

Trento | 6-8 June 2017

International Conference

# ARGUING RELIGION

Disagreement, Recognition,  
and the Reach of Argumentative Debate

 **ISR**  
CENTRE FOR  
RELIGIOUS STUDIES  
FONDAZIONE  
BRUNO KESSLER

  
**Deep Disagreements**



HUMBOLDT-UNIVERSITÄT  
ZU BERLIN



# Contents

1.	The Conference .....	p. 3
2.	Programme .....	p. 5
3.	Abstracts .....	p. 8
4.	Venue .....	p. 17
5.	Trento City Map .....	p. 18
6.	Organisation .....	p. 19

# 1. The Conference

The aim of this conference is to advance our understanding of the epistemology of religious disagreement (RD), to explore the goals and prospects of argumentative debate in responding to RD, and to shed light on the intersections between current philosophical debates in the epistemology of RD and contemporary theories of recognition and toleration. Whereas the question of how pluralist societies can accommodate RD has been the topic of extensive research (e.g. in ethics, social theory, and political philosophy), the challenging question of how much room RD leaves for argumentative debate in its own right and terms has attracted much less attention. The conference will take a step towards remedying this situation. Moreover, it will pave the way for establishing a dialogue between current research in the epistemology of RD and contemporary work in theories of recognition and toleration.

In a preliminary way, RD can be thought of as occurring in three different settings: between believers of the same faith (intra-faith disagreement), between believers of distinct faiths (cross-faith disagreement), and between believers and non-believers (atheists, agnostics or persons who simply do not care about religion). The role, the goals, and the reach of argumentative debate can be expected to differ across these settings and in relation to the religious faiths that are respectively involved in a given RD. Often, convergence of judgment or even consensus are identified as the intrinsic goals of argumentative debate. Can this convergence or consensus-based conception of the goals of public argumentation be usefully applied to the case of arguing religion? If not so, are there promising alternative conceptions? What roles do attitudes of recognition and/or toleration play in responding to RD? Ought the experience of persistent RD in pluralist societies to lead to a “fragilization of religious belief” (Charles Taylor)?

The conference will approach these and the following questions from the perspectives of different philosophical sub-“disciplines” (epistemology, argumentation theory, theories of recognition and theories of toleration):

- What is a religious disagreement, and what kinds of religious disagreement are there?
- To what extent can and should religious disagreements be thought of as epistemic, i.e., as disagreements in which at least one of the disagreeing parties commits an epistemic mistake (holds a false belief)?
- What are the theoretical alternatives to this cognitivist construal of religious disagreement and how do they respectively reflect on the role that argumentation and reasoning can and should play in responding to religious disagreements?
- Can (some) religious disagreements be fruitfully thought of as faultless, i.e., as cases in which, for some propositional content  $p$ , A believes that  $p$  (or something that entails  $p$ ), B believes that  $\text{not-}p$  (or something that entails  $\text{not-}p$ ), and neither A nor B are at fault?
- What is the epistemic significance of “peer disagreement” in the case of religious argumentation?
- How is the goal of arguing religion best to be understood? Is it to rationally convince the other, or rather to persuade or to convert her? Or something else altogether?

## 2. Programme

**Tuesday, 6 June**

**14.30 Welcome and Introduction**

*Marco Ventura*, Fondazione Bruno Kessler

*Geert Keil*, Humboldt University Berlin

*Paolo Costa*, Fondazione Bruno Kessler

**The Epistemology of Religious Disagreement**

Chairs: *Sami Pihlström*, University of Helsinki

*Christoph Schamberger*, Humboldt University Berlin

**15.00 Rationalist Resistance to Disagreement-Motivated Religious Skepticism**

*John Pittard*, Yale University

Respondent: *Katherine Dormandy*, University of Innsbruck

16.15 Break

**16.30 Reasons, Commitment and Disagreement in Religious and Other Contexts**

*Winfried Löffler*, University of Innsbruck

Respondent: *Geert Keil*, Humboldt University Berlin

17.45 Break

**18.15 Keynote**

**Religious Disagreements: Real and Apparent**

*Richard Feldman*, University of Rochester

20.00 Dinner

**Wednesday, 7 June 2017**

**The Epistemology of Religious Disagreement (cont'd)**

Chair: *Christoph Schamberger*, Humboldt University Berlin

**9.00 Religious Disagreement as an Aid to Religious Truth**

*Katherine Dormandy*, University of Innsbruck

Respondent: *Daniele Bertini*, University of Rome 2, Tor Vergata

**The Goals and the Reach of Argumentative Religious Debate**

Chairs: *Winfried Löffler*, University of Innsbruck

*John Pittard*, Yale University

**10.15 Being Religiously Unmusical: What Does it Mean?  
And Does it Matter?**

*Paolo Costa*, Fondazione Bruno Kessler

Respondent: *Sami Pihlström*, University of Helsinki

11.30 Break

**12.00 Religious Claims, Arguments, and Disagreements**

*Boris Rähme*, Fondazione Bruno Kessler

Respondent: *Winfried Löffler*, University of Innsbruck

13.15 Lunch

**15.00 Desire, Divine Hiddenness, and Atheism**

*Fiona Ellis*, Heythrop College, University of London

Respondent: *Paolo Costa*, Fondazione Bruno Kessler

**16.15 Metaphysical Realism as the *Proton Pseudos* of Theodicism:  
A Pragmatic Critique of the Argument from Evil**

*Sami Pihlström*, University of Helsinki

Respondent: *John Pittard*, Yale University

17.30 Break

**18.00 Keynote**

**Arguing Religious Ideals Towards a Humane Politics**

*Akeel Bilgrami*, Columbia University, New York

20.00 Social Dinner

## Thursday, 8 June 2017

### Religious Disagreement and Recognition

Chairs: *Geert Keil*, Humboldt University Berlin

*Boris Rähme*, Fondazione Bruno Kessler

**9.00 Beyond the Wall of Separation: The Cooperation of State and Religious Communities under the German Constitution**

*Ralf Poscher*, University of Freiburg

Respondent: *Marco Ventura*, Fondazione Bruno Kessler

**10.15 The Experiential Path Towards Being Religious Peers**

*Daniele Bertini*, University of Rome 2, Tor Vergata

Respondent: *Rachel Jonker*, University of Notre Dame

11:30 Break

**11.45 Essentially Contested Concepts and Mutual Recognition**

*Joonas Pennanen*, University of Jyväskylä

Respondent: *Christoph Schamberger*, Humboldt University Berlin

**13.00 Concluding Remarks**

13.30 Lunch

# 3. Abstracts

## The Experiential Path Towards Being Religious Peers

*Daniele Bertini*, University of Rome 2, Tor Vergata

Peter and Mary are two devout religious individuals, which adhere to different traditions. As a consequence, they often disagree about religious matters. Most philosophical literature deals with cases like this by relying on two unquestioned assumptions. First, religious disagreements should be assessed in terms of the epistemology of disagreements (call this epistemological reductionism, ER). Second, Peter and Mary are epistemic peers, i.e. they are equally good epistemic agents which have access to the same body of evidence (call this epistemic parity abstractism, EPA). Now, my intuition is that both ER and EPA are not the right way to sketch what is at stake in religious disagreements.

My purpose is to explore how religious parity should be construed when ER and EPA are dismissed. Particularly, I want to argue for the claims that:

- A) contrary to EPA, epistemic parity in religious affairs is not something that can be assumed as a primitive fact, but it is a relational cognitive situation that turns out to be the result of a process;
- B) this process produces toleration and mutual acknowledgement.

According to my view, religious disagreements are anecdotal, and require that individuals have an epistemic duty of investigating together the meaning, the extent, and the consequences of their dissent. Making such an experience evidently originates a personal relationship among the dissenting agents. Such relationship has three main features. First, it is non systematic (it does not involve an evaluation of the whole of the tradition a theorist adheres to). Second, it consists in evaluating others in terms of their first person considerations in support of the core beliefs they accept. Third, while religious diversity is asymmetric at the beginning (it requires that an epistemic agent finds something challenging in the views of the individuals she encounters), it evolves into a symmetric one.

## **Arguing Religious Ideals Towards a Humane Politics**

*Akeel Bilgrami, Columbia University, New York*

In this paper I will explore how religious traditions offer ideals that may be more fundamental than some of the canonical ideals of the liberal tradition, and as a result, how even in a secular time such as ours, we can appeal to them to reconfigure the political enlightenment in a more human direction.

## **Being Religiously Unmusical: What Does it Mean? And Does it Matter?**

*Paolo Costa, Fondazione Bruno Kessler*

Arguing religion is distinctly difficult. It is so not only because religious beliefs are about things which are epistemically very hard to handle, but because it is often an upsetting undertaking. It can cause, in other words, what Bertolt Brecht called «embarrassing incidents» in his 1943 poem *Peinlicher Vorfall*, which drew inspiration from Alfred Döblin's late-life public profession of his Catholic faith.

Why does arguing about the existence of God or about the goodness or wickedness of the universe or about the soul's fate often make people feel uncomfortable?

There are specific cultural reasons behind this unease, turning around the historical trajectory which led to the rise of the modern idea of «secularity», i.e. a self-sufficient sphere of life and experience set against a transcendent or invisible realm. Still, religious beliefs seem to have something built into them that may cause embarrassment in those who see detachment and self-possession as two essential elements of rational argument.

Accordingly, religious beliefs are often understood as: (1) emotionally charged certitudes, (2) as too closely associated with the believer's moral identity and worldview and, finally, (3) as having an inescapable impact on the fundamental choices and value commitments of their holders. What may induce embarrassment in those who are firmly placed outside the religious realm is, therefore, precisely the lack of a clear boundary between the acts of convincing and converting. Too much is at stake for the arguers to keep the distance needed to be open to the reasons of others. This is what plagues any conversation about the ultimate realities. Claiming one's own religious «unmusicality» is a common way out of this stalemate. The embarrassment is thereby turned into a reasonable and respectful refraining from arguing religious beliefs. This is the argumentative move I want to explore in the second part of my paper. My goal is threefold. First, I want to investigate in depth the idea of religious unmusicality and test its consistency. Second, following Habermas's way of framing the issue, I want to see if belonging to a community of faith and experiencing hierophanies are sufficient conditions for claiming an unbridgeable gap between religious and non-religious beliefs. Finally, I would like to check whether a parallel can be drawn between the aforementioned split and the distinction between morality and ethics (i.e., the right and the good), which is widespread in modern moral philosophy. My prospective goal is to see if overcoming the post-metaphysical ethical abstention also means raising above the embarrassment which inhibits an open-ended conversation between believers of different faiths and non-believers.

## **Religious Disagreement as an Aid to Religious Truth**

*Katherine Dormandy, University of Innsbruck*

Religious communities tend to discourage disagreement, worrying that it will contaminate the (purportedly) true beliefs that they are responsible for safeguarding. I will argue that this attitude is an

epistemic mistake: encouraging disagreement is a good way to secure truth and understanding, including about religion, and to combat the epistemically corrosive groupthink to which even truly (and reliably) believing religious communities are susceptible. Every belief system has blind spots that cannot easily be spotted by its closest adherents. We need a plurality of viewpoints from both inside and outside the religious community to help us remove the epistemic logs from our eyes.

## **Desire, Divine Hiddenness, and Atheism**

*Fiona Ellis*, Heythrop College, University of London

My starting point for this paper is a conception of religious experience which I have articulated and defended in a research project entitled Religious Experience and Desire (part of the Notre Dame Experience Project). According to this conception, religious experience is a species of desire. This approach is familiar from the mystical theologians, and it resurfaces in the work of Levinas. However, it is very different from the account with which analytic philosophers of religion are familiar from the work of Swinburne and Alston. For a start, it involves an essentially affective dimension, and is to be comprehended in externalist terms. I consider the implications for an understanding and assessment of the argument from divine hiddenness against theism as made familiar by the work of John Schellenberg.

## **Religious Disagreements: Real and Apparent**

*Richard Feldman*, University of Rochester

In this paper I will examine a variety of cases in which there seems to be religious disagreement. I will argue that in some significant number cases, there are differences that are best not thought of as disagreements. These are merely apparent disagreements. But there

is a set of residual and important cases that do constitute genuine disagreements. I will discuss the epistemological implications of such cases and defend a conciliatory approach to them, according to which epistemic rationality (but perhaps not other kinds of rationality) requires modifying one's view in light of such disagreement with informed and intelligent peers.

## **Reasons, Commitment and Disagreement in Religious and Other Contexts**

*Winfried Löffler*, University of Innsbruck

One root of disagreement in religious matters are the different accounts of the logical place or state of religious claims. Hence, I will as a first step sketch the (astonishingly broad) spectrum where theistic claims (for the sake of simplicity, I will constrain myself to theism) have been placed in our belief-systems: the offers range from theism as a logico-conceptual truth (if theism is the conclusion of ontological arguments and if these arguments really function without empirical premises), to theism as a set of merely practical beliefs, and from theism as a set of "world-view beliefs" to theism as a quasi-empirical belief (if theism is, e.g., justified by extraordinary experiences and miracles). This broad variety generates various types of disagreements, with a partly "non-symmetric" logical character (which might perhaps provide a partial explanation why such disagreements sometimes appear hopeless).

However, not all such logical localizations of theism are equally recommendable. Hence I will secondly argue that theistic claims are best understood as world-view beliefs of a certain non-Moorean type. For such beliefs there are general criteria of rationality; the list of Ferré (1961) seems still useful here: consistency, coherence, connection to experience, openness for new experiences. Although these criteria are not fundamentally different from criteria for scientific theories, theistic claims are not provable in any stronger sense of the world,

but they are defensible by reasons. Nevertheless, a certain aspect of commitment or “free certainty” is unavoidable in such contexts (and hence, disagreement is to be expected). This situation is, however, not a peculiarity of discussions about religious claims. It is comparable to certain other fields in science and in philosophy. Examples are the well-known foundational debates in mathematics (between realism and constructivism); in ethics (between consequentialism/deontology/universalism); debates about positions in intergenerational ethics; policy suggestions from rivalizing economic theories; debates between descriptive and various revisionary positions in ontology. One interesting point about such disagreements is that the reasons given may well be mutually understandable and even be rationally respected by the parties, but usually they do not suffice to change one’s mind easily.

## **Essentially Contested Concepts and Mutual Recognition**

*Arto Laitinen*, University of Tampere

*Joonas Pennanen*, University of Jyväskylä

In this paper we approach the phenomenon of essential contestability, in reference to Gallie’s famous analysis of essentially contested concepts [ECC], in light of the debates on mutual recognition. This is motivated by the observation that one of Gallie’s criteria for essential contestability has been dubbed “reciprocal recognition”. We will start by introducing the question/phenomenon of “reasonable disagreement”: the sides disagree, but neither is unjustified in holding their view; we suggest that there are interestingly and importantly different versions of this idea around (1.1). Then we will introduce Gallie’s eight criteria for ECC and especially the fifth criterion (of reciprocal recognition) (1.2). We will then ask (1.3) what it is that needs to be recognized or acknowledged for essential contestability to be at stake: first, that usages are contested; second, that (each) usage is justified and that the case is that of a

reasonable disagreement; (we focus on these in 2.1-2- 4), and third, that the parties recognize each other in some suitable ways (as persons; as competent judges; as possessors of particular thick viewpoints or identities). (We focus on these in 3.1-3.3). Throughout the paper we will use varieties of religious argumentation and disagreement as cases and examples.

## **Metaphysical Realism as the *Proton Pseudos* of Theodicism: A Pragmatic Critique of the Argument from Evil**

*Sami Pihlström*, University of Helsinki

I have argued in some previous work that we need a thoroughgoing philosophical articulation and defense of antitheodicism, a way of thinking about evil and suffering that firmly rejects the pursuit of theodicies allegedly justifying evil and suffering (Pihlström 2014; Kivistö & Pihlström 2016a, 2016b). That is, we need to emancipate the problem of evil and suffering – including its traditional theological articulations – from theodacist assumptions that lead to a chronic non-acknowledgment of the sufferers' experiential point of view. This also entails emancipating the problem of evil and suffering from the need to consider the so-called argument from evil. In the argument "from" evil, evil and suffering are seen as pieces of empirical evidence against theism. This presupposes understanding theism as a hypothesis to be tested in an evidentialist game of argumentation. Such a presupposition fails to acknowledge the depth and variety of both religious and non-religious approaches to living with evil and suffering. Therefore, I will suggest in this paper that the entire argumentative discourse around the problem of evil ought to be pragmatically reconsidered from the perspective of the ethics of recognition (acknowledgment). In particular, this entails the need of a pragmatic critique of one of the key presuppositions of theodicism, viz., metaphysical realism that seeks to reduce away the perspectivalness of individual human suffering.

## **Rationalist Resistance to Disagreement-Motivated Religious Skepticism**

*John Pittard, Yale University*

When is it reasonable to maintain confident religious (or irreligious) belief in the face of systematic religious disagreement? I argue that the answer to this question depends in large measure on the scope of what may be called partisan justification. Roughly, a subject has partisan justification for her belief that  $p$  when she is reasonable in having a credence for  $p$  that exceeds an impartial estimate of her cognitive reliability on the matter. I consider four different views on the nature and scope of partisan justification: an extreme conciliatory position that denies the possibility of partisan justification (except in an extremely narrow range of cases); an externalist and an “agent centered” account that allow for partisan justification even in disagreements with acknowledged rational parity; and a rationalist account according to which partisan justification is grounded in rational insight and is not available in disagreements with acknowledged rational parity. I argue that only the rationalist account is tenable, and highlight some important implications of this conclusion for the debate concerning the epistemic significance of religious disagreement.

## **Beyond the Wall of Separation: The Cooperation of State and Religious Communities under the German Constitution**

*Ralf Poscher, University of Freiburg*

In modern Western secular societies it seems natural to strictly separate state and religion. It almost seems to follow necessarily from the idea of religious neutrality of the state, which seems not to allow any identification of the state with religious beliefs. Historically the German constitutions of Weimar and also of the Grundgesetz after the

second world war, however, did not follow this separationist principle. They rather established a model of cooperation between the state and religious communities that tries to stay true to the neutrality principle but allows for the integration of different religions most prominently in public schools but also in other domains of government like the military. The talk will explain the historic configuration of the cooperation model and suggestions for reform to adapt it to a more religiously pluralist society.

## **Religious Claims, Arguments, and Disagreements**

*Boris Rähme, Fondazione Bruno Kessler*

Some hold that thinking about religious disagreements along the lines of standard epistemological concepts and arguments distorts the view on what really is at issue and at stake in such disagreements. Others insist that it is perfectly legitimate (i.e., not at all beside the point) to raise and investigate questions about the epistemic significance of religious disagreement for religious belief and, more generally, about the conditions under which religious belief may be said to be epistemically reasonable or rational. After briefly motivating qualified versions of both claims, the main part of the paper discusses the much narrower question of whether the various notions of epistemic peer disagreement that have been proposed in the general epistemology of disagreement can be usefully brought to bear on debates about religious disagreement. I will argue for a (tentative) negative answer to this question and conclude with some remarks on how my considerations bear on issues regarding toleration and recognition between parties to religious disagreements.

## 4. Venue



**Via Santa Croce 77  
I-38122 Trento  
T. +39 0461 314 238/232**

The conference will take place at **Fondazione Bruno Kessler - Centre for Religious Studies**

### **BY FOOT**

It takes less than 15 minutes to walk from the train station. Ask for via Santa Croce. Or ask for Centro Santa Chiara, a well known structure hosting an auditorium for cultural events.

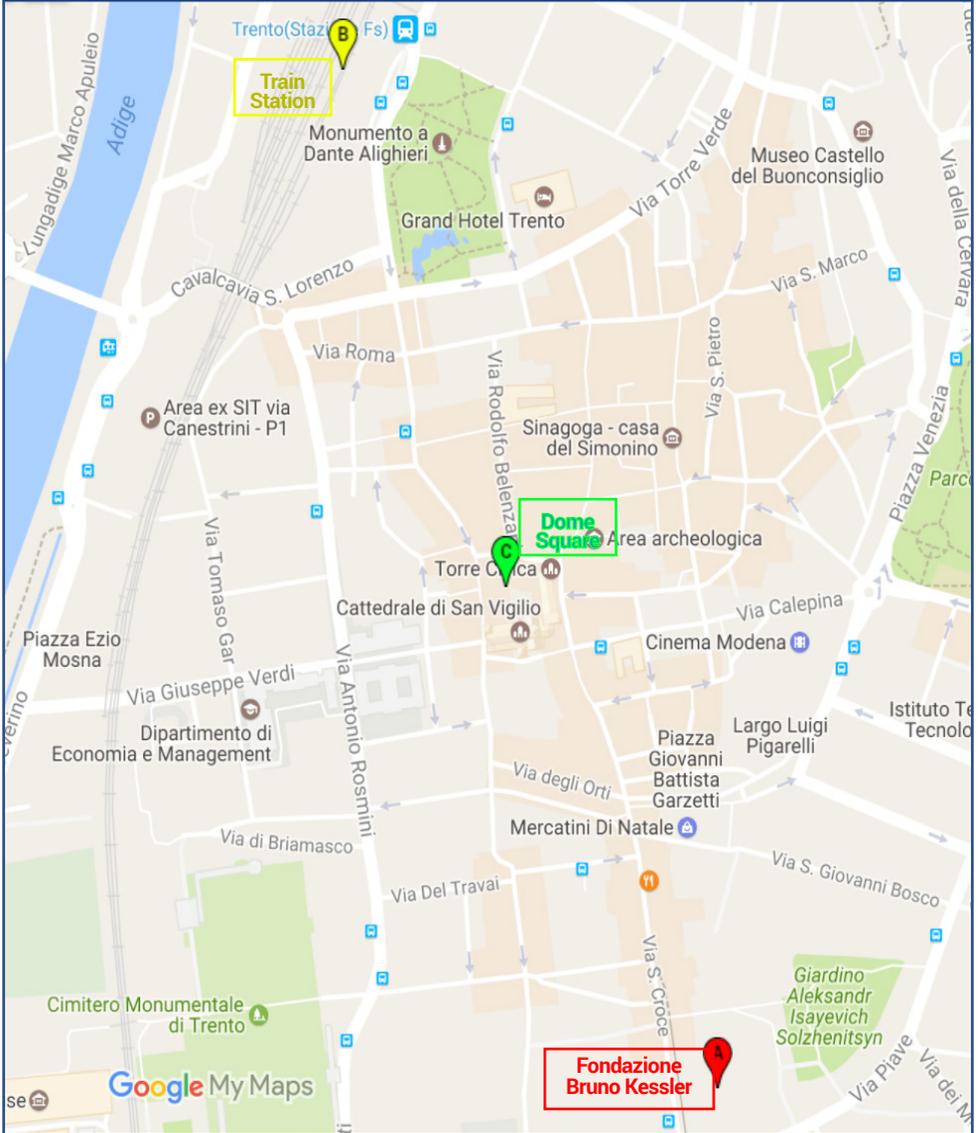
### **BY CAR**

You can't park at our offices without special permission. Consider parking in the underground car park at Piazza Fiera. From the motorway, exit at TRENTO SUD or TRENTO NORD and head toward the center.

### **BY BUS**

Trento has a very good transport system, with 17 city routes. All routes pass close to the train station, leaving every 15 to 30 minutes from about 5 a.m. to about 10 p.m. There are lots of buses that go to our head offices (President's office, Religious Sciences, Italian-German Historical Institute, and FBK's humanities libraries). The most frequent are the 3 and 8, but any bus that stops at Piazza Fiera works. When you get off, walk in the opposite direction of the old city wall. All routes pass close to the train station, leaving every 15 to 30 minutes from about 5 a.m. to about 10 p.m.

# 5. Trento city map



# Organisation

## Organising Committee

*Boris Rähme*, Fondazione Bruno Kessler

*Paolo Costa*, Fondazione Bruno Kessler

*Geert Keil*, Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin

*Ralf Poscher*, Albert-Ludwigs-Universität Freiburg



## Deep Disagreements

HUMBOLDT-UNIVERSITÄT  
ZU BERLIN



## Support



<http://arguingreligion.fbk.eu/>