

## Keith Yandell Remembered

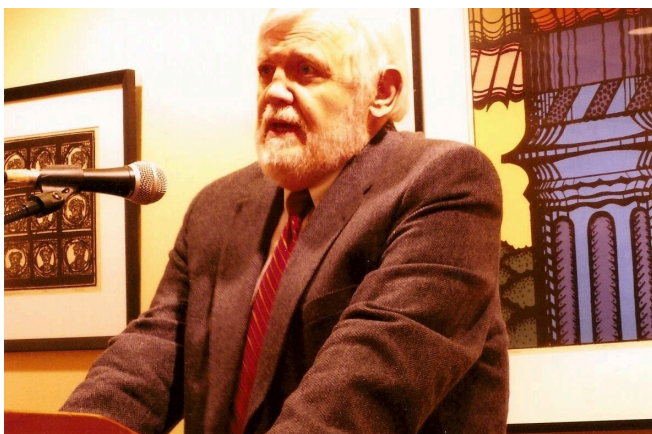
Dave Werther  
 Division of Continuing Studies  
 University of Wisconsin-Madison  
 Madison, Wisconsin

Mark D. Linville  
 PhD program in Humanities  
 Faulkner University  
 Montgomery, Alabama

*“There is a great man who makes every man feel small. But the real great man is the man who makes every man feel great.”*

--G.K. Chesterton

To be invited to write a remembrance of Keith Yandell is a bittersweet honor. How much better it would be to be invited to talk philosophy with him over coffee in the UW-Madison Student Union or to pass an afternoon with him browsing the used bookstores along State Street--invitations we (Dave and Mark)



have been honored to receive and pleased to accept. And the emotional accompaniment to this task stands in stark contrast to the immense pleasure that was ours when we had a hand in the publication of *Philosophy and the Christian Worldview* (Bloomsbury 2012), joining with several fine scholars and admirers of Keith to write essays in his honor. But Keith

himself might have observed that *X is a bittersweet honor* entails *X is an honor*. And so we are thankful for the opportunity to remember him. After our separate reminiscences we will close with a few comments on the lasting significance of Keith's work.

### Some Memories

*Dave:* I had finished an M.Div. program at TEDS, having taken some electives from Stuart Hackett. I then wanted to pursue philosophy in further graduate studies, but had some background work in logic I needed to do. A friend alerted me to a distance-education course in logic the University of Wisconsin offered. I took it.

Keith Yandell was the author. That course and Keith's book *Christianity and Philosophy* (Eerdmans, 1984) were my first encounters with a mind that Robert Frykenberg, Keith's colleague in History and South Asian Studies, once described as a 'steel trap.'

When I had determined to study philosophy at UW-Madison, I made an appointment to meet Keith, with the intention of asking him to be my advisor. I was nervous. Keith was the reason I wanted to study at Madison; he was also department chair then and so might well have more than enough to do without taking on a new advisee. When I met Keith, I was overwhelmed by his warmth and the personal interest he took in me. Before I left his office, he had graciously agreed to be my advisor and handed off the teaching of his distance-ed course in logic to me.

I learned a lot from Keith, not just in seminars but in advisee meetings, trips to Paul's Bookstore, and as his teaching assistant on numerous occasions. In Philosophy 261, Introduction to the Philosophy of Religion, Keith lectured without a note. When he came into the lecture hall just before the beginning of class, he would lean over and ask me quietly "Dave, what was I talking about when I finished last time?" If I said, "the second condition of the principle of experiential evidence," Keith would walk to the front of the hall, and say "Now in our last meeting we began looking at the second condition of the principle of experiential evidence . . ." and walking back and forth in the front of the hall for the next 50 minutes, offer a detailed and precise set of arguments.

Keith's detailed Philosophy 261 arguments were cross-cultural, including Advaita Vedanta Hinduism and Theravada Buddhism. Some philosophers are adept at analysis, but cannot see beyond numbered propositions. Others want to eschew fine-grained analysis in favor of "the big questions." Keith was unique in his ability to do deep analysis along with the assessment of conceptual systems. His mind was as broad as it was deep and it was very, very deep.

The last years were hard ones for Keith as he battled various health problems. One of my favorite memories of these years was visiting Keith when he was receiving physical therapy. He had a book on his table and I could not see the title. I asked him what he was reading; N.T. Wright's *The Day the Revolution Began*. Coincidentally, I had been reading the same book and had brought my copy with me. What followed was a delightful conversation taking me back to the golden times in Keith's philosophy of religion seminars, where his deep and broad thinking shone.



Keith, Mark and I sometimes talked about counterfactuals, as Mark was writing his dissertation on Molinism and Ockhamism. Thinking about all those possible worlds where we never meet Keith, we could be tempted to think we were lucky we did. But perhaps it was not a matter of luck at all.

But in Friendship, being free and all that, we think we have chosen our peers... In reality, a few years' difference in the dates of our births, a few more miles between certain houses, the choice of one university instead of another . . . any of these chances might have kept us apart. But, for a Christian, there are, strictly speaking, no chances. A secret Master of Ceremonies has been at work. Christ, who said to the disciples 'Ye have not chosen me, but I have chosen you,' can truly say to every group of Christian friends 'You have not chosen one another but I have chosen you for one another.' (C.S. Lewis, *The Four Loves*)

Keith affirmed divine providence and creation in the divine image, among the core claims of Christian theism. Having seen that image reflected in Keith, makes it easy for us to believe in divine providence and praise the Secret Master of Ceremonies.

My debts to Keith are enormous. My wife, Susan, and I count it as one of our greatest joys that Keith officiated at our wedding. Keith was much more than an excellent academic advisor; he was a friend, counselor, mentor, a constant source of encouragement, wisdom and inspiration. And, he still is.

*Mark:* It was 1986, when I was finishing an M.A. program at TEDS and shopping for PhD programs, that I happened upon a copy of Keith's *Christianity and Philosophy* in the TEDS bookstore. I bought it, read it, and that settled it. I applied to UW-Madison. Keith's role in my being accepted is an interesting and long story with shades of "St. George and the Dragon," but suffice it to say that but for his heroic efforts on my behalf I would likely, at this stage in life, be looking back on a career of selling insurance, or I might by now have been an experienced fry cook. My debts to Keith began accumulating before we even met. For his example, instruction, encouragement, support, and friendship in the years that followed--both in the years of my program and beyond--that debt has grown beyond possible repayment.

On our first meeting, I addressed him as "Dr. Yandell," but he preferred "Keith," and "Keith" he has been ever since, neither insisting upon his title nor flaunting his credentials. Despite his obvious brilliance, Keith was humble, good-humored, and approachable. Indeed, *he* approached *us*, as there would be a knock on a TA's office door with Keith on the other side: "Hey, you want to go get some coffee?" He met regularly with his small group of advisees--often in the small office that Dave and I shared as TAs--to discuss, say, the doctrines of the Trinity or the Incarnation or Atonement. In a department where nearly everyone else took

naturalism as axiomatic, being occupied with such things as working out a materialist account of mind, I imagine that many would have thought our discussions comparable to sober philosophical examinations of the essential properties of the Easter Bunny. For us this was an oasis of Christian fellowship and scholarship in the midst of a first rate--but decidedly secular--philosophy department.

The familiar phrase that all of Keith's students will remember is "Consider the following argument." What followed was usually a rigorous bit of argumentation replete with all of the P's and Q's, stars and primes, and numbered propositions of analytic philosophy in its grandest style. This might be in a lecture or in a private conversation over lunch. As you were picking at your tuna salad, he might say, "Suppose that X is of kind K, Y is of kind K\*, *being a member of K* essentially includes properties P, Q, and R, and *being a member of K\** essentially includes P\*, Q\*, and R\*, and *having P* entails *not-having P\** (and vice versa), and *having Q* entails *not-having Q\** (and vice versa), and *having R* entails *not-having R\** (and vice versa)...." At this point he might pause, look at you with a quick and encouraging nod, raised eyebrows and upturned palms, as if to say, "You're with me so far, right?" and then he would plunge back in.



And "Consider the following argument" was sometimes the preface to his critique of an idea or argument of your own. But even as your carefully crafted arguments suffered the fate of the walls of Jericho, the man responsible exuded great friendliness and cheer. In fact, as I sat next to him during my graduation ceremony, Keith borrowed my program and began furiously writing something on the back. When he returned it I found an argument challenging the central contention of my

dissertation. He smiled, winked, and whispered, "You can't cross the platform until you answer it." (I had never convinced him of that "central contention.") Years later--and not long ago--I was invited to contribute to a "Four Views" book to which Keith was also a contributor. I confessed to the editor that the prospect of having Keith's critique of my work laid out in print for all to see was a little like submitting to a public flogging, except the flogger was an unusually friendly fellow with nothing but kindness in his heart, smiling cheerfully, and perhaps even engaging in casual conversation ("How are the wife and kids?") with the floggee as he worked.

Keith was a *superb* lecturer. The substance of his graduate seminars consisted of his extemporaneous lectures--he would simply walk into the class empty-handed,

---

offer a cheery greeting, and begin talking--that were uniformly high-powered, fine-grained, and on a level and with the sort of polish that one might expect in one of his published works. But he could also communicate on a level that we mere mortals could understand and appreciate, and this included public lectures and talks on, say, Christian apologetics for churches or student groups and a series of lectures and debates at the Carl Henry Center at TEDS. I occasionally had the privilege of working with Keith as his teaching assistant, including an experimental and team-taught (with faculty from nine disciplines across the campus) undergraduate course. As the sole philosopher in the mix, Keith delivered a series of informative, entertaining--often humorous--and, of course, extemporaneous lectures on ethics that prompted one of the other professors to say to me, "I had no idea he was such a good lecturer." His style in such a setting was casual, conversational, funny, and friendly.

Keith was an analytic philosopher *par excellence*, and he may have been poking fun at his own penchant for the "alphabet soup" style when he wrote his syllabus, shared with me by Trent Leach, a fellow Yandellian, for a class he taught at TEDS on the Cambridge Platonists:

Consider the following description of a paper P: P is no more than 12 double-spaced pages.... What P considers is a central claim C in metaphysics, epistemology, or ethics and the argument(s) provided for C, by Samuel Clarke or one of the Cambridge Platonists. P assesses that argument and comes to a reasoned conclusion concerning the truth or falsehood of C.... Please write a paper that satisfies the description of P.

Despite the precision of his philosophical work, Keith defied the stereotype of analytic philosophers who "either scorn or simply ignore history of philosophy," as one author has put it. He was widely read in the history of his discipline and offered a wide range of courses and seminars on different periods of that history and individual philosophers. He followed the example of his own PhD adviser at Ohio State, Richard Severens, in striving for "clarity and cogent argumentation" while, at the same time, relating his work to "the tradition." Nor did he spend a career of straining at gnats while uncritically swallowing worldviews--the other stereotype--as he was convinced early on that "philosophy need not be divorced from those 'human concerns' which constitute the core of thoughtful living." A chief concern of his was the rational assessment of worldviews as comprehensive conceptual systems, and this concern led him to an expertise in the religious and philosophical systems of India in addition to his consideration of theism and its main alternatives in the West.

## Lasting Significance

Keith dedicated his *Philosophy of Religion: A Contemporary Introduction* (Routledge, 1999) to Alvin Plantinga. It is altogether fitting and proper that he should do this. The inscription reads, “To Alvin Plantinga -- he led the way.” He refers, of course, to the role that Plantinga has played in restoring the discipline of philosophy of religion to its rightful place in the academy after its exile during the usurping reign of logical positivism. But while such credit is certainly due to Plantinga, Keith was among that vanguard of Christian and theistic philosophers who were, as naturalist philosopher Quentin Smith observed, “writing at the highest qualitative level of analytic philosophy, on the same playing field as Carnap, Russell, Moore, Grünbaum, and other naturalists.”

Keith was initially drawn to philosophy as a student in Héctor-Neri Castañeda’s Introduction to Philosophy at Wayne State, then a bastion of analytic philosophy where he cut his teeth and earned his B.A. and M.A. degrees. Among his professors were Robert Sleigh, Edmund Gettier, and Alvin Plantinga. He went on to Ohio State where he studied with, among others, Marvin Fox, Everett J. Nelson, and Richard Sevens.

Keith’s early foray in a 1968 article “Empiricism and Theism” in *Sophia* (and his side in a resulting exchange with atheist philosopher Kai Nielsen) fits Smith’s description of high-level analytic philosophy in the hands of a theistic philosopher, and it was a direct assault on the restrictions that the positivists, wielding their verification principle, had enforced upon moral and religious language. He revisited these and other issues in *Basic Issues in Philosophy of Religion* (Allyn and Bacon, 1971) and then over the course of his career published more than 100 journal articles and several authored and edited books. These include *Hume’s Inexplicable Mystery* (Temple, 1990), which features a penetrating analysis and assessment of Hume’s views and arguments concerning religious belief and established Keith as an authority on Hume (an “excellent Hume scholar” in the estimation of noted Hume scholar Terence Penelhum). *The Epistemology of Religious Experience* (Cambridge, 1994) is a careful and cross-cultural consideration of the question of what evidential support, if any, religious experiences provide for religious truth claims. In this work, as with many of his other writings, Keith considers certain non-theistic traditions--notably, Advaita Vedanta Hinduism, Theravada Buddhism, and Jainism--and pays them the compliment of taking their truth claims seriously *as* truth claims and thus assessing them as such. He thus filled a yawning gap, as not many philosophers of religion have given due attention to the various religious traditions outside of monotheism (and many who do so do not engage in anything like rational assessment). Of course, Keith recognized that his approach is, in some academic circles – especially those circles in which Religious Pluralism is “in danger of becoming canonical” – about as popular as “a teetotal sermon at a local pub.” And so his cross-cultural work is

---

flanked by an extensive critique of Religious Pluralism and, more broadly, a vigorous defense of the practice of philosophy of religion in general which, as he conceived it, centrally involved the rational assessment of religious truth claims. Unless religious truth claims are open to rational assessment philosophy of religion is an idle practice.

As others have noted, Keith was primarily a philosopher who was also a committed Christian, and so he is not best ranked among Christian apologists. But he was a philosopher with both a personal and scholarly interest in philosophy of religion, a theistic worldview, and issues in Christian theology, and so his careful philosophical work is of lasting value not only to philosophers--Christian and otherwise--but also to Christian apologists and theologians, as well as to those working in the emerging and rather hybrid discipline of analytic theology.

Through Christ, Keith has won his Last Battle. In the words of Aslan, "The term is over: the holidays have begun."

**David Werther** (PhD, philosophy, University of Wisconsin-Madison) teaches in the Division of Continuing Studies, University of Wisconsin-Madison. With Mark Linville, he is co-editor of *Philosophy and the Christian Worldview: Analysis, Assessment and Development* (Continuum, 2012), and, with Susan Werther, co-editor of *C.S. Lewis's List: The Ten Books That Influenced Him Most* (Bloomsbury Academic, 2015).

**Mark Linville** (PhD, philosophy, University of Wisconsin-Madison) is Senior Research Fellow and Philosophy Tutor for the PhD program in Humanities at Faulkner University. He is the author of "The Moral Argument" in *The Blackwell Companion to Natural Theology* (Wiley-Blackwell, 2009).