

Sophia Studies in Cross-cultural Philosophy  
of Traditions and Cultures 31

Balázs M. Mezei  
Matthew Z. Vale *Editors*

# Philosophies of Christianity

At the Crossroads of Contemporary  
Problems



Springer

# **Sophia Studies in Cross-cultural Philosophy of Traditions and Cultures**

Volume 31

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Balázs M. Mezei • Matthew Z. Vale  
Editors

# Philosophies of Christianity

At the Crossroads of Contemporary Problems

 Springer

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Hungarian names are normally written in this order: family name first, and given names second. We keep this order here, while capitalizing family names in order to avoid misunderstanding.



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# Chapter 1

## Introduction



**Balázs M. Mezei**

The present volume is the result of a maintained cooperation between Catholic and non-Catholic Universities in Europe and the United States. In particular, the texts presented here are gathered from conferences we organized in Budapest, Hungary, at Pázmány Péter Catholic University in 2015. The aim of these conferences has been to offer novel approaches to some of the central problems in philosophy of Christian-Catholic provenience. We have attempted to articulate various new approaches from philosophers who have been active for a long time and are known for their contributions to philosophy, theology, or philosophical theology. As common platforms, the conferences helped us understand each other's work in a setting both personally inspiring and academically stimulating. As a result of these meetings, we came also better to understand the necessity of continuing our efforts to reach a new kind of thinking which may help, as Classical philosophy did for many centuries, to understand the central tenets of Christianity in a new light.

Philosophy was considered for a long time as the preamble to theology. As philosophy came to be seen as the realm of the sciences in modernity, especially the discipline to clarify methodology, the long story of the isolation of theology from philosophy and the sciences began. The rise of new philosophical endeavors in modernity, such as rationalism, deism and idealism, could not reestablish the role of philosophy as an introduction to theology in scholarship and research. Instead, philosophy appeared in many ways as the rival of theology, either in the form of entering and reshaping, or denying the validity of, the theological realm. This situation changed after the publication of the papal encyclical *Aeterni Patris*, which attempted to reestablish traditional philosophy on the one hand, and to renew its role as an introduction to theology on the other hand. It seems that, more than a century after the first philosophical encyclical, the situation had not substantially changed. In the

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second philosophical encyclical issued by a pope, Saint John Paul II's *Faith and Reason*, philosophy appears not only as the servant of theology, but also as the discipline assisting the human mind in its endeavor of discovering new terrains and finding new interpretations of perennial doctrines. With *Faith and Reason*, then, the traditional relationship between philosophy and theology fundamentally changed and philosophy was acknowledged to be an important actor in the interpretation of reality—indeed, an actor possessing some role in the drama of theology as well.

One of the key sentences in *Faith and Reason* is the call 'to prompt, promote and encourage philosophical enquiry.'<sup>1</sup> This prompting receives a longer explanation in the following way:

... I cannot but encourage philosophers—be they Christian or not—to trust in the power of human reason and not to set themselves goals that are too modest in their philosophizing. The lesson of history in this millennium now drawing to a close shows that this is the path to follow: it is necessary not to abandon the passion for ultimate truth, the eagerness to search for it or the audacity to forge new paths in the search. It is faith which stirs reason to move beyond all isolation and willingly to run risks so that it may attain whatever is beautiful, good and true. Faith thus becomes the convinced and convincing advocate of reason.<sup>2</sup>

Philosophy's daring endeavor to discover ultimate truth is thus encouraged in emphatic words. We can ask: what kind of philosophy is meant by the author of *Faith and Reason*? The answer appears to be obvious: there is no single, determinate kind of philosophizing urged by the encyclical. It is rather the passion to discover ultimate truth that is placed at the center. This passion may take various forms, and the important thing is not to follow some convenient path but rather to go out and find new ways of philosophy's 'audacity' to search for truth. The encyclical also rightly emphasizes the importance of the self-criticism of philosophy: philosophy is not only the courageous way to discover new interpretations, but also a critical way, i.e., the way of critique and self-critique. In the present volume, the reader will find such courageous, critical and even self-critical attempts at finding and articulating the truth with respect to some fundamental tenets of Christianity.

During the two decades after the publication of *Faith and Reason*, several such philosophical attempts have been formulated. Many of them are ingenious endeavors to create a new form of philosophy, most often a philosophy of religion, in which Christianity's main tenets are either presupposed or investigated—or sometimes even further developed, in a certain sense.<sup>3</sup> While it is advisable to have a

<sup>1</sup>Pope John Paul II, *Encyclical Letter FIDES ET RATIO of the Supreme Pontiff John Paul II to the Bishops of the Catholic Church on the Relationship between Faith and Reason*. Rome: 1998, § 51.

<sup>2</sup>*Ibid.*, § 56.

<sup>3</sup>See my summary in Balázs M. Mezei, 'Renewing Christian Philosophy: An Outline', in *Christian Wisdom Meets Modernity*, ed. Kenneth Oakes, Illuminating Modernity Series (New York; London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2016), pp. 203–2033. Cf. also Mezei, 'Catholic Philosophy in the New Millennium', in Mezei, *Religion and Revelation after Auschwitz* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2013), pp. 297–317. For an overall criticism of the presuppositions of Christian thinking, cf. Mezei, 'Demythologizing Christian Philosophy: An Outline', *Logos i ethos* 1, no. 34 (2013): pp. 109–146. As for the criticism of the presuppositions of traditional Christian philosophy, see Mezei, 'Realist Phenomenology and Philosophy of Religion: A Critical Reflection', *Logos i ethos* 44, no. 1 (2017): pp. 47–70.



critical perspective on such endeavors, it is also important to encourage philosophers to find new ways of philosophizing. This encouragement, in harmony with the words of the encyclical quoted above, is an organic part of the Christian and Catholic tradition beginning with Saint Augustine, through the rich scholastic legacy of the Middle Ages, up to the important endeavors of rationalistic, idealistic and even phenomenological, existentialist and hermeneutical philosophies in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

In our time, such courageous philosophies, as it were, may be classified into five groups:

1. Histories of philosophy with a vast output on the work of various authors, schools, ages, and traditions;
2. Contemporary continental philosophy, especially phenomenology, existentialism, hermeneutics and post-modern thought;
3. Contemporary analytic philosophy, especially the various branches of philosophy of religion;
4. New paradigms in philosophical theology with a critical potential vis-à-vis some modern philosophical developments;
5. Certain schools in the theory of science with a strong interest in the reinterpretation of Christianity in harmony with recent scientific advancements.

The importance of these developments lies in the fact that the eternal truth of Christianity, with its focus on the doctrine of the Holy Trinity, may be better assessed and newly understood—inasmuch as understanding here is possible—on the basis of intellectual efforts rooted in the best results of contemporary research. We need to be attentive to such developments so that the intellectual situation of our time may become clearer, and the meaning of the truth of Christianity may be better grasped and expressed through the new methodologies, problems and terminologies provided by contemporary scholarship. Let me thus briefly point out the advantages and disadvantages each of the above factors entail with respect to the better understanding we aim at.

*Ad (1):* The historical study of philosophy, and especially of Christianity-oriented thought, has a central importance in any relevant research. The study of the philosophical background of Saint Augustine, Saint Thomas, Pascal or Fénelon has an immense significance in understanding the age and the person in question—and thus also in the understanding of the developments rooted in these ages and persons, developments which shaped the conceptual and logical framework of subsequent works in philosophy and theology. However, the danger in specific historical studies is at least twofold. On the one hand, even in historical studies a certain philosophical understanding is presupposed which is not made explicit and thus may determine the thought of a researcher in a negative way. Such research must avoid a certain self-evident attitude on the part of the historian, which remains blind to the presuppositions entailed in historical studies which are themselves in need of more thorough investigation. For instance, the notion of personhood shows a characteristic difference in the works of Thomas Aquinas and Immanuel Kant. This difference must be taken into consideration, first, in any analysis of personhood in the two



authors respectively. Secondly, and more importantly, the continuous development of the meaning of this term is in need of overall reflection. By presupposing a common notion of personhood which is not verifiable in the work of a given author—in spite of the use of the corresponding expression in a given language—one distorts the thought of that author and opens the way to an interpretation detrimental to the true understanding of the work and the age of the author.

*Ad (2):* Contemporary continental philosophy has various sources, namely phenomenology, hermeneutics, existentialism, structuralism, post-structuralist and post-modern thought. Almost all these developments have included the work of authors with a relevant interest in philosophical theology. In phenomenology, such authors make a long list, beginning with Franz Brentano, through Max Scheler and Martin Heidegger, to Karl Jaspers, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Emmanuel Lévinas, William Desmond or Josef Seifert. In hermeneutics, structuralism, and post-modern thought, some form of a theological interest comes to the fore in the work of such authors as Paul Ricœur, Michel Henry, Jacques Derrida, John Caputo, Gianni Vattimo, or most recently, Slavoj Žižek. The work, or even simply the proposals, of these authors and other thinkers amply demonstrates the array of research realized in search of a better form of philosophy capable of interpreting, introducing, perhaps even assisting, the theological realm in its own way.

Let me mention as a characteristic example the case of Merleau-Ponty. Only a few readers of this ingenious French philosopher realize that the driving force behind his work was, indeed, the author's desire to understand the difference and unity of faith and reason, as he explains it in *In Praise of Philosophy* in 1953. A similar phenomenon is observable in the work of authors otherwise in many ways uninterested in the problems of Christianity. These efforts make it probable that the problem of theology, especially of Christian theology, has never really disappeared from the scope of philosophy, and that the silence we perceive in certain decades and in the work of certain authors only introduces the revival of a renewed interest. This revival and renewal also makes it probable that the theological interest of philosophy will lead to new ways forward and new proposals which deserve the attention of the theologian.

What may be seen as the negative side of all these developments is their often strange interpretations of fundamental Christian doctrines, interpretations which open the way to full-fledged misunderstandings. Here the critical perspective is urgently needed, and reflection of this sort can help the philosophers themselves, as well as their readers, to develop a more sophisticated and less one-sided understanding of the nature of the divine. However, as Étienne Gilson put it,

[w]e may wholly disagree with Hegel or with Comte, but nobody can read their encyclopedias without finding there an inexhaustible source of partial truths and of acute observations.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup>Étienne Gilson, *The Unity of Philosophical Experience* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1950), p. 301.

Gilson's judgment may be read as confirmation of the encouragement offered by *Faith and Reason*. However, the encyclical—corresponding to our intellectual situation today—puts a stronger emphasis on support and assistance of philosophies which may become 'inexhaustible source[s] of partial truths and acute observations.'

*Ad (3):* A similarly rich development can be observed in Anglo-American philosophy. In spite of the skeptical thought widespread during the 1930s and 40s in the various forms of positivism, renewed interest in theological questions effected its return already in the work of A. N. Whitehead, F. Copleston, and others. Whitehead's theological philosophy has created its own school and inspired a number of important philosophers through its logical precision and metaphysical openness. After 1945, the two most important philosophers of religion, both inspired by the possibility of connecting rigorous scientific thinking with theological interests, have been Richard Swinburne and Alvin Plantinga. These authors are too well-known to explain their significance here, even if this significance is very different in their respective cases. Swinburne's main line of thought originates in a sharp interpretation of philosophy of science, while Plantinga's work is based on an innovative logical analysis. These authors have instigated a wave of tremendous interest in philosophy of religion, an interest expressed in renewed atheistic proposals as well as novel forms of philosophical theologies. One cannot say that out of these efforts the grand new philosophy, as a new introduction to theology, has already been born, but we certainly see a swarm of philosophies attempting the reinterpretation of theological doctrines in new ways and new forms. It is part and parcel of these attempts that thorough-going analytical works have been produced with the intention to make use of the Thomistic tradition in the contemporary understanding of Christianity.

As a disadvantage of this rise of analytic philosophies of religion, and especially of Christianity, we might mention their relative indifference to the mystical dimensions of religion. Indeed, the strong emphasis on methodology, logic, and rigorous reasoning makes it difficult, though not at all impossible, to reflect on mystery. Some authors of the same circles, such as William Alston or Nelson Pike, have demonstrated the applicability of analytical thinking even in an understanding of the mystical side of religion. It is, at the same time, important to note that, by discussing mystery in a language strongly non-mysterious, the mystery-character of mystery may be eclipsed. A conformist attitude to language—which tends to skip the effort of an inspired reading—may also have the negative impact on the reception of the mystical dimension into analytical philosophy.

*Ad (4):* Some of the developments in Anglo-American thought belong to the circle of new paradigms in philosophical theology with a critical potential vis-à-vis some modern philosophical developments. Such is the 'Radical Orthodoxy' movement, which offers a strong criticism of those atheistic post-modern theories which, especially in line with Marxist developments, tried to discard any relevance of religious thought, especially Christian theology. This school often appears as a new kind of apologetics, and thus it often cooperates with other schools of an apologetic character in both continental and Anglo-American thought, such as those schools issuing from the work of Jean-Luc Marion or Cyril O'Regan. These authors may be very far

from one another in a number of ways, yet their thought serves a better understanding of Christianity in the framework of a philosophical theology in our age.

Similarly, the 'non-standard radical philosophical theology', as presented in one of the essays in the present volume, aims at a renewed understanding of the fundamental tenets of Christianity through a new method, and in the framework of a peculiar approach to theological themes. All these philosophies contain a certain criticism of the modern development of ideas, although they differ in their interpretation of the importance of certain evolutions in modernity. While German philosophy is crucially important for such authors as Miklós Vető, for others, this philosophy contains not only the seed, but even the full fruit of Gnostic views in many ways reminiscent of the heretical schools at the beginning of Christian history.

As a disadvantage of this rich harvest of philosophical thought we might point precisely to their methodological and conceptual heterogeneity. While some of these systems, such as that of Josef Seifert, are highly developed methodologically, other approaches lack such an awareness, and thus their conceptual structure is less developed. An additional problem appears in the strong difference present among methodologically and conceptually well-formed attempts, such as the thought of Marion and Seifert. They both derive many of their tools and insights from the tradition of phenomenology, but while the background for Marion is French philosophy, especially Lévinas, for Josef Seifert it is the tradition of realist phenomenology with its analytical tools of investigation originating in the work of Franz Brentano and Dietrich von Hildebrand. It is difficult to build bridges among such authors and their schools, even as it may become possible at some points, given some of the notional and methodological convergences in these works.<sup>5</sup>

*Ad (5):* Finally, let me mention the various scientific theories which attempt to develop a reinterpretation, and often also the verification, of Christian doctrines. Debates concerning the right interpretation of modern and contemporary scientific developments with respect to traditional Christian views have been widespread from the beginning of modernity. However, the scientific revolutions during the twentieth century revived some of the old debates. Alister McGrath and some other authors in his school have proposed a scientific underpinning of basic Christian doctrines. Keith Ward developed a reinterpretation of Christian theism in light of contemporary science. Ervin László and his followers have tried to develop the grand theory of human knowledge with an emphatically spiritual dimension close to some of the central Christian doctrines. The list can be continued, but it is more important to note that contemporary science is very far from offering a plain refutation of the teachings of Christianity. Rather, it seems, some interpretations of science help us understand better these teachings and interpret them as important points in a new metaphysics in the making.<sup>6</sup> I do not want to say that such a metaphysics, if the use of this word is appropriate here, is a necessity, but I suggest

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<sup>5</sup>I have attempted a comparative approach in my 'Catholic Philosophy in the New Millennium', cited above.

<sup>6</sup>Cf. Stephen M. Barr, *Modern Physics and Ancient Faith* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2003).

that the variety and richness of all these approaches to the meaning of Christian doctrines on the basis of contemporary science have the clear promise of a maintained revival of philosophies interpreting these doctrines and helping to reach a deeper understanding of our traditions.

As a disadvantage of these scientific endeavors we may mention again that the fundamental Christian tenets are mysteries, and thus their theories must contain the character of mystery, if not in the form of style, then certainly in content. Ervin László's grand new theory, for instance, offers an ambitious interpretation of quantum theory but it appears to be insensitive to the differences various religions and traditions outline in their understanding of the spiritual realm. It is indeed very important to connect, on the theoretical level, near death experiences and similar phenomena with scientific results and religious doctrines. However, it shows some lack of theological sophistication to presuppose, as László does, that the spiritual background of all religions is the same in a fundamental sense, while this sense is not explained in terms of relevant expertise. Indeed, the aim of the present volume is to offer a contribution to these efforts in the field of philosophical theology, that is to say, in philosophy open to theological problems. In this sense, the volume stands indeed at the crossroads of contemporary problems.

Miklós Vető summarizes his philosophical understanding of God on the basis of his long and rich career as a philosopher and a historian of philosophy. God is the totally other who expresses himself in love for the created world. The world as created necessarily presupposes its creator and the distinction between the world and its creator makes the freedom of the creation possible. While Vető is connected to some of the most important developments in contemporary French philosophy, such as Lévinas and Marion, his way relies on an interpretation of Kant and Classical German philosophy with an additional interest in the tradition of mysticism. In fact, Vető's work takes into consideration the fact that mystery is such that rational thinking cannot exhaust it fully.

William Desmond offers a sophisticated discussion of Jean-Luc Marion's understanding of the saturated phenomenon and presents his own idea of, as he puts it, the porosity of being, namely the 'hyperboles of being'. There are four hyperboles, the idiocy of being, the aesthetics of happening, the erotics of selving, and the agapeics of community. These hyperboles define the peaks of immanence in which transcendence communicates itself. Professor Desmond's fine essay shows not only the fruitful effects of Marion's thought but also the merits of a careful, sensitive and experience-laden philosophical-theological thinking well-seated in the heart of the continental tradition and expressed in a language both philosophical and poetic. This kind of philosophy imbues the interpretation of the basic Christian doctrines in a way both natural and open to the presence of transcendence.

Savina Raynaud offers an excellent linguistic analysis of the problem of the naming of God by raising the problem of the expression 'God'. The question is, more precisely, whether 'god' is a proper or a common name. Without offering an easy solution to this problem, Professor Raynaud escorts the reader through the difficult terrain of linguistics, showing the various models describing the mechanisms of reference in human language. She also invokes some biblical verses to demonstrate

that calling God by name has never been a simple task. Finally, she puts the problematic into the context of Italian philosophy of language of the past century.

In his text entitled 'The Limits of Univocity in Interreligious Relationality', Richard Schenk describes the difficulties of interreligious discussions with respect to various proposals that have surfaced during the past centuries, especially the theory of John Hick and his followers. Professor Schenk thoroughly analyzes the logical possibilities of interreligious dialogue with a special emphasis on the distinction between exclusivist and pluralist theories. He carefully points out, especially on the basis of Raimundo Panikkar's work, the difficulties of univocal pluralistic theories which argue for the overall relativity of religious forms and the impossibility of an exclusive position with respect to one religion. Richard Schenk's solution is a threefold procedure involving the acknowledgment of ambivalence of religious expressions, the respect for each other's convictions and traditions, and thirdly the learning process of self-reflection based on rereading and reinterpreting our own fundamental texts.

In his essay, István M. Fehér discusses the mutual influence of theology and philosophy in Martin Heidegger's work. Professor Fehér analyses various periods of the author and emphasizes the theological openness of a philosophy which was originally construed in purely philosophical terms. However, behind the pure philosophy, both the life of Heidegger and the influences he received prove the importance of the theological dimension in his work. Since Heidegger's work is the greatest influential factor behind almost every sort of continental philosophy of religion, this piece of Professor Fehér helps the reader to have a clear grasp of the reasons for Heidegger's impact.

Balázs M. Mezei's essay describes the outlines of the so-called non-standard radical philosophical theology, a newly developed philosophical approach to the problem of divine revelation. As Professor Mezei points out, the notion of revelation is merely presupposed but not properly conceived in theology, because theology considers revelation as its axiom and focuses on content-type analysis. In contrast, a radical philosophical theology raises the question 'what is revelation?' in its entirety and offers a description along the lines of philosophical and theological reflection. In this way, it outlines a philosophical theology which is termed 'apocalyptic,' not because of the popular and misleading meaning of 'apocalypse', but because its subject matter is revelation—in Greek, *apocalypsis*. It is a phenomenological approach to the problem, because its framework is the self-communicating fact of revelation. In this apocalyptic phenomenology, as the title of the essay suggests, a new form of philosophical reflection on Christianity becomes possible.

Cyril O'Regan's text, entitled 'Žižek and the Theological Foundation of the Secular', focuses on the work of one of our influential contemporaries, the Marxist philosopher Slavoj Žižek. The connection between the work of Professor O'Regan and Žižek is given in the latter's work on the philosophy of Hegel, the basis of his kind of Marxism. While Žižek develops Marxism along the lines of some contemporary French commentators, he remains open to a certain evaluation of Christianity and theology. This evaluation originates in Hegel's assessments of Christianity and has led to his co-authoring the popular work *The Monstrosity of*

*Christ* with the theologian John Milbank. Professor O'Regan shows how this theological interpretation is decisive in Žižek's work and points out the intriguing presence of a certain theological interest, even a tendency to 're-mythologize' in a self-confessed radically secularist philosopher.

Francesca Aran Murphy shows in her text, entitled 'Étienne Gilson and Marie-Dominique Chenu: "Chosisme"', that Gilson's peculiar sort of Thomism was not a popular option at the time of its first presentation. On the contrary, Gilson needed time and the assistance of influential friends to emerge as one of the main interpreters of the thought of Saint Thomas Aquinas. In the period between the two World Wars, Gilson's scholarly work and the influence of *nouvelle théologie* signaled the emergence of new approaches that led, after 1945, to important changes of emphasis in the theological and philosophical fields. Gilson played a decisive role in these changes and developed a certain philosophical interpretation which facilitated a better and more up-to-date understanding of the importance of Thomas's theological work. This rich essay also shows the importance of Gilson even in our day, and the possibility of philosophical scholarship influencing the theological realm in a positive way.

John Betz's 'Christian Metaphysics: Between East and West' offers a comparative investigation of the notion of the *analogia entis*, developed in a new form in the last century especially by Erich Przywara, with respect to three distinct problems. First, Professor Betz explains the reason why Karl Barth's critique of the classical notion of analogy is mistaken. Second, he shows the relevance of the notion of analogy to the understanding of human beings from the theological point of view. Finally, he develops this analogical anthropology on the basis of the sophiology of Eastern Orthodox authors, especially the works of Florovsky, Solovyov, Florensky, and Bulgakov. In John Betz's understanding, the notion of *analogia entis* provides us with a most useful, and theologically as well as philosophically enlightening, understanding of reality, which shows the common truth of various traditions, the traditions of the Christian East and the Christian West.

István Czakó's 'Appropriation and Polemics: Karl Jaspers' Criticism of Kierkegaard's Concept of Religion' investigates the character of Kierkegaard's writing and points out the difficulty in describing the Danish author as a philosopher of religion. On the other hand, Kierkegaard may not have reached the popularity he gained during the twentieth century without the thorough-going reception of Karl Jaspers. Jaspers' discussions of Kierkegaard's thought from the early 1920s introduced him into the debates which are often seen as the matrix of emerging existential philosophy. However, Jaspers' appropriation of Kierkegaard's philosophy was one-sided and emphasized more the later period of the writer. On a more balanced view, Jaspers' interpretations offer only an aspect of the rich work of the Danish author. As Professor Czakó explains, however, even a more balanced reception, and a less sharp criticism by Jaspers, would still have led to the influence Kierkegaard enjoys today among philosophers of religion.

In his intriguing article on Harry Frankfurt, Kenneth Oakes introduces his readers to the rich work of Frankfurt, mainly known from his popular writing *On Bullshit*. As it turns out, even *On Bullshit* points to a deep and thorough-going theory of truth, because it establishes a category beyond the division of telling the truth/



telling a lie. Bullshit is avoiding both and thus it makes problematic a traditional conception of truth as opposed to lying. Professor Oakes explains that Frankfurt's lesser known essay, *On Truth*, develops a complex theory. However, Frankfurt has an even more interesting proposal important for philosophers as well as theologians, contained in his work, *The Reasons of Love*. In this work, Frankfurt explains the peculiar character of human love in a way which strikes the readers with its originality. Most importantly, love is the creation of the lover on the basis of the beloved in such a way that the content of love cannot be described as an objective state of affairs. Love is love just because it is created and practiced freely by the lover with respect to the beloved.

In his essay, Matthew Z. Vale investigates Erich Przywara's interpretation of the philosophical work of Max Scheler. The chapter traces some of Przywara's judgments provoked by Scheler, and it does so by closely tracing Przywara's critical engagement with Scheler's 'primacy of love'—his notion of phenomenology as a reduction to a being-less horizon of the person, who is a kind of pre- or extra-ontological love-act. Przywara's main response is that Scheler's talk of the love-act 'before' or 'without' being is really only speaking of being by other means; rather than a metaphysics of being as being, Scheler holds a metaphysics of being as love-act. This analysis helps the reader to gain an insight into the intricate debates between the emerging phenomenologies of religion during the first half of the twentieth century and the self-critically changing approach of Thomistic and Neo-Thomistic thought of the same period. The debate gains a special importance in view of the fact that both impulses played an important role in the thought of John Paul II, which can be detected in his encyclical letter *Fides et ratio*.

As to the coherence of the themes covered in this volume, let me refer to the 'theology of the people' often cited as the intellectual background of Pope Francis.<sup>7</sup> The 'sensus populi' is mainly interpreted in terms of the sensitivity of the socially disadvantaged. However, we may also talk about a sort of 'sensus populi' of academic researchers trying to discover uncommon dimensions in contemporary discussions. The reader who goes through the chapters of this volume will see that among the many topics and authors covered are ones often disregarded in academic circles. Gilson, Jaspers, Przywara, Žižek and others have been neglected by many influential authors, as have been a number of the subjects covered here, such as interreligious dialogue, the hyperboles of being, or various aspects of phenomenological theology. In this way, the contributors have followed the parable in the Gospel of Luke: 'Or what woman, having ten silver coins, if she loses one coin, does not light a lamp, sweep the house, and search carefully until she finds it?' (Luke 15:8). Indeed, all the authors in this volume have lit a light and made their attempt to find a lost coin in the house of our philosophical and theological traditions.

I offer this volume to the interested reader as part and parcel of our common work towards the appropriate awareness of the importance of Christianity in philosophy both historical and systematic. As it seems, the advancing of philosophy is dependent on the knowledge of our sources and developments, just as it is depen-

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<sup>7</sup>Cf. Rafael Luciani, *Pope Francis and the Theology of the People* (New York: Orbis Books), 2017.

dent on continuing dialogue with the philosophical results of non-Christian cultures. This dialogue has become not only possible, but also necessary in the context of globalization—indeed, in the context of a historical development of the original matrix of Christianity. If today we often face a denial of the fact of the basic importance of Christianity in philosophy, that is only the sign of the importance, concealed or expressed, of the basic tenets of Christianity in the self-interpretation of philosophy. For the denial of a fact can actually equal its confirmation—i.e., the confirmation of the subliminal presence and importance of that fact. The future of philosophy is dependent on the open acknowledgment of this importance, and it is dependent on the work we carry out on the appropriation of our traditions—in a critical, even in a polemical way. This work is, as our underlying conviction suggests, the prerequisite of the renewal of the theological dimension of our culture.

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# Chapter 2

## God and Religion



Miklós Vetö

### 2.1 Introduction

In our Christian or post-Christian universe, these two names, these two notions in our title—if you will, these two themes—are naturally linked, and difficult to dissociate. Nonetheless, this apparent indissociability is, strictly speaking, really only peculiar to the biblical, post-biblical, and Islamic cultural sphere. In these last centuries, even from within this same milieu, these two notions have come to seem detachable from one another, each pretending to a legitimacy of its own, in fact and in practice. These two notions can be conjugated in three ways: God without religion, religion without God, and God with religion.

‘God without religion’ characterizes above all Protestant orthodoxy, where the sovereignty of the Word and the exclusivity of revelation in relation to every natural or conventional structure leaves hardly any place for religion. At the other end of the spectrum, we find the great multiplicity of doctrines, organizations, and religious rites which, it seems, are only so many forms and moments of natural religion—not in the sense of Enlightenment rationalism’s ‘within the boundaries of reason alone’, stripped of rites and dogmas, but rather in the sense of the various translations and expressions of social and individual immanence. It is this religion that has been described and deduced by the philosophies and sociologies of the last two centuries. The last variation is that one, finally, which combines the two notions, and which Islam, Judaism, and above all, Catholic and Orthodox Christianities, make manifest and live out. The aim of this paper is to explain and to establish conceptually the necessary and mutual belonging-together of these two themes. One has to recognize that religion naturally calls out to God, and that its eidetic structures reflect the *eidōs*

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English translation from the French original by Matthew Z. Vale.

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of God. In my view—and this is my principal affirmation—even if we know that ‘God is love’, He first appears to human consciousness as ‘Other’, and religion is that method by which humans articulate the presence of this absent one, this Other. I begin from the epistemological fact that there is, within the human mind and heart, a place for this Other. And from there—cognizant though I am of the paradox inherent in any form of deducing the Other from out of the depths of that which is *not* the Other—I will attempt to elaborate an eidetic metaphysics of religion, culminating in an eidetic metaphysics of the Christian religion. But this Christian metaphysics is best constructed over against the backdrop of these two other possibilities, these two other conceptions of religion. The first is the quasi-impossibility of religion under the crushing weight of transcendence. The second is religion’s rich and exuberant immanent unfolding, which would render religion quasi-independent of any true transcendence.

## 2.2 The Transcendence of God and the Immanence of Religion

The philosophical or theological thesis of God without religion has been prescribed and professed by Protestant orthodoxy. The Reformers denounced the semi-superstitious customs of the Catholic Church and the survival of pagan elements—those rites and sacraments which seemed to enchain God and subject Him to the necessities and the logics of the world. With implacable rigidity the Reformers indicted the religion of their Catholic adversaries, and by way of indicting their religion, finally indicted religion itself. In religion, man appeals to mediators between himself and the Most High. Yet this mediation infringes upon divine Sovereignty; it fails to respect its radical transcendence. For lack of any better options, religion did have a role to play *before* revelation, in the ages before any true communication between God and the world. But the advent of revelation signals a return to the ‘suppression of religion’.<sup>1</sup> Religion has lost all utility, even curdled into something transgressive and occult, yet very real. The Gospel—Luther railed—has no enemies more pernicious than ‘pious’ men.<sup>2</sup> Religious piety—Barth will teach—is the final entrenchment of the natural man, who wishes, from out of himself and by his own powers, to come to meet God.<sup>3</sup> Doubtless, this intransigent view has its grandeur; it remains a living source of inspiration and action. But strictly speaking, it cannot, as such, be maintained. It is hardly possible in practice and indefensible

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<sup>1</sup>Karl Barth, *Die kirchliche Dogmatik*, vol. 1/2, *Die Lehre vom Wort Gottes* (Zürich: Zollikon, 1948), p. 304.

<sup>2</sup>Martin Luther, *D. Martin Luthers Werke*, Abteilung Schriften, vol. LII, *Hauspostille* (Weimar, 1915), p. 71.

<sup>3</sup>Karl Barth, *Römerbrief* (München: 1933), p. 229. For Brunner, ‘religion is in itself the most indefensible of all human enterprises.’ Heinz Zahrnt, *Aux prises avec Dieu. La théologie protestante au XXè siècle*, trans. A. Liefoghe (Paris: 1969), p. 52.

in theory. On the one hand, one cannot but speak about God and to God, and even the strictest Biblicism is obliged to accommodate itself to ecclesial structures, liturgical rites, and doctrinal formulae. On the other hand, the exclusion of mediation is a metaphysical *hapax*. Man—as we will see below—possesses, inscribed in his very essence, the aspiration, or at least the reference, towards transcendence. And transcendence—or more precisely, the Transcendent One—desires to place itself within the range and capacity of the creature.

The second possible relation between these two notions—God and religion—is the negative one: to conceive of religion *without God*. For those situated within the tradition of theist cultures, this conception appears rather absurd. Yet the notion grows more and more plausible to our contemporaries, who are ultimately undertaking nothing other than a revival of the antique tradition of paganism, as well as of the Hinduism and Buddhism of our day.<sup>4</sup> These sorts of religions know of a profusion of gods, heroes, and demons, yet their essential aspect is not their polytheism, but rather the absence of a transcendent God overarching the multifarious pantheons.<sup>5</sup> These religions do nothing but reflect and articulate the natural sphere in which humans live, and the society of which they form a part. And there is certainly no lack of philosophical and sociological theories which generalize and formalize these sorts of immanent belief systems. Philosophy of religion believes itself capable of recovering, at the core of this plurality of deities and rituals, a common original principle: the sacred, or numinous. From a properly philosophical point of view, the sacred and the numinous have a status one might call hybrid. Both are situated *within the world* (within nature, or society), yet both stand with one foot partially outside the world. Plato's description of human beings—those plants with roots in the heavens—seems to apply also to these two primal principles of religion.<sup>6</sup> Yet the resemblance does not go very far. The feeling of fear and reverence, the intuition of something surpassing us on every side, does not yet mean the discovery of an authentic transcendence. Indeed, herein one finds the best of Schleiermacher's philosophy of religion, to this day the most potent attempt at conceptually grounding a religion of immanence, a religion without God. Schleiermacher addressed his *Speeches on Religion* to its 'cultured despisers', and his apology unfolds by abandoning all reference to transcendence. The *Speeches* dissociate religion from morality and metaphysics. They assign religion to its own 'province', yet this proper 'province' is none other than the 'feeling of absolute dependence with regard to the universe'.<sup>7</sup> To be religious is to return to the experience of this *sui generis* and original feeling of dependence; consequently, the intentional object of the feeling is merely the world, that is to say, a sphere of radical immanence. This

<sup>4</sup>To the same point, one could equally cite the various ecologies of our time.

<sup>5</sup>Popular Buddhism acknowledges a multitude of gods and demons which are extinguished by their purified, enlightened forms. However, this atheistic Buddhism finally reverts to a radical immanentism.

<sup>6</sup>Plato, *Timaeus* 90b.

<sup>7</sup>Cf. Miklós Vetö, *De Kant à Schelling. Les deux voies de l'idéalisme allemand*, vol. II (Grenoble: 2000), p. 442.

doctrine could admit of a God, but it neither requires nor implies one.<sup>8</sup> However, the conundrum is precisely that the category of ‘the religious’ lies within a sphere of immanence, even while holiness and divinity only receive their eidetic and metaphysical sense from a return to transcendence, to the Other.

### 2.3 God as the Other

Religion is founded upon transcendence. It only *is*, and only is *what* it is, in its return to transcendence. And its truth, its validity is a function of the authenticity of the moment of transcendence it is supposed to manifest. Religions of nature transact in natural structures, natural forces, and natural beings, and very often these structures are amazing, and these forces sublimely powerful. In essence, the religion of nature effects a return to the amazing and the powerful. The amazing and the powerful can impress and even fascinate, yet for all that, they are not in themselves proper to religion. On the contrary, they only impress and fascinate insofar as they conjure up a reality entirely different from immanent realities—differing in power, in intensity, and in its manner of presenting itself and exerting itself upon the world. The things of religion belong to a region entirely different from the quotidian and the rote, a region different, in short, from all the gradations of the immanent. Nonetheless, difference still does not on its own equate with transcendence. In a certain sense, ‘the different’ remains in continuity with the thing from which it differs. Certainly, our intuition presents it to us as being situated elsewhere in respect to our place, but always from within a horizontal and analogous dimension. And furthermore, ‘the different’ is devoid of any personal quality which *eo ipso* could render it effectively elsewhere from, and otherwise than, our world.

God is the principle and the animating impulse for all the aspirations towards transcendence which, metaphysically, characterize religion. But how ought we describe the concept of God? God is, of course, the ultimate horizon of the real in its entirety, yet ‘God’ is not a metaphysical concept. The classical philosophies of the West attempted to transcribe Him within the terms that come closest to His perfection and transcendence. And so philosophy spoke of being. Yet being is the principle and root, the origin and term of beings, and as such—regardless of what Heidegger says—does not stand in radical discontinuity with them. Philosophy speaks equally of eternity, omnipotence, omnipresence. However, in each case, God is defined as the maximum in relation to that which He is not. He is that which is beyond all time, all potency, and all presence, yet in the end He is understood by taking time, power, and place as the points of departure. The discourse would then have to be radicalized and adopt the attitude of negative theology. Henceforward God is no longer a quantitative exemplum of a quality; on the contrary, He is irreducibly opposed to all quality. God is now defined not by that which is less, by that

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<sup>8</sup> As a Baudelaire will declare: ‘even were God not to exist, yet would religion be holy, divine’; in J.-F. Marquet, *Le vitrail et l’énigme. Dialogue avec Philippe Soual* (Paris: 2013), p. 117.

which is weaker than He or limited by Him; He is now defined by that which He is not. This procedure has an authentic radicality to it, yet it still falls short of the alterity proper to the transcendent. There thus remains for us only the unique category of *the Other* to designate God.

Contrary to the different, the Other harbours a personal quality and everywhere appears as a non-referential notion. Since the *Sophist*, the Other has been thought in relation to the same. The same, however, is finally a synthetic concept, constituted by returning upon the self, upon oneself, while the Other imposes itself immediately and directly. As Lévinas writes, the alterity of the Other does not result from His identity, but constitutes it.<sup>9</sup> The Other is not conceived of against the backdrop of some opposite; rather, it is on the basis of its metaphysical condition of ‘other’ that its identity is affirmed. Incidentally, this non-referentiality, or non-relativity, is not exclusive to the Other. There is an abundance of realities whose excellence and grandeur come into view as such without reference to a dialectical counterpart. Some say it is against the backdrop of one being’s ugliness that we better see the beauty of another. Nevertheless, the beautiful would be beautiful even in the absence of every non-beautiful entity.<sup>10</sup> Were someone to visit an art gallery and be short of time, he could choose only to look at the most beautiful canvases. But one could just as easily imagine visiting and exhibition in which all the paintings were beautiful in themselves, and not in reference to others. The case of unreal comparisons furnishes further analogous examples that refuse dialectic. Merleau-Ponty made the profound observation that we often avail ourselves of terms like ‘enormous’ or ‘far away’ without the implication of any comparison at all.<sup>11</sup> One can have an intuition of an effort as ‘enormous’ without thereby comparing it to a ‘limited’ or ‘moderate’ effort that would be concealing itself, so to speak, in the background of the intuition. One could just as equally perceive a stand of trees on the hillside opposite the river, without by that token consciously or unconsciously referring oneself to a copse that lies only 20 m away. As for God, He constitutes the prime exemplum of these higher concepts which refuse all comparison,<sup>12</sup> and which obtain and signify in and of themselves. That is, He *is* the Other without any reference whatsoever to that which He is not.

## 2.4 Religion: The Eidetics of the Other

God is the Other, the Other properly speaking—or rather, the single true Other. He is that transcendence which in no way implies any immanence; the beyond which is to be conceived without thinking any ‘this-side’. On the other hand, immanence has

<sup>9</sup>Emmanuel Lévinas, *Totalité et infinité* (La Haye: 1968), p. 229.

<sup>10</sup>Cf. Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Liturgie cosmique. Maxime le Confesseur*, trans. L. Lhauemet and H.-A. Prentout (Paris: Aubier, 1947), p. 83.

<sup>11</sup>Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phénoménologie de la perception* (Gallimard: Paris, 1945), p. 308.

<sup>12</sup>Cf. Isaiah 40:25; 46:5, etc.