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## RELIGIONS, REASONS AND GODS

Traditional theistic proofs are often understood as evidence intended to compel belief in a divinity. John Clayton explores the surprisingly varied applications of such proofs in the work of philosophers and theologians from several periods and traditions, thinkers as varied as Ramanuja, al-Ghazali, Anselm and Jefferson. He shows how the gradual disembedding of theistic proofs from their diverse and local religious contexts is concurrent with the development of natural theologies and atheism as social and intellectual options in early-modern Europe and America. Clayton offers a new reading of the early-modern history of philosophy and theology, arguing that awareness of such history and the local uses of theistic argument offer new ways of managing religious and cultural difference in the public sphere today. He argues for the importance of historically grounded philosophy of religion to the field of religious studies and public debate on religious pluralism and cultural diversity.

PROFESSOR JOHN CLAYTON taught at Lancaster University for 25 years, eventually as Professor of Religious Studies and later as Head of Department. He was Chair of the Department of Religion and Director of the Graduate Division of Religious and Theological Studies, Boston University, from 1997 until his death in 2003. With Ninian Smart, Patrick Sherry and Steven T. Katz he co-edited the three-volume *Nineteenth-Century Religious Thought in the West* (1985, 1988).

ANNE M. BLACKBURN is Associate Professor of South Asia and Buddhist Studies in the Department of Asian Studies, Cornell University.

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# RELIGIONS, REASONS AND GODS

*Essays in Cross-Cultural Philosophy of Religion*

JOHN CLAYTON

PREPARED FOR PUBLICATION BY

ANNE M. BLACKBURN AND THOMAS D. CARROLL



**CAMBRIDGE**  
**UNIVERSITY PRESS**

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CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS

Cambridge, New York, Melbourne, Madrid, Cape Town, Singapore,  
São Paulo, Delhi, Dubai, Tokyo

Cambridge University Press

The Edinburgh Building, Cambridge CB2 8RU, UK

Published in the United States of America by Cambridge University Press, New York

[www.cambridge.org](http://www.cambridge.org)

Information on this title: [www.cambridge.org/9780521126274](http://www.cambridge.org/9780521126274)

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First published 2006

This digitally printed version 2009

*A catalogue record for this publication is available from the British Library*

ISBN 978-0-521-42104-1 Hardback

ISBN 978-0-521-12627-4 Paperback

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*For Anne*

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Πᾶσα διδασκαλία καὶ πᾶσα μάθησις διανοητικὴ ἐκ  
προϋπαρχούσης γίνεται γνώσεως.

Aristotle

It is traditions which are the bearers of reason.

Alasdair MacIntyre

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## *Editorial preface*

The proximate point of origin for this volume is John Clayton's 1992 Stanton Lectures, delivered at the University of Cambridge. Clayton had planned to publish his Stanton Lectures soon thereafter with Cambridge University Press. However, that publication was delayed for a variety of reasons. In 1997 he retired from his position as Professor and Head of the Department of Religious Studies at the University of Lancaster to become Professor, Chair of Department, and Director of the Graduate Division of Religious and Theological Studies at Boston University. During the late 1990s Clayton focused primarily on the administrative side of his professional work. By 2000, he had returned in earnest to his Stanton Lectures, deciding that *Religions, Reasons and Gods: Essays in Cross-Cultural Philosophy of Religion* ought to come to publication as a nearly independent typescript rather than as a lightly revised version of the Stanton Lectures. The gods did not smile on Clayton's plans. In the autumn of 2001 he fell seriously ill with a condition requiring exhausting treatment. One year later, he was diagnosed with a second illness, an aggressive cancer that took his life in September 2003.

Clayton recognized that his ambitious plans for the completion of *Religions, Reasons and Gods* would not be realized in this context of ill-health and, accordingly, he revised arrangements for the publication of this volume. With the generous support of editors at Cambridge University Press, he specified a collection of essays (some previously published and some unpublished). These were to articulate the central claims of the Stanton Lectures as well as Clayton's subsequent reflection on the potential contributions of the philosophy of religion to public contexts of increasing religious pluralism, the history of 'the Enlightenment project', and the implications of its history for a reconsideration of the history of philosophy as well as the goals and methods of philosophers of religion. Clayton hoped that Anne M. Blackburn, his partner, would bring *Religions, Reasons and Gods* to publication. Handsome support from



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Boston University made possible the involvement of Thomas D. Carroll, a doctoral student with whom Clayton had worked closely prior to his death. Carroll and Blackburn, therefore, have worked together as co-editors of this volume.

Over the course of some months, we explored the materials left behind by Clayton for inclusion in this volume. Previously published essays have been reproduced without further editorial changes, apart from those required to standardize published style or to make current references to Clayton's own work. We have omitted all diacritical marks in transliterated Sanskrit, and have largely followed Clayton's own system of reference notation. Pieces unpublished but evidently complete have likewise received no further substantial editing. One essay crucial to *Religions, Reasons and Gods*, 'The Debate about God in Early-Modern British Philosophy', remained unfinished. Working in the British Library, Carroll drew on Clayton's research notes to retrace investigations made during the year or so before Clayton's death. On this basis, he annotated Clayton's essay and developed an editorial addition and an appendix on natural theology and the design argument in Britain. Clayton had suggested that a paper read in 1996 at a conference on Philosophy of Religion organized by the Commonwealth Institute (London) serve as the final chapter of this volume. Unfortunately, this paper does not remain among Clayton's materials. Despite the good offices of his colleagues, no copy has become available. For that reason, we selected the text of his final Stanton Lecture as the concluding essay in this volume. We have also added a brief introduction to each of the volume's three parts. We have followed Clayton's wishes in the dedication of *Religions, Reasons and Gods*. The essays which follow speak, of course, for themselves, and we do not wish to intrude unduly on readers' encounters with Clayton's work. However, since his essays were written in conversation with several disciplines, and for audiences in rather different cultural contexts, it may be useful to provide some very preliminary points of orientation to this volume.

The essays drawn together here reflect Clayton's preoccupation with matters of cultural and historical *difference* and *location*. It is in one sense no surprise that essays developed in the 1980s and 1990s should evince such concerns, since they were apparent across diverse disciplines in scholarly conversations during that period. Clayton developed these ideas in a distinctive intellectual climate, one characterized by debates about the constitution of and the recognition of 'the Other', the relationships of texts to contexts, the nature and limits of interpretative authority, the

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history of ‘natural’ kinds and categories, and so on. The roots of his abiding interest in cultural and historical difference and location are still more complex, however, and significantly autobiographical. Clayton sometimes referred to himself, with both pride and irony, as ‘a Texan by birth and conviction’. Texans of Clayton’s generation were no strangers to complex configurations of insider–outsider status, and to the experience that a story told one way might be told otherwise in a different context. Clayton’s Texas was part of the American Republic yet still oriented in important ways toward an early period of independent (not elephantine) republicanism; it partook of the American West as well as of the American South; it was cross-cut by allegiances oriented toward race and class. And Clayton’s Texas was all this at a time of considerable upheaval: the civil-rights movement and American military involvements in Asia. As a young man he moved from this environment to Cambridge, for doctoral studies. In one sense, it was a massive change. Yet, at the same time, his education in Britain assured a formative continuity. It, too, provided a particularly stimulating climate in which to reflect on the intellectual and social processes through which communities are formed, divide and overlap, on the relationships that may obtain between social location and authority, and on the shifting historical contexts within which claims about the prior, and the distant, are made. Emblematic of this period, perhaps, is the position of *The Code of the Laws of Cricket* on Clayton’s office bookshelves. At Lancaster and in Boston, *The Code* stood with other ‘sacred texts’.

That John Clayton was, in much of his work, inclined to pursue the historically specific character of persons’ and communities’ involvement with such ‘scriptures’ owed much to an abiding early interest in nineteenth- and twentieth-century German theology. For many years, even as his scholarly work extended to the study of philosophy and theology in other parts of Europe and Asia, Clayton engaged German theological works that, in a constructive and normative vein, explored the relationships between shifting social and institutional contexts and expressions of religious authority and tradition. Moreover, in doing so, he increasingly entered German academic conversations about the history of theology and philosophy of religion influenced by scholarship in historical sociology and by reflections on the intersection of theology and culture.

In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, German theologians sought to reconceive Christian theology in the wake of Kant’s critique of rational theology. In tracing the history of this reconfiguration of theology, Clayton focused on the development of theologians amidst their cultural

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and intellectual contexts, consulting correspondence and lectures as well as major theological works. In his scholarship, he sought to reveal the complexity and distinctiveness of theologians, and of their times. The following passage from an essay comparing Tillich and Troeltsch suggests something of Clayton's analytical and historical approach to the study of theology:

At some stages in his development and at specific places in his writings, Tillich reminds one here rather more of Barth and there rather more of Troeltsch. But, all things considered, Tillich was neither simply another spokesman for the newer dialectical theology nor a lingering specimen of the older theological liberalism. He was neither a Barth nor a Troeltsch; he was instead a *Tillich*. But precisely because he was who he was, Tillich stood on the boundary between these two apparently antithetical possibilities. As the situation required, he moved nearer to the one or he moved nearer to the other. He made no final and lasting choice between them. In his life's work, moreover, he sought theologically to mediate between the dialectical theology and theological liberalism. And therein lies not only much of Tillich's historical significance, but also something of his positive significance for the future constructive work of the theologian.<sup>1</sup>

Clayton's conversations with German colleagues shaped the character of his increasingly comparative and historical research programme. So too, of course, did his institutional location in a reasonably new Department of Religious Studies at the University of Lancaster, at a time of growing immigration to Britain, especially from former colonies. To this period date his early efforts to bring central questions from philosophy and the philosophy of religion – about argument and proof, reasons, ends and motives – to bear on texts connected to Buddhism, Hinduism, Judaism and Islam. *Religions, Reasons and Gods* reveals Clayton's interest in drawing together more closely topics and methods in the history of religions and the philosophy of religion. These essays constitute an extended argument in favour of the view that careful investigation of the nature and context of argument may usefully illuminate histories of religious traditions and communities by pointing toward local, group-specific, uses of reason. Clayton's Lancastrian location was one of the conditions of possibility for such an argument, inasmuch as it favoured conversation across the apparent boundaries between philosophers, theologians, anthropologists and historians. Like all British universities,

<sup>1</sup> John Clayton, 'Tillich, Troeltsch and the Dialectical Theology', *Modern Theology*, 4/4 (July 1988), 323–44, 340.

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the University of Lancaster was also, especially by Clayton's later years in Britain, an institution profoundly shaped by the character of British higher-education assessment exercises. The administrative strategy followed by Lancaster – which involved, in part, the development of thematic connections across sub-disciplines within religious studies in order to maximize the research and teaching productivity of the faculty – both reflected and shaped the character of Clayton's Stanton Lectures and the ideas developed in this volume. It is not really a surprise that bound RAE (Research Assessment Exercise) volumes, too, stood on Clayton's office bookshelves, less far from books on local rationality than one might initially expect.

The increasing religious diversity that came to characterize Britain and the United States during the latter half of the twentieth century raised the stakes in conversations – scholarly and popular – about relativism and universalism, truth and objectivity, and the possibility of conversation across the boundaries of religions which might be seen as discrete communities of life and language. There are many signs of these debates in *Religions, Reasons and Gods*. Like many philosophical critics during this time, such as Lorraine Code, Richard Rorty and Alasdair MacIntyre, Clayton sought to find a method for philosophy that did not limit it to the foundationalist epistemology increasingly scrutinized by feminist and other philosophers who sought to emphasize the importance of particularity as well as tradition in epistemic agency. Against correspondence theories of truth which, according to some of their critics, characterize truths and the facts they correspond to from a God's-eye view of the world, philosophers such as Rorty and Code emphasized the importance of the contribution made by language, culture and standpoint to the expressions which are subsequently deemed to be true or false. Clayton preferred the notion of 'local rationalities' to general characterizations of rationality *simpliciter*, but he also sought to distinguish his views on the embeddedness of reason within social practices from the attitude toward rationality characterized by some neo-Wittgensteinian philosophers of religion who seem to favour separatism over exchange.

While not always immediately visible, these themes run throughout Clayton's book. They are explicitly present in Part I, which addresses problems of religious diversity and public life. In Chapters 2 and 3, 'Thomas Jefferson and the Study of Religion' and 'Common Ground and Defensible Difference', Clayton attempts to render natural religion less natural as the default discourse of the modern public sphere. This involves historical and programmatic moves. His account of the context

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for Jeffersonian natural religion emphasizes the reasonably homogeneous Protestant cultural landscape of its origins. This landscape shaped the character of Jefferson's conception of religious discourse fit for public life, and also limited the work required of such a discourse. Clayton juxtaposes Jeffersonian America with late-twentieth-century Britain and America, raising questions about the role of philosophy of religion in an era of greater cultural and religious diversity. Clayton's programmatic work involves recourse to the notion of 'defensible difference', which holds that the tensions of religious and cultural pluralism are best managed by the careful delineation of points of difference as well as attention to areas in which shared ends may be achieved through distinct means, means rooted in distinctive traditions of argument and practice. On Clayton's view, philosophers of religion may play a constructive role in the implementation of the principle of defensible difference. Yet, as the structure of *Religions, Reasons and Gods* reveals, he held that a productive reconsideration of the conceptual frameworks of philosophy of religion required a richer history of the traditions of reasoning and practice out of which the philosophy of religion emerged. Such a historical perspective could help to illuminate the origins of central problems in the philosophy of religion, as well as ways in which such problems reflect more parochial concerns than many contemporary philosophers might initially expect.

Parts II and III of this volume may be seen, in part, as one attempt to provide that historical perspective. Clayton returns explicitly to his vision for the philosophy of religion only at the end of the book, after an extended reconsideration of the histories of philosophy and philosophy of religion as academic disciplines and modes of enquiry. *Religions, Reasons and Gods* is, among other things, a cautionary tale about the subtly powerful workings of anachronism in the origin stories told within academic disciplines. Clayton examines, in treatments of both mediaeval and modern arguments, the conditions of possibility for specific 'thinkable positions', and for the reception of such positions. Such examination serves, on the one hand, his stated aim to illuminate the 'forms of life' within which argument, proof and disproof occurred. In addition, however, through essays developed (to a large extent) diachronically across roughly seven hundred years, he narrates the historical contingency of the practice of philosophy and theology. According to Clayton, the histories of philosophy and philosophy of religion as disciplines are not best told as a streamlined teleology from the vantage point of a present position (whether understood as apogee or nadir). Rather, such histories are to be worked out in tension with the categories and stories which come most

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naturally to present times and places, and with attention to the extended unintended and unpredictable consequences of ideas and texts in motion – carried by persons within, and across, varied social settings and institutional environments. From this perspective, the pasts of all religious traditions are equally foreign, and Kant is no less a stranger to us than Anselm or Ramanuja.

Chapter 7, ‘The Otherness of Anselm’, which concludes Part II of this volume, provides a particularly clear window onto Clayton’s approach to historical enquiry. Clayton examines the place of theistic proof in Anselm’s *Proslogion*. In doing so, he stresses the importance of looking at the *entire text* within which theistic proofs occur, and of attempting to determine the role played by proof as part in relation to text as whole. Moreover, he draws attention to other texts in relation to which the *Proslogion* was written and used by Anselm. Thus, for Clayton, the study of a moment of argument involves the exploration of intra- and inter-textual contexts for such a moment. Why? Because understanding the work accomplished by an instance of rationality requires understanding the rhetorical context (often linked to textual genre) within which such an instance was introduced, as well as the ends (ritual, social, institutional and foundational) it may have been intended to serve. This may be seen as a move to attend to the individual maker of argument both in the foreground and in the background of historical investigation.

On the one hand, Clayton draws our attention to Anselm the person, Anselm the religious, Anselm the maker of meaning. And, on the other, he shows us Anselm as the product of time, place and circumstances. Clayton’s Anselm participated in a local understanding of ‘reason’. He did not practise heroic, or universal, philosophy. (Indeed, Anselm is for Clayton an important case study through which to meditate upon the relationship between the context of argument and the magnitude of the epistemic achievement claimed for an argument.) In ‘The Otherness of Anselm’, as in other essays which follow here, we thus see Clayton’s persistent movement to evoke now one, now another, pattern of relief in the treatment of arguments, texts, persons and contexts. Clayton was fascinated by the fluidity of visual argument present in Klimt’s maximally textured figurative paintings, which can be viewed as an intensification of focus on human physical form and as the effacement of the individual within a pattern. Some of the essays presented in *Religions, Reasons and Gods* – especially those in Part III on debate and early-modern philosophies – bear the marks of this fascination. In these four chapters, Clayton works in part through genealogy to trace the development of the modern

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in philosophical and religious thought. Rather than finding a singular story of the development of modern Western philosophy, Clayton finds localized enlightenments, with varying qualities. These chapters display again Clayton's earlier emphasis on the distinctiveness and complexity of particular thinkers, yet he also observes here the culturally and historically located conditions for the possibility of argument, highlighting the development of early modernities in France, Germany and Britain. Clayton's narratives draw key intellectual figures in and out of view as formative agents in the constitution of the modern, and of philosophy and philosophy of religion as disciplines.

*Ithaca, New York and Boston, Massachusetts, September 2005*

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## *Acknowledgments*

Time did not allow John Clayton to prepare his acknowledgments for this volume. The Editors hope that Professor Clayton's many friends and colleagues will find herein traces of conversation and disputation, and of his appreciation of their hospitality. In addition to the research funding indicated in his original footnotes to previously published essays, it is appropriate to note support received by John Clayton from Emmanuel College and the University of Cambridge during the preparation of his Stanton Lectures. Clayton was also provided with generous research funds by Boston University beginning in 1997.

The Editors are indebted to the Boston University Department of Religion and the Division of Religious and Theological Studies and to the Boston University Humanities Foundation for supporting completion of this volume after Professor Clayton's untimely death. The financial support offered by the Humanities Foundation enabled Thomas D. Carroll to retrace lines of enquiry indicated by Clayton's research notes and to conduct additional research at the British Library, in order to complete Chapter 10. At Boston University we are particularly grateful to Professor Katherine O'Connor (Director of the Humanities Foundation), Professor Stephen Prothero (Chair of the Department of Religion and Director of the Division of Religious and Theological Studies) and Ms Karen Nardella (Administrator for the Division of Graduate and Theological Studies). We offer thanks to Mr Christian Lammerts for his careful work in formatting Professor Clayton's essays to meet the guidelines of the Press. Dr Kate Brett, Editor at Cambridge University Press, supervised preparation of this volume with a gracious commitment for which we were particularly grateful during the difficult days following John Clayton's death.

In addition, Anne M. Blackburn wishes to acknowledge the research leave and administrative support made possible by her appointment as Yehan Numata Visiting Associate Professor of Buddhist Studies at the



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*Acknowledgments*

Harvard Divinity School during the spring term of 2005, a period devoted in part to completion of this volume.

We are grateful for permission to reproduce essays originally published elsewhere: Chapter 2, 'Thomas Jefferson and the Study of Religion', was published by Lancaster University in 1992, 35pp.; we wish to thank Mrs M. E. McClintock, Academic Registrar and series editor of the University of Lancaster Inaugural Lecture publications for permission to republish the lecture. Also included in Chapter 2 is an extract from 'Enlightenment, Pluralism and the Philosophy of Religion', published in *Hermeneutics of Encounter: Essays in Honour of Gerhard Oberhammer*, ed. F. X. D'Sa and R. Mesquita, De Nobili Research Library, 1994, pp. 35–59; we are thankful to Professor Dr R. Mesquita and Doz. Dr Utz Podzeit of the De Nobili Research Library and University of Vienna for permission to republish this extract. Chapter 3, 'Common Ground and Defensible Difference', first appeared in *Religion, Politics, and Peace*, ed. Leroy S. Rouner, University of Notre Dame Press, 1999, pp. 104–27, and we thank Professor Emeritus Leroy S. Rouner of Boston University for permission to republish the essay here. Chapter 4, 'Religions, Reasons and Gods', was initially published in *Religious Studies* 23/1 (1987), 1–17, while Chapter 6, 'Piety and the Proofs', appeared in *Religious Studies* 25/1 (1990), 19–42; for permission to republish these articles we wish to thank Professor Peter Byrne of King's College, London. Chapter 5, 'Ramanuja, Hume and "Comparative Philosophy": Remarks on the *Sribhasya* and the *Dialogues concerning Natural Religion*', will see first publication in *Expanding and Merging Horizons: Contributions to South Asian and Cross-Cultural Studies in Commemoration of Wilhelm Halbfass*, ed. Karin Preisendanz, to be published by the Austrian Academy of Sciences, Vienna, 2006; we are grateful to Professor Dr Preisendanz of the University of Vienna for her gracious permission to republish the essay so soon after its first appearance. Chapter 7, 'The Otherness of Anselm', appeared in *Neue Zeitschrift für systematische Theologie und Religionsphilosophie* 37/2 (1995), 125–43; we thank Professor Dr Oswald Bayer of the University of Tübingen for permission to republish the essay in this volume. Chapter 9, 'The Enlightenment Project and the Debate about God in Early-Modern German Philosophy', was originally published in *Vernunft, Kontingenz und Gott: Konstellationen eines offenen Problems*, ed. Ingolf Dalferth and Philipp Stoellger, (Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr (Paul Siebeck), 2000), pp. 171–93; for permission to reproduce this essay, we wish to thank Professor Dr Ingolf Dalferth of the University of Zurich and Ms Jill Sopper, Foreign Rights Manager for Mohr Siebeck.

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|---------------------------------|--|
| <i>GS/JA</i>                    | Moses Mendelssohn, <i>Gesammelte Schriften. Jubiläumsausgabe</i> |
| <i>JAOS</i>                     | <i>Journal of the American Oriental Society</i>                  |
| <i>KA</i>                       | <i>Kants Werke: Akademie-Textausgabe</i>                         |
| <i>KGA</i>                      | Friedrich Schleiermacher, <i>Kritische Gesamtausgabe</i>         |
| <i>Notes Rec. R. Soc. Lond.</i> | <i>Notes and Records of the Royal Society of London</i>          |
| <i>OC</i>                       | <i>Œuvres complètes</i> of Rousseau                              |
| <i>Op. Om.</i>                  | <i>Opera Omnia</i>   |
| <i>WA</i>                       | <i>Weimarer Ausgabe</i> of Martin Luther                         |
| <i>WZKSO</i>                    | <i>Wiener Zeitschrift für die Kunde Süd- und Ostasiens</i>       |
| <i>ZDMG</i>                     | <i>Zeitschrift für die Deutsche Morgenländergesellschaft</i>     |