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RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE AND THE END OF METAPHYSICS

A profile of Jeffrey Bloechl (ed), *Religious Experience and the End of Metaphysics*.
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THE CURRENT POVERTY OF STRICTLY ANALYTIC PHILOSOPHY OF RELIGION is starkly contrasted by the innovative research conducted in Continental philosophy of religion. *Religious Experience and the End of Metaphysics* is further testimony to this trend. The notion of religious experience, which has been a fundamental theme of analytic philosophy of religion, is given a fresh treatment from a Continental vantage. This Continental perspective is far more than a genre or metaphor since many of the ten essays in this collection originate from a seminar, entitled "Religious Experience in the Wake of Modernity", held in the Theology Department of the Catholic University of Louvain, Belgium. Although the themes of the volume range across religious (Judaism, Buddhism, and Christianity), Martin Heidegger, as the last portion of the title suggests, is the figure that orients the direction of this collection. Principally, Heidegger's concern with onto-theology and his desire to overcome it influence the manner in which the contributors address how one may have a religious experience or encounter the divine. While addressing Heidegger, contributors broach a plethora of secondary issues: speech and language, eschatological community and ethics, aesthetics, and lived experience.

In the first essay "The Disappearance of Philosophical Theology in Hermeneutic Philosophy", Ben Vedder engages the relationship between philosophy and theology. This concern reveals the volume's recurrent occupation with theological matters, necessitated by the rethinking of the onto-theological tradition. Vedder charts the historical disintegration of rationalistic, philosophical theology starting curiously with Spinoza, whom Vedder suggests is the first to endorse hermeneutics as he draws a distinction between "philosophical knowledge of God and the hermeneutic approach of believers" (15). According to Vedder, philosophical theology is unable to truly encounter "God", who remains an infinite ideal. As such, Vedder argues that hermeneutics is intimately

tied to human finitude, in that it is an endless practice. Heidegger revises the hermeneutic tradition through the proposition of a finitude that is not linked to a “horizon of infinity”—a provisional nothingness (25).

This theme of nothingness continues into the second essay, “Rethinking God: Heidegger in the Light of Absolute Nothing, Nishida in the Shadow of Onto-theology.” In this essay, John C. Maraldo performs a comparative reading of Heidegger and the Japanese philosopher Nishida Kitarō (1870-1945), in which he seeks to demonstrate that Heidegger’s revision of Western metaphysics is limited by his unwillingness to truly think nothing. For Maraldo, Nishida’s Buddhist conception of Absolute Nothing as the ground of Being allows one to rethink God outside Western ontological and metaphysical constraints. With his rejection of onto-theology, Heidegger dispenses with God unnecessarily. As Maraldo avers, he forgets to think Nothing itself despite his pretense of open-ended questioning.

Beginning with the third chapter, there is an engagement with Heidegger’s phenomenology. Emilio Brito’s essay, “Light and Shadows from the Heideggerian Interpretation of the Sacred” probes the manner in which Heidegger relates *das Heilige* (the Sacred) to the question of Being, whilst Jean-Yves Lacoste explores Heidegger’s interpretation of the work of art and its usefulness for theology and the philosophy of religion in his essay, “The Work and Complement of Appearing.” In both essays, there is a quest to find the Opening of the divine/sacred in Heidegger’s thought, a quest to devise a phenomenology of the non-appearing. Brito finds the Opening in poetry and Lacoste locates it in artwork. In both cases, the non-appearing divine is perceptible through an affective act of mediation.

Adriaan Peperzak’s essay, “Affective Theology, Theological Affectivity” continues to reflect on encountering the divine through affectivity. By outlining a phenomenology of speech Peperzak presents religious experience as a manner of being in the world. Using speech as an analogy, he demonstrates how an effective theology requires affectivity, which allows one to experience the God that it addresses. Such a theology confounds many of philosophy’s questions regarding the metaphysics of presence through a “para-doxical attunement ... [exhibited in] the Christian tradition of ‘spiritual’ life” (104).

With Ignace Verhack’s essay, “Immanent Transcendence as Way to ‘God’” the volume shifts direction, becoming less occupied with Heidegger himself and more engaged with his critics, who, in Bloechl’s words, “criticize him in the name of religion” (9). One such critic, Jean-Luc Marion, factors in both Verhack’s essay and in the following essay, “Derrida and Marion: Two Husserlian Revo-

lutions" by John D. Caputo. Underscoring Heidegger's suggestion that "godless thinking is more open to" a truly divine God, Verhack broaches Marion's modification of Heideggerian (non)metaphysics, in which he links Heidegger's *es gibt* to a phenomenology of the gift where God exists only in the act of giving and thereby existing outside of ontology per se. Verhack, however, does not find Marion's later accounts persuasive and endorses a return to his earlier work, which allows the "thinking of God as gratuitous self-gift par excellence" (116). Caputo also finds Marion's account unconvincing, suggesting that it is "a phenomenological version of Christian Neo-Platonism" (129). Instead, he favors Derrida's deconstructive messianic eschatology, where "the name of God is the name of the possibility of the impossible" and not a "saturated phenomenon" or the pure gift itself (*étant donné*) (125).

Another critic who opposes Heidegger and his propensity to reduce plurality to totality through his fundamental ontology is Emmanuel Levinas. Richard Cohen addresses Levinas's criticisms in regard to Judaism in "The Universal in Jewish Particularism." Cohen argues that Judaism occupies a special place in the Western religious tradition—precisely because it is not properly a religion at all, but rather a way of living that encompasses an ethos and a civilization. As such, it assimilates many religious paradoxes, in particular the binaries of transcendence/immanence and particular/universal. Like Peperzak's Christianity, Cohen's endorsement of Judaism's "concrete universalism" as the solution to many modern philosophical problems returns the philosophy of religion to the embodied and experiential roots of a particular religious tradition.

Kevin Hart's essay, "The Kingdom and the Trinity" is by far the volume's most theological work, in both content and method. Probing two fundamental and distinctive sites where Christians experience the divine, Hart quickly points out that in these two motifs—the kingdom and the trinity—one does not actually seize "an experience, but rather a new structure of experiencing" (160). Beyond finite human aptitude, these motifs are not conceptually graspable, but are available "only in the life that reaches toward them" (11).

In the last essay, "Ultimacy and Conventionality in Religious Experience" Joseph O'Leary enters the entrenched debate (between Steven Katz and Robert Forman) over mystical experience and its relation to (linguistic) mediation. This debate has occupied analytic philosophy of religion for the past two decades. O'Leary seeks to blur the division through an innovative appeal to phenomenology and Mādhyamika Buddhism. Through an investigation of ultimacy and conventionality and their effect on one another, O'Leary argues for a plurality of experience where both are culturally and contextually bound. Although they are historically and linguistically mediated, mystical texts retain a sense of ultimacy

which remains attainable for the reader through a radical plurality of experience.

Religious Experience and the End of Metaphysics is a diverse collection of essays that attempts to understand the human encounter with the divine without recourse to metaphysics. Using largely continental thinkers as a starting point, it returns the philosophy of religion to the lived, embodied experiences of individual religious traditions. As such, many of the essays have a theological agenda—non-foundational, but theological all the same. This agenda blurs the lines between philosophy and theology, exposing what Hent De Vries has called the “the turn to religion.”

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