



# Introduction

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The collection of essays to follow looks at the role of God in the work of major thinkers in modernity. The philosophers of this period are, by and large, not orthodox theists; they are freethinkers, emancipated by an age no longer tethered to the authority of church and state. This side of the story, which portrays the great minds of Western thought as cutting ties with the sacred and moving increasingly toward the secular, has received ample attention in classrooms and throughout the literature. The essays in this volume, however, are united around the belief that this is only one side of an even more complex and diverse story (or, more exactly, collection of stories), and that treating this side as the whole story, as is often done, hopelessly distorts the truth of the matter. The flipside of the story is about theologically astute, enlightened philosophers, bent not on removing God from philosophy but on putting faith and reason on more sure footing in light of advancements in science and a felt need to rethink the relationship between God and world. This book is focused on this oft-ignored side of the story—that is, the theologically affirmative dimensions of major philosophical figures stretching from René Descartes to Søren Kierkegaard. Our purpose is to help halt and indeed reverse the slow

secularization of the respective philosophical positions in modernity, a secularization that has been mounting over the last two hundred years.

Before we begin unpacking the specific nature and aims of the essays to follow, a word about our use of terms is in order. In employing the cluster of terms *modern*, *modernity*, and *modern thought* to describe the period covered in this book, we are intentionally using broad brushstrokes as we strive to capture an overarching understanding of a key interval in Western thought. What we do not claim to offer is any kind of precise social or political history. In other words, this volume is directed more toward the history of ideas and the specific “thought-world” of each individual philosopher than toward any sort of empirical history of philosophy or philosophical movements. The terms *modernity* and *modern thought*, as we will use them, thus cover not only the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries but also large chunks of the centuries just before and after them. In other words, we use the terms *modernity* and *modern thought* to refer to the entire “Age of Reason,” or the period of thought from roughly Descartes, Hobbes, and Pascal all the way to Fichte, Schelling, and Hegel. More will be said regarding the beginning and ending of this period below. For now, it will suffice to say that this period is singularly significant in the history of ideas for its wealth of freethinking individuals, its epoch-making philosophical systems, and its initiation of a comprehensive set of challenges to orthodox standards.

Another cluster of terms that will attract a large share of our attention throughout are *secular*, *secularism*, and *secularization*. Harvey Cox is quite right in noting that “the word ‘secularization’ retains vague and fuzzy overtones. Despite its usefulness as a ‘hinge category,’ opening a door for discussion among theologians, sociologists, literary critics, historians, and others, the word often seems slippery and imprecise.”<sup>1</sup> The term *secularization* has been used to indicate everything from mere modernization to antireligious modernization and has been applied to an even wider range of cultural and intellectual human activities.<sup>2</sup> While a *sacred/secular* distinction can be used to indicate a profound difference in how peoples approach the world, as it does in Mircea Eliade’s *The Sacred and the Profane*,<sup>3</sup> *secular* need not connote “contrary or opposed to the sacred.” In the wide or generic sense, it may merely indicate

something outside the religious sphere.<sup>4</sup> The contributors to this volume acknowledge this point. Be that as it may, *secular* in the academy in general and philosophy in specific often means something more than merely the mundane or nonreligious. And this more restrictive definition of *secular* or *secularization* will be used in this book.

Many of the thinkers covered in this volume, though by no means all of them, can be described as secular in the wide or generic sense. Most, for example, stand somewhere outside the standard orthodox conceptions of Christianity (or, in the case of Baruch de Spinoza, Judaism). What is at issue is not whether one or another of these thinkers is an orthodox religious adherent—most were not—but whether it is possible or desirable to understand the respective philosophy outside of the religiously and theologically affirmative position each philosopher maintains. In other words, the term *secularization*, as we will be using it, signifies the tendency of interpreters after the modern period to downplay, extract, hinder, or otherwise work contrary to the religious and theological dimensions of modern thinkers, regardless of the significance of such dimensions for a proper understanding of these thinkers. *Secularization*, in this sense, is a revisionist approach to the history of ideas, where philosophers are recast and repackaged as agnostics, skeptics, or atheists, antithetical to religion and theology, regardless of whether this portrait captures the actual contours of the given figure's visage.

Understood in the above way, the phenomenon of secularization is no chimera. As a movement, it is traceable to an assemblage of post-Hegel academics who made the removal of God and metaphysics a seminal part of their public agenda. The works of Friedrich Nietzsche, Ludwig Feuerbach, and Karl Marx are well-known examples. Nietzsche, capitalizing on the work of Schopenhauer, rejected the idea that anything lies behind the physical world other than the “will to power”; Feuerbach reasoned that the very notion of God is nothing more than a projection of human characteristics and desires; and Marx's take on religion completed the movement toward a secularized *Weltanschauung*, begun by Nietzsche and Feuerbach. Such left-Hegelians, as Peter Hodgson puts it, “anthropologize[d] the synthesis [of nature and spirit in Hegel], transferring it from *Geist* to man—to man not as an individual but as a species essence (*Gattungswesen*).”<sup>5</sup>

The secularization push is not restricted to philosophy, however. We find in the wider academic sphere persons such as F.W. Newman and George Jacob Holyoake. Newman writes in his essay “Programme of Freethought Societies” that “secularism accepts no authority but that of Nature, adopts no methods but those of science and philosophy, and respects in practice no rule but that of the conscience, illustrated by the common sense of mankind.” For him, “[Secularism] utterly disowns tradition as the ground of belief, whether miracles and supernaturalism be claimed or not claimed on its side. No sacred scripture or ancient church can be made the basis of belief.”<sup>6</sup> Holyoake puts flesh on Newman’s position by methodically presenting the principles of secularization. According to Holyoake, “The leading ideas of Secularism are humanism, moralism, materialism, [and] utilitarian unity: Humanism, the physical perfection of this life—Moralism, founded on the laws of Nature, as the guidance of this life—Materialism, as the means of Nature for the Secular improvement of this life—Unity of thought and action upon these practical grounds.”<sup>7</sup> Holyoake takes the “distinctive peculiarity” of the secularist to be the conviction that this program constitutes “a religiousness to which the idea of God is not essential, nor the denial of the idea necessary.”<sup>8</sup> God may not be known to be dead in this brand of secularism, but he is hopelessly irrelevant in the academic arena.

Perhaps the most extreme brand of secularization, however, appears in the work of Leo Strauss (and his followers). Strauss’s form of secularization employs a hermeneutic of suspicion, which presumes that Descartes and Kant merely started the ball rolling, as it were, with regard to their respective shifts away from the settled religious orthodoxies and orthopraxis of their day. Thus, if we are to read them rightly, we must presume that all theological or religious talk found in their work is either lingering European bias toward Christianity; juvenile inability to shake watchful specters and angels looming overhead since catechesis; or merely an evasive maneuver meant to throw off censors in an effort to get their views published. We can be certain, however, that all the while they proceeded in faith that those who followed after them would take these thoughts down the slippery slope they intended toward agnosticism, skepticism, and atheism. We cannot therefore proceed with historical business as usual when reading such

figures, argues Strauss, but must employ an esoteric reading of philosophical texts, recognizing that the given philosopher's true position is always between the lines and contrary to the orthodoxies of the day. As Strauss puts it:

If it is true that there is a necessary correlation between persecution and writing between the lines, then there is a necessary negative criterion: that the book in question must have been composed in an era of persecution, that is, at a time when some political or other orthodoxy was enforced by law or custom. One positive criterion is this: if an able writer who has a clear mind and a perfect knowledge of the orthodox view and all its ramifications, contradicts surreptitiously and as it were in passing one of its necessary presuppositions or consequences which he explicitly recognizes and maintains everywhere else, we can reasonably suspect that he was opposed to the orthodox system as such and—we must study his whole book all over again, with much greater care and much less naïveté than ever before. In some cases, we possess even explicit evidence proving that the author has indicated his views on the most important subjects only between the lines.<sup>9</sup>

In the case of Strauss, this hermeneutic of suspicion should never stop with modernity but should work backwards through the whole of philosophical history. For “a glance at the biographies of Anaxagoras, Protagoras, Socrates, Plato, Xenophon, Aristotle, Avicenna, Averroes, Maimonides, Grotius, Descartes, Hobbes, Spinoza, Locke, Bayle, Wolff, Montesquieu, Voltaire, Rousseau, Lessing and Kant, and in some cases even a glance at the title pages of their books, is sufficient to show that they witnessed or suffered, during at least part of their lifetimes, a kind of persecution which was more tangible than social ostracism.”<sup>10</sup> In the end, charity bids us not to take the claims of such thinkers at face value but to trust that the philosophical giants of Western thought were far too advanced in their thinking to truly embrace the opiate of the masses.

The current volume is meant to push back the secularization of modern thought, embodied in figures such as Strauss, a secularization that has been advancing ever since the great works of modernity were

first written. By highlighting and, in many cases, defending the theologically affirmative dimensions of thinkers such as Thomas Hobbes, Gottfried Leibniz, John Locke, Immanuel Kant, F. W. J. Schelling, and G. W. F. Hegel, in the face of contemporary understandings with needlessly negative emphases, this book presents a substantial counterbalance to the secularizing trend and a timely correction of deeply held misperceptions about this crucial period of Western thought. Many, if not most, of these thinkers drink deeply from the well of Judeo-Christian thought and indeed hold a measurable array of religious convictions that inform and, at times, dictate the rest of their work.

To be sure, our collective concern here is not to defend Christianity or any other historical faith through the figures discussed in this volume. Nor is our concern to commend these thinkers' respective theologies or personal religious outlooks. Moreover, in suggesting that the figures discussed in this collection are more theologically affirmative than typically supposed, we are not suggesting that the types of theology they affirm are in anyway faithful to a certain historical orthodoxy—be it Christian or otherwise. No doubt the respective theologies represented in this collection are, in most cases, innovative. What we do intend to demonstrate, however, is that the very significant theological dimensions discussed in this volume, whether orthodox or heterodox, are of great importance to the figures discussed here, and that if these theological dimensions are downplayed, ignored, or otherwise removed, then a proper understanding of these figures has been lost. Hence, this collection presents an array of essays from top scholars in their respective fields of research, united by the conviction that the increasingly secular portrayals of the patriarchs of modernity—portrayals that seek to downplay or remove theologically affirmative elements—are in desperate need of revision.

The field of Kant studies, from which the editors came to approach this volume, provides an excellent example of both the secularizing tendency in the study of modern thought with which this book takes issue and the positive developments that can occur when these secularizing tendencies are resisted. *Kant and the New Philosophy of Religion* (2006) makes the case that there are essentially two interpretive trends regarding Kant's philosophy of religion in the field of Kant

studies.<sup>11</sup> One trend is principally negative toward religion and theology, while the other affirms the religious and theological dimensions of Kant's thought. For ease of reference, the editors of *Kant and the New Philosophy of Religion* call these two trends "traditional" interpretations and "affirmative" interpretations.

Interpretations designated "traditional" are primarily negative in their assessment of the prospects of grounding religion and theology in the Kantian paradigm. Traditional interpreters have a wide range of positions on the place of God in Kant's philosophy. Some, such as Allen Wood and Denis Savage, argue that Kant's philosophy is deistic;<sup>12</sup> others, including Keith Ward and Don Cupitt, think it is most amenable to theological nonrealism;<sup>13</sup> and still others, such as Matthew Alun Ray and Yirmiahu Yovel, argue that it supports either agnosticism or atheism but nothing more.<sup>14</sup> Despite differences on the exact nuances, all these interpreters agree that Kant's philosophy works decidedly against those who would seek to gain a foothold for religion and theology in reason. And, at the end of the day, these interpreters conclude that Kant's philosophy of religion offers no real help in overcoming the essentially negative thrust of his theoretical philosophy. Kant understood traditionally is a thoroughly secular Kant. He is an agnostic, atheist, deist, or nonrealist, and, so the argument goes, to suggest anything more is to go beyond the parameters of what his "central" corpus will allow.<sup>15</sup>

Contrary to their negative counterparts, theologically affirmative interpretations of Kant typically hold that Kant's philosophy provides a rationale for God-talk and religious faith. But the case cannot be made without looking beyond the *Critique of Pure Reason*, and sometimes to Kant's writings both before and after 1781. Affirmative readers usually make it a point to capture a sense of the whole of Kant's philosophical enterprise—something that is lost when too strong an emphasis is placed on the first half of the *Critique of Pure Reason* and those aspects of Kant's writings that support its chastening of theology.

The arguments articulated and defended by these theologically affirmative interpreters vary greatly, but all within this camp agree that theological affirmation, though diverse in substance and form, is the real legacy of Kant. Ronald Green, Ann Loades, Stephen Palmquist,

Adina Davidovich, John Hare, Elizabeth Galbraith, and others have therefore argued that traditional interpretive approaches to Kant on religion and theology are wholly inadequate.<sup>16</sup> To the extent that the affirmative camp is right, traditional interpretations are either short-sighted or negligent. They miss either the plethora of positive resources in Kant's philosophy for grounding religion and theology or the opportunities for understanding these resources as genuine contributions to the critical philosophy.

The conclusion in *Kant and the New Philosophy of Religion* regarding these interpretive trends is that these traditional renderings of Kant constitute the "largest unified minority report" on how to interpret Kant's philosophy of religion but that, when all relevant data are considered, these renderings represent neither the majority in the field of Kant studies nor the most accurate interpretation of Kant on religion and theology. Thus the hermeneutic superstructure of the traditional interpretation is in need of renovation, and the basis for an affirmative grounding of religion and theology in Kant's philosophy needs to be more adequately articulated.

*In Defense of Kant's Religion* (2008) is the attempt by the editors of this book to follow up on the strides taken in *Kant and the New Philosophy of Religion*.<sup>17</sup> There we argue that a careful and charitable understanding of Kant's critical philosophy unlocks his main text on religion, *Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason*. Set in the context of a civil trial that considers arguments from both traditional and affirmative camps, we call forward witnesses from each side in order to draw out the best evidence for and against the cogency of Kant's philosophy of religion. In dialogue with expert testimony, we develop an interpretation that sheds new light on Kant's *Religion* and, in so doing, seek to exonerate the text from the charges of incoherence leveled by its critics.

Among Kant's chief critics is Nicholas Wolterstorff. In essays such as "Conundrums in Kant's Rational Religion" and "Is it Possible or Desirable for Theologians to Recover from Kant?," Wolterstorff is highly critical of Kant's philosophy of religion and equally skeptical of its usefulness for the theological enterprise. In writing *In Defense of Kant's Religion*, we approached Wolterstorff with the thesis that Kant's thought had been unduly secularized and that a more careful reading

of the relevant texts would show his work to be not only coherent but more positive toward religion and theology than typically supposed. Although skeptical, Wolterstorff read the finished manuscript and committed to writing its foreword. He was convinced that the research had merit, solved most, if not all, the conundrums in the text, and offered the best available reading in the literature.<sup>18</sup>

What emerges in the process of our exposition is a Kant very different from the secular one presented by the traditional camp. To use Wolterstorff's words, this Kant is "more metaphysical, more willing to engage in speculative theology, less dismissive of actual religion."<sup>19</sup> Although the verdict is still out on exactly how best to understand Kant's philosophy of religion and its relationship to theology, the theologically negative trend in Kant studies, both through our study and through numerous others emerging in the field, is beginning to be undone. Patient acceptance of the secularized standard is waning, and, with it, the stigma formerly associated with interpreters who take religion and theology to be of central importance to getting Kant right. Kant's philosophy of religion is now taken seriously in a way that it was not formerly. Reading Kant well, for a growing number of scholars, means having a clear picture of how Kant's philosophy of religion and religious convictions fit in with his philosophical system as a whole.

What is clear from the above account is that scholars are beginning to notice what has been lost in the traditional or religiously and theologically negative understanding of Kant's thought. The whole thrust of Kant's work in denying the dogmatist and skeptic is to put faith in better, more rational light, not worse. The fact that his position is difficult or undesirable to some is no reason to dismiss it, downplay it, or otherwise circumvent it when trying to understand him. Without question, more work needs to be done, but certainly over the last thirty-five years a "new wave" of Kant interpretation has been building and is having a considerable impact on Kant studies today.<sup>20</sup>

In view of these developments in Kant studies, the editors of this volume took up the question: *Is Kant the only philosopher of the period who has been subject to the relentless effect of the secularizing trend?* With this question in hand, we began to approach top scholars in the various fields within the study of modern thought. Among the first approached

was Wolterstorff. Convinced that the Straussians in particular had damaged the common understanding of John Locke's philosophy, Wolterstorff agreed to contribute an essay on Locke. He then encouraged us to continue pursuing this question of secularization with notable scholars focusing on other modern figures. As we approached these scholars, we found resounding agreement that the current project was a necessary and timely one.

Soon, there was a chorus of desecularizing voices that now echo throughout this volume. We were delighted to hear this resonance from such top scholars as Peter Hodgson (in reference to Hegel) and John Cottingham (in reference to Descartes), both of whom were contacted early on in the project and immediately agreed to contribute. The manifold support came so swiftly that within one month's time we had the full fifteen contributors. In fact, we had to decide early on to limit the number of contributions to fifteen, as there had been such interest that the collection threatened to grow to nearly twenty-five essays. The collective understanding of these fifteen contributors is that each figure discussed in this volume has been, in a word, secularized. Put bluntly, the significance of God to modern thought has gone missing in action, and what these contributors have done on behalf of their respective fields is raise the flag of awareness by writing groundbreaking new essays that demonstrate persuasively the persistence of the sacred in modern thought.

As a work in the history of ideas, this volume is organized around a figure-based approach. Authors have sought to assess the state of their respective fields under the theme of secularization and to make an argument for the significance of God to a proper understanding of the figure in question. There is no attempt on the part of contributors to override in a comprehensive fashion the effects of secularization in their subject areas. Instead, each essay represents an argument meant to stake a significant claim counter to the secularizing trend described above and to do so in such a way as to offer a genuine contribution to the given field of study. These two features—staking a claim counter to the secularized reading and making a genuine contribution to the given field—were indeed the litmus test for inclusion in this volume.

Essays have been ordered more or less chronologically rather than thematically. But we have stepped outside the bounds of convention in at least one way that requires some explanation: we have decided to include Søren Kierkegaard in this collection. The reason is this. One prominent way of thinking about philosophy after modernity is to see it as dividing into two streams—one secular and antimetaphysical and the other theistic and metaphysical (in the distinctly post-Kantian sense of these terms). The existentialists, Nietzsche and Kierkegaard, are the two fountainheads—one atheistic and one Christian—of these *post*-modernist movements. But the secularized rendering of modern thought does not stop with Hegel; it proceeds, rather remarkably, in an effort to devour the Great Dane of nineteenth-century Christendom. Thus Myron Penner's essay on Kierkegaard is included as a concluding unscientific, indeed antiseccularist, postscript that addresses this secular push.

Now, the theologically affirmative dimensions drawn out in this volume are varied and in no way uniform. Cottingham (on Descartes) and Hodgson (on Hegel) argue that God is so central to their respective figures' thought that to remove or bracket this feature is to do systematic violence to their respective philosophies; Firestone (on Kant) and Mariña (on Schleiermacher) contend that to treat the theistic component of these respective thinkers' thought along nonrealist lines is at odds with a careful reading of their respective arguments; Clayton (on Spinoza) and Hardy (on Hume) demonstrate that these so-called atheists retain a certain belief in God, even if they reject theologies with greater likeness to Christian orthodoxy; Jacobs (on Leibniz) and Adams (on Schelling) suggest that the lack of theological depth on the part of most philosophical interpreters is in many ways to blame for the distorted and theologically truncated readings of these respective figures; Martinich (on Hobbes) and Snobelen (on Newton) dispel common antitheistic myths regarding these respective figures via careful scrutiny of primary sources; and Wolterstorff (on Locke) and Bost (on Bayle) demonstrate that the apparent dissonance between these respective figures' theological profession and philosophical treatises is better explained by their respective methods than by a hermeneutic of suspicion along Straussian lines.

It would be too cumbersome to review the details of each argument leveled in this volume. Nevertheless, in the course of compiling the research contained here, a number of preliminary conclusions have come to the fore regarding modern thought and its secularization. The following list is not exhaustive, but it does represent eight major themes found throughout the fifteen essays that are especially significant for the desecularizing process and may help lay the groundwork for demonstrating the persistence of the sacred in modern thought:

1. There are in fact no atheists among the modern figures discussed in this volume; those accused of such positions are either heterodox or thin moral theists.
2. The disciplinary rift between philosophy and theology, and the secularizing of the former, have contributed to an increasingly distorted understanding of modern figures who did not divorce these spheres and indeed knew each far better than many specialists do today.
3. Contemporary academics are prone toward specialization, which enables them to compartmentalize their thinking in a way that the systematizing and unifying thinkers of modernity did not.
4. Modern philosophers thought it possible to respect the disciplinary limitations placed on the philosophical sphere without abandoning personal faith commitments that rest on things outside that sphere.
5. Because labels are often given by opponents of a given thinker, not—or at least not initially—by historians proper, these polemical labels can often stick and ultimately distort the actual intent of the given thinker.
6. As terms and presuppositions change and are combined with the polemical aims of new movements, the potential for misinterpretation based on “standard” labels increases exponentially.
7. Secularizing readings are often agenda-driven revisionist histories that retroactively interpret the aims of a figure on the basis of the significance of his thought to where his followers have taken it, rather than on detailed analysis of the philosopher himself.

8. In light of the potential for agenda-driven misinterpretation, past or present, careful textual analysis is required so as to avoid perpetual misreading.

Certainly these overarching conclusions are not the whole of what is discussed within this volume. The secularization of each figure has a narrative all its own. However, the above eight conclusions represent a common thread found to run through the discussions of several of the figures treated here and thus offer some common themes to their respective secularizing narratives. Our hope is that, in identifying and discrediting these common disservices to some of the main figures of modernity, we will demonstrate the persistence of the sacred in modern thought.

## Notes

1. Harvey Cox, foreword to *Secularization and the University*, by Harry E. Smith (Richmond, VA: John Knox Press, 1968), 9.

2. See, e.g., *Rethinking Secularization: Reformed Reactions to Modernity*, ed. Gerard Dekker, Donald A. Luidens, and Rodger R. Rice (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1997), 1–2.

3. Mircea Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane: The Nature of Religion*, trans. Willard R. Trask (Orlando, FL: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1987), 10.

4. Cf., e.g., Alvin Plantinga, “Science and Religion: Why Does the Debate Continue?,” in *The Religion and Science Debate: Why Does It Continue?*, ed. Harold W. Attridge (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009), 94.

5. See chapter 14 of this book, Peter C. Hodgson’s “Hegel and Secularization.”

6. F.W. Newman, “Programme of Freethought Societies,” *Reasoner*, no. 388, n.d., n.p., quoted in George Jacob Holyoake’s *The Principles of Secularism Illustrated*, 3rd ed. (London: Book Store, 1871), 15.

7. Holyoake, *Principles*, 28.

8. Holyoake, *Principles*, 12.

9. Leo Strauss, *Persecution and the Art of Writing* (Glencoe, IL: Free Press, 1952), 31–32.

10. Strauss, *Persecution*, 33.

11. *Kant and the New Philosophy of Religion*, ed. Chris L. Firestone and Stephen R. Palmquist (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2006).

12. See Allen W. Wood, “Kant’s Deism,” and Denis Savage, “Kant’s Rejection of Divine Revelation and His Theory of Radical Evil,” both in *Kant’s Philosophy of Religion Reconsidered*, ed. Philip J. Rossi and Michael W. Wreen (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991), 1–20 and 54–76, respectively.

13. See Keith Ward, *The Development of Kant’s View of Ethics* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1972), and Don Cupitt, “Kant and the Negative Theology,” in *The Philosophical Frontiers of Christian Theology: Essays Presented to D. M. MacKinnon*, ed. Brian Hebblethwaite and Stewart Sutherland (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), 55–67.

14. See Matthew Alun Rayn, *Subjectivity and Irreligion: Atheism and Agnosticism in Kant, Schopenhauer, and Nietzsche* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2003). See also Yirmiahu Yovel, *Kant and the Philosophy of History* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980).

15. For a thorough summary of these theological positions in the realm of Kant studies, see Chris L. Firestone, *Kant and Theology at the Boundaries of Reason* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2009).

16. Adina Davidovich, *Religion as a Province of Meaning: The Kantian Foundations of Modern Theology* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1993); Elizabeth Cameron Galbraith, *Kant and Theology: Was Kant a Closet Theologian?* (San Francisco: International Scholars Publications, 1996); Ronald M. Green, *Religious Reason: The Rational and Moral Basis of Religious Belief* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978) and *Religion and Moral Reason: A New Method for Comparative Study* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988); John E. Hare, *The Moral Gap: Kantian Ethics, Human Limits, and God’s Assistance* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996); Ann L. Loades, *Kant and Job’s Comforters* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Avevo Publications, 1985); and Stephen R. Palmquist, *Kant’s System of Perspectives* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1993) and *Kant’s Critical Religion* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2000).

17. Chris L. Firestone and Nathan Jacobs, *In Defense of Kant’s Religion* (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2008).

18. See Nicholas Wolterstorff, foreword to Firestone and Jacobs, *In Defense*, xi–xii.

19. Wolterstorff, foreword, xii.

20. Talk of a “new wave” of Kant interpretation is drawn from Keith Yandell, who uses this term when identifying interpreters of these stripes as “new wavers.” See Keith Yandell, “Who Is the True Kant?,” *Philosophia Christi* 9, no. 1 (2007): 81–97.

## The Desecularization of Descartes

JOHN COTTINGHAM

It is striking that Descartes is not generally treated in the anglophone academy as a Christian philosopher, in the manner of Augustine, say, or Thomas Aquinas; indeed, he is generally presented in textbooks in a way that systematically downplays the religious dimension of his thought. Descartes, as the cliché has it, was the “father of *modern* philosophy”; and modern philosophy, as we all know, is a secular subject, long since emancipated from its medieval servitude to theology. Most modern analytic philosophers steer clear of God, and many are committed to an explicitly naturalistic outlook. Descartes is principally studied, in countless Introduction to Philosophy courses, for what he has to say about topics of interest to modern “mainstream” philosophy, such as the basis of knowledge, the nature of the mind, the structure of science, language and meaning; and should his writings from time to time include reference to God, this tends to be regarded as cumbersome baggage that his philosophical outlook would really be better off jettisoning, if it could only manage to do so, rather than as the vital and indispensable core of the system.<sup>1</sup> Of course, most students who have studied Descartes know that he provides “proofs” for God’s existence, and as part of their work they may be expected to expound and criticize his arguments in the Third and Fifth Meditations. But such texts are often treated as little more than target practice

(offering the chance to show how great philosophers can produce flawed reasoning). They may be required reading for an exam designed to test knowledge of the *Meditations*, but they are apt to be taught as something that can be forgotten with relief when one comes to what are taken to be the more important and philosophically interesting questions in the *Meditations*, such as the dreaming argument, the logic of the *Cogito*, or the relation between mind and body.

There is, perhaps, nothing intrinsically wrong with such selectivity in the teaching of the history of philosophy. It is understandable that an instructor, in expounding any great canonical philosopher of the past, would wish to give special attention to the arguments and theses that seem most relevant to current concerns. But there are dangers. Filleting a fish can make it more presentable for the dinner table, but it also involves discarding the very structure that once gave strength, shape, and stability to the living organism. Most philosophers, I think, would concede that to attempt to teach Aquinas's philosophy without attending to the centrality of God in his thought would create impossible distortions. In this paper, I want to explore the various ways in which this is also true of Descartes. I shall begin by looking at the role of God in Descartes's scientific work and shall then move on to a more general exploration of the way in which Descartes's theism pervades his entire philosophical outlook.

### Science, Systematicity, and Completeness

A striking feature of Cartesian thought sets it apart from a great deal of current philosophy, namely, its systematicity and unity. The hyper-specialization of modern academic philosophy has involved a greater and greater fragmenting of the subject into separate compartments,<sup>2</sup> so that the practitioner of philosophy of mind, say, is so involved in technical debates in his or her special area that he or she has little time or inclination to attend a seminar on, say, ethics or the philosophy of science. Such compartmentalization would have been anathema to Descartes. Indeed, it is plausible that, were he alive today, he would see today's philosophical scene as a reversion to the scholasticism that he

regarded as his life's work to combat. When he promoted his own vision of philosophy as an organic unity, he was partly reacting against the scholastic conception of knowledge as a series of specialities, each with its own methods and standards.<sup>3</sup> In his famous arboreal metaphor, he sees the whole of his scientific system (which includes medicine, mechanics, and morals) as a series of branches growing out of the single trunk of physics.<sup>4</sup> This implies, for Descartes, that the kind of understanding involved in each case is ultimately based on a uniform mathematical template involving "order and measure," as he explains in his early work, the *Regulae*: "I came to see that the exclusive concern of mathematics is with questions of order of measure, and that it is irrelevant whether the measure in question involves numbers, shapes, stars, sounds, or any other object whatever. This made me realize that there must be a general science which explains all the points that can be raised concerning order and measure irrespective of the subject-matter, and that this science should be called *mathesis universalis*—a venerable term with a well-established meaning, for it covers everything that entitles these other sciences to be called branches of mathematics."<sup>5</sup> Cartesian science, then, is unified, insofar as it operates with formal, in principle mathematically describable, proportions and ratios. So here is a first level of unification. But there is a deeper level of organic unity, which Descartes goes on to express by saying that the unified trunk of physics itself grows out of metaphysical roots. What precisely does this mean, and why does it involve God?

A standard answer would be that Descartes's mathematically based science involves "clear and distinct ideas"—for example, ideas of quantity and extension and motion—and that Descartes wanted to provide metaphysical foundations for this science by showing that our grasp of these fundamental building blocks of science is reliable. To establish this, he was obliged to venture into the murky domain of theism, eventually wheeling in God as the guarantor of our clear and distinct ideas. This was the view, for example, of the great Cartesian editor Charles Adam,<sup>6</sup> and it more or less corresponds to how most modern anglophone philosophers read Descartes's *Meditations*.<sup>7</sup> The idea, put crudely, is that when Descartes came to write the *Meditations*, having already devised a new scientific system based on mathematical principles,

he now wanted to validate it by showing that it met traditional standards of deductive certainty (of the kind his scholastic predecessors and rivals were committed to), and that in order to achieve that end he tried, after the event, as it were, to bolt a dubious metaphysical undercarriage onto the scientific machinery he had previously developed.

Together with this interpretation goes an implicit critique of the Cartesian project so described—first, that it was doomed to failure, and second, that it was unnecessary to begin with. It was doomed, so runs the story, because in order to wheel in God, Descartes was obliged to develop the theistic proofs in the Third and Fifth Meditations, which unfortunately do not work (either because the premises are flawed or because they cannot be established without circularity); and it is unnecessary because science does not require such transcendent underpinning. Instead (so runs the argument), what science really needs is to become wholly naturalized and autonomous, aiming to provide the simplest and most elegant mathematical descriptions of the cosmos that are consistent with the data and abandoning any confused aspirations for some absolute divine guarantee that the answers so produced are the right ones. So the overall evaluation of Descartes, on this view, is that he took us only partway toward our self-sufficient modern world (appropriately enough for one who was a pioneer on the threshold of modernity). He took us to the modern ideal of a unified mathematical physics (the ideal now entrenched in the goal of modern science to achieve a grand “theory of everything”), but he unfortunately remained mired in a medieval cosmology that was stuck with supposing it needed a divine guarantor. And once we have appreciated this (so the story concludes), we can salvage what is valuable about Descartes by giving him credit for helping to design the modern scientific machinery, while politely ignoring the obsolete theistic undercarriage.

Like much of what has aptly been called the “shadow history” of philosophy, this account of the Cartesian project has a normative as well as a descriptive component.<sup>8</sup> Descriptively, it is supposed to match, more or less, Descartes’s actual intentions and objectives: the idea is that he cobbled together some metaphysics merely to bolster his main scientific aims.<sup>9</sup> The additional normative element is an implicit value

judgment to the effect that Descartes's impressive program for science failed to take the desirable final step that would have made it wholly autonomous and independent of any supernaturalist elements.

I want to argue that both elements of this account are unsustainable. First, it is highly implausible to suggest that Descartes's work in metaphysics was merely instrumental, some kind of philosophical afterthought aimed at merely providing support for his scientific ambitions. And second, the supposedly desirable goal of a complete and fully autonomous science turns out on examination to be incoherent, irrespective of whether it is couched in the philosophical language of the seventeenth century or of our own time.

With regard to the first point, although Descartes's preoccupations with mathematics and science go back to his early career, his interest in theistic metaphysics was certainly no afterthought. It is important to remember that he was, all his life, a devout Catholic, and one who had been educated by the Jesuits. This of course does not in itself prove that he had a strong interest in philosophical questions about God, but it makes it certain that he was exposed to such questions from an early age. References to God are prominent in Descartes's early notebooks written during his travels in Germany in his midtwenties, when he had the famous dreams of founding a new scientific system.<sup>10</sup> And in his early thirties, when he was occupied with working on optics and planning what was to become his early treatise on physics, *Le monde*, he did not allow his pressing scientific concerns wholly to eclipse his continuing metaphysical interests, as he explained in a letter to his mentor, Marin Mersenne: "I may some day complete a little treatise of Metaphysics, which I began when in Friesland, in which I set out principally to prove the existence of God and of our souls when they are separate from the body, from which their immortality follows. I am enraged when I see that there are people in the world so bold and so impudent as to fight against God."<sup>11</sup> Much later, in the dedicatory letter to his masterpiece, the *Meditations*, the first work to be published under his own name, he picked up on the earlier ambitions recorded in the Mersenne letter, observing that he had always regarded the topics of God and the soul as prime examples of subjects suitable for demonstrative philosophical proof.<sup>12</sup>