

Thinking Differently: Continental Philosophy versus Philosophy of Religion

George Vamesul
“Alexandru Ioan Cuza” University of Iasi

Morny Joy (ed.), *Continental Philosophy and Philosophy of Religion*, New York, London, Dordrecht, Heidelberg: Springer 2011.

Keywords: continental philosophy, philosophy of religion, phenomenology, deconstruction, alterity, ethics

The volume *Continental Philosophy and Philosophy of Religion* published by Springer in 2011 and edited by Morny Joy is part of a larger series, *The Handbook of Contemporary Philosophy of Religion* which aims to bring to the fore the primary issues and approaches concerning the contemporary philosophy of religion. The present volume focuses through a group of articles on the recent development in Continental Philosophy and its potential influences on philosophy of religion. The phrase “Continental philosophy” does not stand for a specific type, subject or method of philosophy – despite its constant association with analytic philosophy – rather it refers to a worldview shared by a number of philosophers that led them to constantly reassess the boundaries between philosophy and religion, and to recast in a new fashion the traditionally conceived philosophy of religion. This implies that there is an entire network of guiding threads, such as the Nietzschean “death of God”, the phenomenological approach, the problem of subjectivity or the crisis of modern rationality and Western Christian values after the World War II, a network that is present altogether or in part at authors like Paul Ricoeur,

Jacques Derrida, Julia Kristeva, Jean-Luc Marion or the Frankfurt School.

The volume contains nine articles which present the developments of different authors from the Continental tradition and their entanglement with the philosophy of religion. I shall next give a short consideration on every article, in the end drawing some conclusions on the entire volume.

The first article, *Paul Ricoeur: Hermeneutics, Philosophy and Religion* (p. 17) by Morny Joy, is a close survey of Ricoeur's philosophical endeavor. Although Ricoeur's first encounter with Husserlian phenomenology happened in a favorable manner, later, following Heidegger's critique, he departed from the transcendental approach toward a more contextualized hermeneutical phenomenology (p. 22). Throughout this transition Ricoeur came to realize that the problem of alterity is the cornerstone of the phenomenological approach, so that his later work would be devoted to this problem. Despite his methodological agnosticism concerning the questions of the source of consciousness and the religious beliefs, his thought on the radical reciprocity in relation with the other opens a space of tolerance and love that have a Christian character (p. 34-36).

The early work of Jacques Derrida – *De la grammatologie*, *La voix et le phénomène* and *L'écriture et la différence* – has been considered a breakthrough due to its new approach on language and its ability to say and to what lies at the limits of philosophy. His idea of deconstruction brought him to the attention of American literary critics, and later, to an open debate with Anglo-American philosophy and philosophy of religion. In her article *Thinking Otherwise: Derrida's Contribution to Philosophy of Religion*, Ellen T. Armour focuses on the distinctness between the traditional approach to philosophy of religion and the path opened by Derrida's thinking toward this matter. Although Armour argues that these two are not completely separate due to the topical and thematic link between them (p. 42), she identifies three characteristics that distinguish Derrida's approach. First, despite philosophy of religion's solely concern with Christianity, Derrida account is rather diverse dealing with more than one religious tradition (p. 44). Second, contrary to

philosophy of religion's endeavor to establish the rationality of the content of the religious belief, Derrida is drawn to religion because it goes beyond the limits of rationality (p. 47). Finally, if the Anglo-American philosophy of religion reinforces the boundary between religious and secular, Derrida's work brings into question this traditional project. In conclusion Armour notes that Derrida's account of religion decentralizes it and bestows it into the larger historical and cultural framework (p. 56-58).

In *Levinas's Project: An Interpretative Phenomenology of Sensibility and Intersubjectivity* Bertina G. Bergo takes a survey of Emmanuel Levinas entire work. Although the nature of Levinas's philosophy has been the subject of numerous papers, the most challenging side of his thought is the problem of intersubjectivity. As Bergo notes (p. 73) Levinas thinks alterity as an intersubjective interdependency driven by the infinite responsibility of the face-to-face relationship. Since the encounter with the face of the Other is primary to being, and it is irreducible to any psychological, epistemological or metaphysical status, than the meaning of the intersubjective relationship precludes ontology in favor of ethics (p. 80). From another point of view this implies that the meaning of "first philosophy" must be redefined and the role of ethics reassessed from a marginal position to a more central one.

Julia Kristeva and Luce Irigaray are two of the recently women thinkers that have a major impact on what is known as contemporary feminist thought. In *The Challenge of Love: Kristeva and Irigaray*, Morny Joy surveys the new perspective that these women philosophers open in an area generally ruled by men approaches. Although their writing style is different from classical philosophical writing, they show a great familiarity with works of important figures of philosophy like Plato, Hegel, Kant or Heidegger (p. 90). Being influenced by the theory of physchoanalyst Jacques Lacan, and with a sharp awareness toward the Nietzschean proclamation of the "death of God", their work can be defined as a continuous search to express new ways of understanding the sacred (Kristeva) or the divine (Irigaray), and to account for an ethics of love, bare of projections or illusions. With the aid of a converted

phenomenological approach, that roughly means the investigation of the lived experiences, they carry to question the unconscious dimensions of thought and behavior. One of their most challenging interrogations is the question of the gender of God. This is all the more important since God has been traditionally conceived only in masculine and transcendent terms, leaving aside the feminine attributes (p. 109-110). If taken seriously this might bring a radical change in the philosophy of religion as it was traditionally conceived.

One of the most imposing voices of the twentieth century continental philosophy is no doubt Michel Foucault. Due to the controversial status of his work that has been bestowed at the crossing between history, literature and philosophy, Foucault was able to criticize the task of philosophy understood as a legitimizing enterprise and recast it as a mode of “thinking differently”. In his article *Thinking Differently: Foucault and the Philosophy of Religion*, Jeremy Carrette brings to the fore the influence of Foucault’s thinking on the philosophy of religion. Carrette argues that the scheme that Foucault engages to decentralize and weaken the sovereign authority of knowledge can be equally employed in the philosophy of religion (p. 133). This allows scholars within the philosophy of religion to question the function of the categories of this domain and to review the hidden assumptions involved in the classification of non-Western traditions. Thus, a space for dialogue is opened where the Western tradition can reconsider itself through the eyes of non-western thought. This critical enterprise is not a rejection of the Western thought but rather it is the recognition of its limitations and unknown presuppositions that are hidden throughout its own framework (p. 134). In this light Carrette argues that the task of philosophy of religion is to link thought with practice and to elaborate a self-critical apparatus in order to broaden rationality and the critical enquiry.

Throughout Gilles Deleuze’s entire work there is no mention of a philosophy of religion. Even when engaged with commenting on “religious” authors Deleuze restrains himself from any opinion or judgment toward the matter. This acknowledgement appears discouraging for the purpose of the

present volume and seems to render futile any attempt to engage such a topic. Nevertheless Philip Goodchild in his *Deleuze and Philosophy of Religion* assumes this difficulty and tries to overcome it through what he calls a “critical construction” (p. 139). Goodchild submits that there is an implicit philosophy of religion within Deleuze’s work that can be analyzed in three moments. First there is the moment of indifference (p. 140) toward the question of God. This indifference is not only linked with the historical context in which Deleuze lived but also has a deeper reason: if philosophy is “knowledge through pure concepts” than it defines itself through a constant battle against mere opinion. This implies an absolute immanence since concepts do not refer to things, but to other concepts and are judged in relation with problems, which they frame. Thus, philosophy is a pure transcendental exercise and the question of God has no meaning here. So to speak, Deleuze takes seriously Kant’s account on this problem. This first moment of indifference is doubled by a second moment of the construction of an atheist metaphysics (p. 143). Like every atheist position it can only present itself in tension with a theist point of view. Despite its concern with the temporal existence, this metaphysics, like that of Spinoza, is inseparable from ethics, informing the temporal conduct of the thinker. Thus, the question becomes whether the same could be claimed of a religious dimension since it remains very pertinent in Spinoza in the form of a “third kind of knowledge”. The last moment is the moment of beatitude (p. 154) which claims that since Deleuze’s thought “expresses a immanent ethos” that is no longer concerned with transcendent morality, it may imply in the same manner an immanent religiosity.

Jean-Luc Marion is one of the recent French philosophers that had succeeded to impose himself on the international stage of philosophy. In her article *Jean-Luc Marion: Phenomenology of Religion* Christina M. Gschwandtner gives a thorough account on Marion’s achievements especially since they directly involve the philosophy of religion. Although Marion begins his philosophical publications with an exegesis on Descartes (p. 167) it will be the theological and phenomenological works that will really have a major impact. It

is worth mentioning that during his preoccupation with Descartes, Marion developed his idea of metaphysics, understood as a Cartesian scheme of foundation. He finds Descartes as both, a prisoner of the scheme (*Sur l'ontologie grise de Descartes*), but also with a chance to escape through his thought of God as infinite (*Sur la théologie blanche de Descartes*). Nevertheless he assumes Pascal's critique of Descartes and engages his idea of the three orders, an idea that will also infiltrate his later writings.

Gschwandtner notes that Marion's engagement with phenomenology is driven by the task of finding a rigorous language to express the things themselves (p. 171). Starting from this classical phrase but with a view toward ultimate phenomena that have been neglected or insufficiently accounted for by the traditional phenomenological movement, Marion will recast the phenomenological method in terms of givenness. This will allow him not only to overcome the traditional limitations of the phenomenological method, but also to treat some of the most exclusive phenomena – alterity and revelation – as saturated phenomena. Gschwandtner concludes her article with an inventory of the most important of Marion's critiques.

The next article *Critical Theory, Negative Theology and Transcendence* is James Swindal's attempt to link the philosophy of religion with a movement totally different from phenomenology: the "Frankfurt School" of critical theory. Swindal claims that although the early members of this movement – Walter Benjamin, Max Horkheimer, Theodor Adorno – were highly influenced by Marx and Engels philosophy, they dismissed with its reductionist character when dealing with cultural phenomena. Since the Marxist debate against culture started as a critique of theology, the rehabilitation of the cultural performed by the Frankfurt School can be seen as a "reformed idea of the theological" (p. 188). The thread that unites all this thinkers is seen by Swindal to be their Jewish heritage, a term that becomes interchangeable with "critical theory". This leads to a critique of religion that is not concerned with its claim to truth but with the "degree in which it mirrors the Messianic condition" (p. 189). The result is

a kind of “prophetic Jewish messianism” that has a strong affinity toward forms of negative theology which serves as adjusting lever for religious utopias. In his accounting for every member of the Frankfurt School, Swindal brings to light a galore variety of religious thematics that springs from their work and that ranges from topics as transcendence and God to morality, messianism and ethics.

In the final chapter *Encountering Otherness*, Morny Joy rounds up the contributions that different authors gave to the topic of “the o/Other” in this volume, focusing on philosophers of French background. His main purpose is to establish the upshot that could result for the philosophy of religion if their positions and insights were taken seriously enough to open a new way of thinking in this all to traditional field (p. 221).

Overall the volume does not contain highly technical articles dealing with specific problems from each author, but rather some general account on their entire work and the specific outcome for philosophy of religion. Though this may be disappointing to an advanced reader it is highly helpful for someone looking for an introduction or a fresh view on the continental philosophy of religion.

Address:
George VAMEȘUL
Al.I. Cuza University of Iasi
Department of Philosophy
Bd. Carol I, 11
700506 Iasi, Romania
E-mail: vamesugeorge@yahoo.com