Religion after Metaphysics

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Edited by Mark Wrathall


1 Introduction

The entanglement of religion and metaphysics has a long and complex history. The collection of essays brought together by Mark Wrathall deals with a recent episode of this history. It discusses the consequences of what has been labeled as ‘the end of metaphysics’, a development in continental philosophy that took place in the course of the nineteenth century. Although this notion already appears with Hegel, the essays in this volume focus on the axis Nietzsche-Heidegger as the main motor behind the debate on metaphysics in contemporary philosophy. Heidegger gave this debate new intensity with his interpretation of metaphysics as onto-theology, claiming that the question of God (metaphysica specialis) and the question of Being (metaphysica generalis) have been intertwined ever since the earliest beginnings of philosophy. According to him, the entanglement of theology and metaphysics as separate projects does not constitute onto-theology as the thinking of God in terms of Being. It is rather the other way around; the entanglement results from the onto-theological constitution of metaphysics in which the highest being (God) and beings in their Being reciprocally ground each other. This interpretation of metaphysics as onto-theology runs counter to attempts to disentangle theology and metaphysics. It limits the secular interpretation of philosophy and prioritises what has come to be known as ‘post-secular philosophy’, i.e. philosophy which transgresses fixed borders between philosophical and theological thinking—Cf. Phillip Blond, Post-Secular Philosophy: Between Philosophy and Theology (Londen: Routledge, 1998).

The Heideggerian analysis of onto-theology implies a second and perhaps more dramatic consequence. Given the reciprocal grounding of theology and metaphysics, anything happening to the grounding power of either one must have direct consequences for the other. The Nietzschean ‘death of God’ inevitably leads to a destabilisation of metaphysics, and any proclamation of the ‘end’ of metaphysics will result in a theological crisis. The contributors to Religion after metaphysics each respond to the thesis that the ‘end of metaphysics’ entails a transformation of religion, which is to say – the book title is perhaps a little too broad in this respect – a transformation of theological thinking and the philosophy of religion. To the majority of the contributors the qualification ‘after metaphysics’
signifies a sense of relief over the liberation of religion from an alien, unfitting, or oppressing set of concepts. To them the ‘end of metaphysics’ holds the promise of a new sense and thinking of religion beyond, or without, ontology. Others in the volume, however, reject the Heideggerian analysis of onto-theology, arguing among others that it is based on a misconstruction of religion’s (historical) engagement with the question of Being. They challenge the idea that religious thought is fundamentally dependent on ontological figures and counter the notion that the ‘end of metaphysics’ has any consequences for religion. Several contributors point toward the Jewish philosophical tradition for alternative views of the relation between ‘Athens’ and ‘Jerusalem’.

2 The Contents of the Book

[3] The volume contains ten essays written by an impressive line of authors most of whom are prominent figures in the present-day debate on post-secular philosophy. The essays have been grouped into three parts. The first part discusses – quoting Wrathall’s introduction – ‘the nature of the death of the philosopher’s God and the direction in which Western culture is moving’. Part two evaluates the critique proper of ‘the metaphysical account of God’ and discusses the horizon of ‘post-metaphysical’ religion (which is elsewhere referred to as ‘non-theological’ religion). The final part moves from post-metaphysical religion to post-metaphysical philosophy, discussing ‘the kind of philosophical inquiry appropriate to post-onto-theological religious experience’.

[4] Part one consists of essays by Pippin, Vattimo, Rorty and Charles Taylor. Robert Pippin opens his discussion of ‘Love and Death in Nietzsche’ with a close reading of the famous passage from The Gay Science where the madman proclaims the death of God. In his original reading, Pippin draws attention to the way the madman addresses the atheists who make fun of his proclamation, portraying them – in Pippin’s words – as ‘thoughtless, smug, self-satisfied boors’. Elaborating on Nietzsche’s diagnosis of the sickly ‘lack of vitality’ in these atheists, Pippin analyses Nietzsche’s alternative notions of desire-as-excess and of erotic ‘reckless generosity’ as possible guideposts for the overcoming of ‘pale’ and melancholy atheism. In the same section, Richard Rorty discusses various forms of scientific and epistemological atheism, expressing his sympathy for Gianni Vattimo’s renewed ‘attempt to move religion out of the epistemic arena’. According to Rorty, religion does not need to play ‘the game of giving and asking for reasons’, competing with empirical enquiry for ‘universal intersubjective agreement’. This game religion has already lost to science. However, as long as it is regarded as a matter of private belief, religion does not need notions of truth, validity or legitimacy in order to play its role. As a complement to Vattimo’s ‘unjustifiable gratitude’ and ‘feeling of dependence’, he describes his own ‘unjustifiable hope’ in a future ideal society in which a Pauline love will be ‘pretty much the only law’.

[5] Part two features Wrathall, Dreyfus, Peperzak, and Caputo. In his essay on Heidegger, Mark Whathall deals with the question of why Heidegger believes that ‘an experience of the divine is necessary in order to live a worthwhile life in
the kind of [technological] world that shows up after the death of God? After analysing the Heideggerian reading of Nietzsche’s proclamation of the death of God, Wrathall goes on to explore the notion of *das Geviert* ('the fourfold') in the late Heidegger. The technological world which has uprooted existence has made it hard for modern people to get a deeply significant sense of place. Since according to Heidegger, this sense of being ‘near’ to the world is what makes life worthwhile, the question becomes how one could restore it under the present conditions. As Wrathall argues, there can be no way of restoring it by means of human action. The only way is to receive it as a gift. In order to make ourselves receptive to this gift, we have to open ourselves to the play of divine ‘derangement’ and ‘attunement’ on the level of experience. Further on in this part of the book, Adriaan Peperzak opposes the Heideggerian line of thought by means of a critical analysis of the onto-theological thesis. As Peperzak aims to show, this sweeping thesis does not meet the minimal standards of clarity and evidence. The talk of the ‘after metaphysics’ risks wasting ‘a heritage that could have been promising’ by condemning in a rather ‘scholastic’ fashion ‘2,600 years’ of ‘ontotheology’ without direct consideration of the oeuvres involved. After close reading Heidegger, he proceeds with a discussion of the crucial difference between the impersonal God of philosophy and the ‘godly God’ of religion. Following a remark by Heidegger that the God of philosophy cannot be prayed to nor made music for, he focuses on the notion of the person, which, according to him, has been the blind spot of ontological and for that matter onto-theological thought. Referring to Levinas, he argues that philosophy needs to think ‘a concept of non-finite personality’ which remains close to religious experiences such as prayer and devotion.

Part three consists of only two essays, one by Batnitzky, the other by Marion. They share their common attempt to think, quoting the former, ‘the philosophical possibility of revelation’. Presenting a parallel reading of Levinas and Leo Strauss, Batnitzky aims to dismantle the usual assumption that these Jewish thinkers have opposing views of the relation between ‘Greek’ and ‘Hebrew’ traditions of thought (Strauss is thought to side with ‘Athens’). As she argues, in both the heterogeneity between these traditions is retained, rendering ‘Jewish philosophy’ impossible. The key issue here is the interpretation of the concept of revelation. ‘Levinas and Strauss both utilise a conception of Jewish revelation to defend not the philosophical truth of Judaism but the true possibility of philosophy, which for both is the possibility of morality’. In her conclusion, Batnitzky criticises the Heideggerian analysis of the onto-theological character of religious revelation as not doing justice to the public (i.e., social and ethical) dimension of religion which is so important to the Jewish tradition (in a certain sense, she argues, Heidegger’s analysis is too exclusively ‘Protestant’). Referring to Derrida’s recent work, she contends that the claim that we live ‘after metaphysics’ encounters its limit in the continued possibility of radical evil, which after all may call for a notion of metaphysics.
3 Evaluation

[7] *Religion after metaphysics* is a valuable volume. It provides a clear overview of a complex and still heated debate, written by some of its most prominent participants and a number of excellent critics. In this sense it is a good general introduction to post-metaphysical thought on religion, highlighting the inevitable aporias involved. In addition a number of essays – notably those by Vattimo, Rorty, Caputo, and Marion – offer a brief but effective introduction into the thought of the individual authors. On the other side, one may criticize the relative lack of historical depth in the treatment of the subject – a problem which, as Peperzak and Batnitzky argue, is proper to the Heideggerian analysis of the ‘history’ and ‘end’ of metaphysics. The essays pay little attention to the phenomenal or empirical dimension of religion. They offer no case studies or other hints that would enable the reader to picture the face of this new ‘religion’. On a different level one could also question the lack of interaction between the often diametrically opposed views of the authors, and the absence of earlier development that shaped the present state of the debate (e.g. the Marion-Derrida encounter concerning the gift). These additional dimensions would probably have made *Religion after Metaphysics* a little less of a collection of positions which have already been elaborated in the major works of the individual authors, and a bit more of an effort to unearth the tensions present within and between these positions. But this is not to diminish the value of a book that remains a must-have for anyone interested in philosophical thinking about the questions of contemporary religion and theology.