees the value in drawing on insights from religious and cultural traditions in addressing philosophical questions. This characteristic reflects the approach animating this journal – that religious and cultural traditions can be legitimately engaged without interfering with the autonomy of the philosophical enterprise.

William Sweet

## THE IDEA OF RELIGION AND THE CLASH OF CULTURES

Leslie Armour

In the twentieth century many people thought that religion would go away. Some thought it would be made unnecessary by the classless society and an imagined universal escape from poverty.<sup>1</sup> Others, as psychoanalysis progressed, thought it would be seen as an infantile fantasy.<sup>2</sup> Logical positivists saw it as meaningless babble. Few people expect any of this now, though those who see religious belief as incompatible with a scientific understanding of the world nurture hopes of a disappearance.<sup>3</sup>

Some who believed that religion would survive thought that the great religions – those “major religions” associated with the great civilisations – would converge into one tolerant body, not relativist, but pluralist all the same. “Civilisation” was a French invention which remains somewhat uncertain in meaning, and religions were determined to be “major” mainly by counting their adherents, but the partisans of this idea included Arnold Toynbee,<sup>4</sup> surely one of the most imaginative historians of this period, Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan (who went from being King George V Professor of Mental and Moral Science at the University of Calcutta to being Spalding Professor of Eastern Religions and Ethics at Oxford<sup>5</sup> and then went on to be the much loved president of India), and Frederick Copleston, the author of what remains the standard history of philosophy whose many volumes are still regarded as scripture by many students. These claims were historical, but metaphysical claims to the same end were made by a number of process philosophers, Alfred North Whitehead,<sup>6</sup> John Eloy Boodin,<sup>7</sup> Samuel Alexander,<sup>8</sup> Pierre Teilhard de Chardin,<sup>9</sup> and Sri Aurobindo Ghose.<sup>10</sup> Very many of them combined a related metaphysics with their own views of history.

None of them of course, denied that the religions that we know and that they wrote about clash, or that, as Anthony Kenny recently noted, the one thing we can be sure of, if we focus on doctrines as they are currently proclaimed, is that most of them must be false.<sup>11</sup> Rather, those who believed in convergence thought some process or processes now at work in the world would result in a transformation. Yet we live in a world where clashes blamed on religion involve kinds of violence that were almost unimaginable two hundred years ago. Some of them are global in scope and are hourly at the top of the news.

The thinkers who looked toward unity had a case to make, however. Teilhard de Chardin’s popularity, like that of the others, has waned, and yet in *The Future of Man*<sup>12</sup> he argued persuasively that the notion that religions are static runs counter to the major change in human thought since the sixteenth century. First, we saw that the stars change, then that earth has changed and finally that life has evolved. Boodin also argued that evolutionary change should be understood as all pervasive, involving the whole cosmos, a thesis which has gained some strength from recent debates

about changes in the laws of nature themselves. But he also argued that the changes that would bring about religious convergence would come about from the speed of education and above all, perhaps, from the transformation of work through technology which would both free people from drudgery and require for its working a more rational appraisal of the world.<sup>13</sup> To an extent Teilhard was obviously right: for the most part, where technology and education have worked together to transform daily life, tolerance has increased. The uprush in American fundamentalist intolerance in recent decades has its roots not just in parts of the South and in the hillbilly counties which had long been breeding grounds for sentiments that led to lynchings and laws against teaching evolution, but wherever the poor, oppressed, and uneducated have found themselves herded together. Admittedly Yale University graduates led the country into two disastrous wars and a Harvard graduate presided over the most disastrous war of all. They did so in the name of something like a civic religion based on free market “democracy” and a currency which has “in God We Trust” printed on it. But it is not usually Ivy League graduates and the computer-driven numerologists of Wall Street who preach exclusive salvation and see the devil in other people’s religions.

Nevertheless, Boodin and the others, of course, missed the problem of cultural lag – our knowledge of the hard sciences so far outstrips our social understanding that we are often left feeling powerless in the face of what seem to be quite simple human problems, like providing Americans with the kind of health care Britons and Canadians and millions more take as the minimum human beings should expect.

It is this, I will argue, that is at the heart of the paradox I want to discuss in this paper. Yet we must start with the fact that, for the most part, the major religions have remained fixed on the notion that a revelation received in a rather distant past was sufficient. Never mind that it was given to people in very different cultures with very different notions of what constitutes knowledge and very different expectations about evidence and argument.

This is distinctly odd. One might think that an infinite God would have an infinity of things to reveal as circumstances demanded and in fact most religions think that revelations did not occur all at once. Christians believe that the ancient Jewish religion has not been superseded but absorbed into a better revelation. Muslims accept that Jesus added to the religions of the book but maintain that Mohammed added something too. For most of them the story ends there. The followers of Joseph Smith, who think that celestial beings brought news to him in upstate New York, believe that Mormonism is nearly complete although they have allowed that successive presidents of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints have received some significant news since.<sup>14</sup> Baha’is, who seem to be the most hated believers in Iran these days, suppose there was yet another prophet. Their direct descent is through the older “religions of the book” though they also claim to be the heirs of Zoroaster, Krishna, and the Buddha.



Buddhism has undergone continuous changes, though some Buddhists swear by the oldest brand. Somewhat exceptionally, Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan was willing to see Hinduism as a work in progress. Still, in *The Hindu View of Life* he does not mention the caste system and much else that impedes change and figures in disputes in which people are thrown out of train windows.

Despite all this, the partisans of convergence are generally right about the logical implications of the historical processes that interested them both in their own terms and in the light of what seem to be persuasive philosophical reasons. Polytheisms have tended to be replaced by monotheisms or by belief in some great Absolute like the Hindu Brahman entwined with Atman which is expressed in the human spirit. Buddhists went beyond all gods, though the gods have tended to sneak back, most richly in the immensely popular Pure Land version in China which holds, like the followers of Joseph Smith, that each human being might become a god.<sup>15</sup> One might think that the God of the Christian mystics is not very far from the Hindu Brahman and that the perfectly unified Allah of the Koran would find little strangeness in either. But one must remember the fierce old woman I found waving a Bible in Petticoat Lane Market in London one Sunday morning. She shouted “Allah is not God” while a cluster of stall holders, clearly friends of Allah, shouted back “yes, he is.” I know what the stall holders were thinking. I wonder what the old lady with the Bible was thinking.

I think one can easily enough see what impedes the realisation of the hopes major thinkers and a good many market stall holders share. To know if anything comes of what we see, we first need to think about the nature of religion.

## **ORIENTATION AND THE NATURE OF RELIGION**

Religious practices and rituals have been – and are – put to many uses: few people now believe they can make it rain or cause their enemies to break out in boils. Roman Catholics who go to mass believe that the bread and wine are transformed into the body and blood of Jesus. Hindus sometimes refer to Christianity as the “cannibal religion,” but I suspect that relatively few Catholics are now simple literalists about the transformation into flesh and blood. They think, no doubt, that the sacraments unite them with a spiritual reality<sup>16</sup> and with each other, and so the Church authorities often express concern about outsiders who take part in the communion. The joint participation in a reality not evident to outsiders brings partakers together – and so it is very generally with religious rituals. The dark side of this is that it is an occasion of separation – to be bound together against all others is to invite confrontation.

The heart of the event, though, is a sense of orientation – one declares oneself bound to a reality which provides directions to one’s life. If this is not to lead to disaster, the bonding must be to a reality which is

potentially inclusive. Orientation is the basic concern of religion, bonding is an outcome which can be used for good and ill. And so one must look at orientation carefully. Its aim is to give one a goal and a direction. It can only take place without bonding oneself to others if the goal is one that can be reached alone. The center of many strands of the Protestant Reformation was a shift from a collective responsibility to spiritual reality through the church to an individual relationship with a God precisely defined and quite separate from other spiritual realities. The effect of Protestantism, however, was to stimulate the urge to be bonded through the state or other institutions. The result was often a disorientation which resulted from loyalties to potentially conflicting realities.

The immediate questions which occur when one asks about such things are: do people really need orientation? What could satisfy the need? Will what satisfies the need be something which unites everyone as that wide swath of thinkers from Arnold Toynbee to Teilhard de Chardin thought, or will it more likely be something which binds people together in confrontational groups? What, indeed, counts as a source of orientation and could any orientation work adequately for human beings?

Aristotle noticed that we are not like the bees and Marx observed that we are not like the beavers. We do not come equipped with a genetic plan which adequately shapes our lives. We have to be educated in order to survive. In reality, we are faced daily with indefinitely many choices. Our lives can be mapped in terms of "life chances" as Ralf Dahrendorf explained.<sup>17</sup> Not everything is open to everyone all the time, but in the narrowest life there remain indefinitely many choices in the course of a day. So, yes, we do need orientation; we look for some aim. Finding food, staying warm, keeping a mate, staying alive, coping with one's children, doing one's daily job, seeking entertainment, fill one's day. But somehow these activities need to be co-coordinated and priorities set. If there is no overall orientation, life becomes full of frustrations and one seems to drift with the tide. It seems unlikely that anyone has ever gone for long without attempting some broader orientation.

Whatever this determining structure turns out to be it is likely to be something which has some of the properties of a religion. We hear it said that some people turn money-making into a religion, and this is not quite a joke. Others seem dominated by the search for some bearable state of mind. We do not know how many people who are "addicted" to drugs, gambling, and sex are in fact searching for a state of mind in which things will fall into place. Mind and body tend to work together, of course. Some things may be addicting because they involve a chemical change in the body, others may be addicting because the body becomes used to what the mind finds satisfying, and debates about which is which are not always susceptible to easy settlement.

What does emerge, however, is that most kinds of overall orientation would have a tendency to self-destruction if they were pursued widely. One needs possessions to live but the unobstructed pursuit of

possessions must, if successful, lead to social division. The capitalist who tries to master the whole world would, if he succeeded, possess all the wealth and everyone else would be bereft. At some point he must tame his possessiveness in order to maintain his customers. The search for special states of mind – whether by drug taking or whatever – leads to an inward focus which eventually cuts one off from the community while leaving one dependent on it. As a mainly mental exercise it has been recommended for saints, but is absurd for everyone. Solitary sainthood as much as drug induced states of mind tend eventually to separate one from the commonly perceived reality. Solitary saints may seek this but such solitude has never been pursued widely. The widespread pursuit of drug-induced states of mind leads communities to call for more policemen.

Of course there are more promising projects. The modest programme traditionally offered by hedonists is one, and the pursuit of general wisdom is another. But the minimisation of pain and maximisation of pleasure turns out, as F. H. Bradley noticed,<sup>18</sup> to be logically absurd. Pleasures cannot be aggregated like piles of coal, for one tends to crowd out another. Nor does the maximisation of pleasure amount to anything. Just as there is no largest possible pile of coal so there is no maximum of pleasure. The pursuit of a generalised wisdom sounds much better. But it merely begs the question. The wisdom would be, after all, an understanding of the universe. But that is a statement of a necessary condition for genuine orientation, not an account of orientation.

At any rate, every functioning and functional orientation is both objective and tied to decision-making states of mind even if these change from time to time and even if their objective is something pedestrian like balancing pleasure and pain. Such an orientation is tied to the mind that it directs and it does not hold sway over other minds unless others make the same choice.

Grasping the way in which orientation bears upon, indeed shades into, and becomes central for religion may show us the essential point of religious tolerance. It may also help us to understand why our religious discourse needs to be shaped so that we can try to share our grounds of conviction with others – and yet, equally, why it is that organised religions tend to be fissiparous. Where orthodoxy is demanded, there is always a struggle to maintain it.

This suggests a deeper enquiry into the idea of an ultimate orientation. An obvious example of an orienting notion is the concept of God. I shall argue that this, understood in a certain way, has a good deal in common with *any* ultimate orientation which is likely to succeed. It is, that is, connected to successful orientation if the notion of God is taken to include the idea of an infinite mind, capable of infinite goodness, capable of entering into a direct relation with finite minds such as ours and capable of facilitating, through a shared experience, the optimization of goodness in any actually possible world.<sup>19</sup>