

Paul K. Moser, *The Elusive God: Reorienting Religious Epistemology*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008. Pp. xi + 292. Hbk. ISBN 9780521889032.

Paul Moser, one of the USA's prominent epistemologists, has produced a substantial and challenging book on religious epistemology. The line he takes is unusual and requires study, the more so as the author's style is precise and almost understated. It is also courageous, and may take some philosophers of religion by surprise. The author provides a tightly argued and cogent case in support of his view of what the proper point of departure is for epistemology of religion, against the traditional assumptions of Anglophone philosophy of religion. It does what it says, namely, propose and outline a reoriented religious epistemology, or rather a Christian epistemology. It does this essentially on the basis of taking God seriously, i.e., of working with the concept of God presented in the Jewish and Christian scriptures, instead of the rather deistic notion of God found in traditional philosophy of religion and in certain kinds of natural theology.

The book pushes the boundaries, with implications for both philosophy and theology. In the last hundred years or so, many theologians have viewed Kant as the angel with the flaming sword, barring the way to any epistemology permitting a full-blooded metaphysical realism about God or a dynamic relationship with the living God that went beyond the phenomenal. In consequence, they were unable to conceptualise God as one who self-communicated passionately and made life-transforming moral demands on us. This book, precisely because it so directly breaks with some of the received conventions, not just of natural theology (which is one of his targets) but also of how to do religious epistemology, may lead to the lifting of the Kantian spell. (His remarks on Kant and others on pages 209 and 244 are apposite here). Moser is not the first contemporary philosopher to adopt this view, but he takes its implications further than others have done.

The obstacles to the reorientation Moser proposes are formidable and deeply entrenched. Philosophy of religion is still influenced by Enlightenment presuppositions, such as: (a) There are many religions and they constitute a 'natural kind.' (b) All religions have a common core, with differences between them being matters of superficial appearance and presentation. (c) That common core is a moral commitment to the idea of 'the fatherhood of God and the brotherhood of man.' (d) The residue is much as William James described it in *Varieties of Religious Experience*: the good bit is the experiential and affective dimension, which is solitary and ineffable, and hence without objective semantic content; the bad bit is the public, ecclesial, doctrinal and liturgical dimensions of religion, which James dismisses as superstitious and inauthentic. (e) What is good in religion can be had in neater, more propositional form in a secular ethic and humanist metaphysic.

One might allow those presuppositions to be not inherently anti-religious, and still reject them on the grounds that they miss what is important in Christian faith. They are largely off the point, and insofar as they are *ad rem*, they turn out false. Despite the fact that (a)-(e) each implies that what any religion says about itself is not to be taken seriously on an intellectual level, they are still dominant in much of the debate in philosophy of religion. Merely to understand Moser's book, let alone agree with him, will challenge the reader to stand free of such presuppositions.

As regards philosophy of religion, the book aims to improve the philosophy by making it more religious. That this may disturb more than a few philosophers is revealing, for, if one considers the development of philosophy of science, his lead is reasonable. Logical positivism was a powerful influence in analytic philosophy from the 1930s until the 1960s. Its view of philosophy's role was modest: philosophy (of the right kind) would consist of no more than a logic of science and, more generally, philosophy of science. Although it eventually collapsed, it wasn't all bad. Among its virtues was its commitment to the sciences. The logical positivists had started with a

certain view of science at the beginning of the twentieth century, and had abstracted a kind of logic of science from that view. However, their commitment to science obliged them, as work on the history of science grew apace in the mid-century, to admit that their theories didn't fit what was going on in science. Faced with a choice between the reality of what was going on in science and their theories of what science was, they did the humble and honest thing and amended their philosophical theories, even to the point of eventually abandoning them. Today, it is understood that one cannot be a serious philosopher of biology or physics without a respectful absorption in the target discipline, not just in the findings but also in its methodology and practices.

Here, then, is a lesson for philosophers of religion: second-order disciplines (whether philosophy of biology, philosophy of religion, philosophy of law) must treat the target first-order discipline with some seriousness. Of course they may criticise; they wouldn't be proper philosophers if they didn't. But they must understand it; it must not turn out, in the eyes of the scientist, believer, or lawyer, that the philosopher really doesn't know what she is talking about.

*The Elusive God* pushes philosophy of religion to develop, and the direction of the push is welcome, since it takes the reality of a religious life seriously. That means moving towards the particularity of the religion in question. It is widely assumed that 'religion' is the name of a natural kind, to which belong Christianity, Islam, Zoroastrianism, Hinduism, etc. This leads to or at least supports further tacit assumptions, not just the popular one that all religions teach fundamentally the same thing, but that the metaphysical, epistemological and ethical claims of the different religions are isomorphic or fundamentally similar. But the idea of religion as a natural kind is unsound. When Scientology, Wicca, Satanism, Shintoism, secular humanism, or Taoism are considered as candidates for membership, the coherence of the category 'religion' breaks down.

Chapter 1 addresses the sceptical challenge, an issue the author's previous work has often addressed. (A final appendix also deals with scepticism in more detail). The plausible kinds of sceptical challenges are identified, and the issue of what kind of evidence the Jewish and Christian God might want to transmit to us is treated deftly. As he says on several occasions, that God has little interest in convincing people of God's existence and no interest at all in offering 'scientific' evidence or philosophical 'proof' of same. That God (assuming that God exists) wants to save us from the mess we humans have made, not just of our world but also of our personal moral lives, and will communicate God's self to us in line with that goal; accordingly, the evidence to expect must be conceived within those parameters. For many readers, section 6, "Skeptical Tests," may be the most important part of chapter 1 to read, since it is easiest to see as addressing traditional epistemological concerns. The evidence of a God who wants to save us and calls us would be, in the author's view, fallible and defeasible, but could still be reasonably conclusive for the individual in the absence of defeaters (63). As he notes, the author relies here on the position worked out in much greater detail in his *Knowledge and Evidence* (1989).

What is involved in knowing God? Just as I cannot come to know another person unless I am willing to be reciprocally known, so I cannot expect to know God without letting myself be known in return. That involves being open to the commitments of relationship. Moser flags this issue from the outset as central to monotheist epistemology, and particularly to Christian epistemology (4). There's no getting to know (in any intellectually satisfying sense) that the Christian God exists unless one comes to know that God, and one can't come to know that God without becoming interpersonally and morally related to that God. Much of the book is a sustained philosophical development of that theme. No doubt, natural theology's 'first cause' or 'unmoved mover' has its theoretical uses. But Moser's approach has the merit of applying philosophical

reflection to God as reflected in actual Christian thought and practice.

The central contention of chapter 1 is that "the reality of the God of traditional theism is knowable firsthand by humans on the basis of salient and conclusive, if elusive, evidence." Conclusive evidence means "well-founded undefeated support suitable for knowledge" (2). In this instance, such conclusive evidence can only come from God's initiative of self-revealing. According to the Christian faith, God's self-revelation is not a spectacle to satisfy disinterested or scientific curiosity, but a gift given for a morally serious purpose, namely, our well-being and our redemption from evil. In addition, as Moser emphasises, both the self-revealing and its purpose are inherently loving.

Moser's view of that experiential evidence is quite precise, even narrowly focused. He is explicit that evidence of an experiential kind is required: he rejects fideism (the position that in principle there can be no knowledge of God) repeatedly. He does not see it as arising from mystical or numinous religious experiences, i.e., any kind of religious experience of the unusual, esoteric or overwhelmingly powerful kind. His principal reason appears to be an austere concern that the experiential evidence be not clouded or missed by having spectacular but inherently diversionary events (8). The conclusive evidence will be "purposively available," and it essentially is "evident authoritative divine love expressed via human conscience, including an evident invitation to repentance and volitional fellowship with God" (8).

One can see his point in wanting to avoid the spectacular. In contemporary religious and spirituality studies, perhaps too much attention is paid to the experience, as though that were the goal of prayer or meditation or religious engagement in general. What is important is to connect with God, not to have a nice experience of the mystical or spiritual kind. At the same time, the numinous and the mystical are not all bad, and they may very well come as part of

the experience that Moser rightly sees as key. Perhaps a bit more could have been allowed to that possibility.

Although he does not say so, his religious epistemology could apply only to such monotheist religions as Judaism, Christianity and Islam, and even then, the fine-grained analysis (and not just the Biblical texts cited) indicates that it is about Christian epistemology. One cannot study religion in general, since there is no such thing; and one cannot study theology (or physics) without buying into it as a way of looking at the world. There has to be, in Gadamer's words, some fusion of horizons. One can say something interesting about religious epistemology only as a result of some experiential learning of what it is to come to know religiously in Christianity or in Buddhism or in some other religion. The common assumption that too deep an immersion in one religion compromises one's epistemological objectivity about religion is false. If one is not immersed in some religion or has never had the experience of being so immersed, it is more difficult, not less, to understand what a religion is about.

Many of these points are well-known to religious believers, but they have had little impact on traditional philosophy of religion. This book is a significant initiative towards changing that situation. Much of what has gone on in philosophy of religion had to do with proofs for the existence of God, suitably general so that it didn't focus on exclusively Christian claims about the Incarnation and vaguely purporting to be about religion 'in general,' even though it really only applied to the western monotheist religions. The claims about the existence and nature of God that it focused on were philosophical abstractions: they had little to do with the religious *life* of believers. The religious believers who took part in such debates knew that this was so, but were a bit remiss in not addressing the fact that the non-believers were puzzled as to why religious believers in general seemed so detached about the viability of the arguments for God's existence. The question needed to be reframed: not, can religious believers prove that a God exists, but what are religious believers up

to when they claim that there is a God, that they know him and communicate with him, and that such knowing makes all the difference to a human life?

It's that question with respect to Christian believers that Moser addresses. Natural theology tended to direct attention to propositional knowing that there is a God, with faith in that God segmented off to the exclusively religious zone of non-natural theology. That was rather misleading, particularly in the case of Christianity, where knowing God turns out to be crucial. In the Gospel of John, we have: "And this is eternal life: to know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent" (Jn 17:3). It is inconceivable that propositional knowledge or knowledge by description alone could generate, let alone constitute, something as important as "eternal life" (if there is such a thing). It presumably must involve what Moser calls "direct experiential knowledge" (245) of God that is personal, the kind of knowledge involved in knowing another person deeply. Such knowledge includes what Russell termed knowledge by description and knowledge by acquaintance, but it goes well beyond that.

Chapter 2, "Knowledge by Attunement," expands this theme at length. Although he does not use this comparison, what is involved here is not unlike the kind of knowing that is required in most academic disciplines. Whether one is trying to become an historian or a palaeontologist, it quickly becomes clear that more is involved than reading books about the findings of others. It also involves developing a style of thought, an apprenticeship to the leaders of the discipline and their style of approaching issues, a feel for what the issues are and of how the professional would address them, a kind of professional skill, in short, an attunement to a certain style of questioning, weighing and judging. Chapter 2 discusses the kind of knowledge offered in Christian faith, the appropriate stance to take so as to maximise one's access to and grasp of that knowledge, and receptivity to its moral and spiritual implications for one's life.

At this point, some philosophers of religion, less religiously-inclined, may become uneasy and feel that we are now on the slippery slope away from a detached objectivity and sliding into a question-begging appeal to the need for emotional involvement. Such a fear is groundless: proper identification of the concept of God does not assume that the concept is instantiated. The Western monotheisms emphasise that God is not an 'object' of observation, analogous to a sub-atomic particle or physical object, but rather like a human person. It is morally inappropriate to seek to know another person as if he or she were a mere physical object for detached observation, and the one who becomes aware of such scrutiny rightly seeks to resist and evade such intrusion. It is morally and religiously inappropriate to seek to know God in the same impersonal and objectifying fashion, and the monotheist has every reason to expect that such attempts will be deflected by an apparently elusive God.

In addition, there are moral criteria for qualifying as God. In line with monotheism, Moser holds that only a fully worshipful being could be God, and such a being would not be fully worshipful if it were less than all-loving and omni-benevolent, to enemies as much as to friends (86-87). It is thus in the context of one's moral life (taking that in the broad sense), and only in such a context, that conclusive evidence for God can be expected to emerge.

Chapter 3, "Dying to Know," follows naturally from chapter 2, focusing on the significance and the great good of being in the kind of loving and redemptive relationship with God that enables one to overcome the death-dealing effects of greed, selfishness and the like. To adapt a remark of St Paul at the beginning of 1 Corinthians, the focus of the chapter is to show that being a Christian isn't about intellectual ideas but about power.

Chapter 4 is courageous, since it proposes reform to academic philosophers. While the Greeks saw philosophy as rooted, not unlike religion, in wonder, it is true that academic philosophy can become a rather arid and soul-less activity. It is also true that there is no good reason why Jesus cannot be taken as a wisdom teacher, just as much

as Socrates or Aristotle. Much of what the author says is accurate, however uncomfortable it may be to hear. However, I wish to enter two caveats to the author's line. He may well agree with me, but if so his agreement does not emerge clearly.

First, the risk of losing oneself or one's soul in arid academic disputes is not a risk confined to philosophy or indeed to the academic life. One could be a social worker for whom the suffering people with whom one works have become 'cases,' and one has become burnt-out on the inside. It is not a risk pertaining simply to a particular academic discipline, but a spiritual problem rooted in the human heart.

Second, philosophy well done also serves the kingdom of heaven. More than a few philosophers in recent years have been taken aback, if not horrified, by the extent to which their undergraduate students hold that morality is purely subjective or relative. Moral anti-realism and moral relativism are increasingly part of 'popular' culture and the culture of the 'literati'; they are even making inroads among theologians. The locus of most determined resistance to that trend is analytic philosophy. Something similar could be said about the rise of general relativism (semantic and ontological, as well as moral) that is common among well-known French philosophers, and widespread among literature and sociology professors. Again, the most determined resistance to it (apart from parents doing their best to raise their children) seems, as far as I can see, to come from analytic philosophers, whether religious or atheist. To teach these things, even getting into the technical minutiae of metaethics and theories of truth, is also to serve the Good. St Paul seemed to want the teachers to teach, and the Book of Daniel says that those who lead people to wisdom shall shine like the stars for eternity.

But these are minor criticisms. *The Elusive God* is something new in the epistemology of religion. Don't miss it.

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Brendan Leahy, ed., *Inter-Church Relations: Developments and Perspectives. A Tribute to Bishop Anthony Farquhar*. Dublin: Veritas Publications, 2008. Pp. 203. ISBN 978-1-84730-095-9.

2010 will mark the centenary of the World Missionary Conference in Edinburgh, often deemed the beginning of the modern ecumenical movement. So much, of course, has changed since 1910, including the conceptions of what the identity, aims and limits of ecumenism are – and should be. As a response towards the Other (from an inter-church or interreligious perspective), the ecumenical movement may play a crucial role in how Christianity thrives or merely survives in the twenty-first century. How one defines and implements church unity and inter-church relations, therefore, remain key, ongoing issues for dialogue.

In this regard, exposing one's humanity – one's frailty, passions and joys – will be (at least) as important for Christianity's growth as any development in Christian doctrine. While I have only 'met' Bishop Farquhar through the glimpses offered in these essays of tribute, a reader cannot forget how his love of Dundee United almost gets repeated as much as his deep commitment to church unity. A trivial detail, perhaps, but then it is through glimpses into the humanity of the Other that relationship, let alone unity, is possible.

In *Inter-Church Relations: Developments and Perspectives*, we are presented with various snapshots of ecumenism in Ireland, interspersed with reflections from individuals involved in international and global ecumenical bodies. The casual reader will certainly be surprised at the wide-range of Christian churches in Ireland, some more established and others burgeoning, from black and ethnic minority churches to Orthodox, Quaker and Presbyterian churches and communities. They may also be encouraged by the developments of inter-church relations, both at the grass-roots and institutional level.

While a few essays in the book suffer at times from a superfluity of statistics or a tendency for safe, but lifeless 'institutional jargon,'