Christ in Postmodern Philosophy: Gianni Vattimo, René Girard and Slavoj Zizek

Jan-Olav Henriksen

To cite this article: Jan-Olav Henriksen (2010) Christ in Postmodern Philosophy: Gianni Vattimo, René Girard and Slavoj Zizek, Ars Disputandi, 10:1, 1-3, DOI: 10.1080/15665399.2010.10820009

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/15665399.2010.10820009

© 2010 The Author(s). Published by Taylor & Francis.

Published online: 06 May 2014.

Submit your article to this journal

Article views: 307

View related articles
This small book opens up a topic long called for looking more into: the astonishing fact that an increasing number of contemporary philosophers engage with religion in general, and with Christianity more specifically, from the basis of their own thinking, and not on the basis of a given, institutionally secured, religious position. It is striking, indeed, how Christological themes, themes relevant to Christology, and to the central elements in the Christian message in general, seem to emerge on the contemporary scene, and in surprising contexts of discourse, among which are not only those that Depoortere has chosen to subject to scrutiny. We could see Derrida, Marion, Caputo, Levinas, Badiou, Habermas and Ricoeur as other examples of the same trend (and Depoortere is well aware of these). However, the thinkers chosen by Depoortere in themselves provide a good impression of the wide span of resources that is present in different reconstructions of religion and Christianity today. As such, this is indeed also a valuable book for students who want to be introduced to the exchange between the Christian tradition and contemporary strands of thinking.

The main title of the book should not be read as if it focuses explicitly on Christology or Christ. Rather, it uses the uniqueness of Christianity (constituted by Christ) as the focal point for discussing related themes within a broader – but still coherent – perspective.

The design of the book is simple and self-explanatory: After a very brief introduction, Depoortere presents the three thinkers in three separate chapters, Vattimo, Girard and Žižek successively. These chapters serve as eminent introductions to, and overviews of, the thinkers in question, and Depoortere should be congratulated on having provided such an accessible and eloquent text. However, the presentations are there for a reason: they provide Depoortere with the ground for discussing at length selected issues in the positions analyzed, in order to highlight intersections with other thinkers, and situate them and their understanding of religion in a wider context. E.g., in Vattimo there are clear parallels to T.J. Altizer, who both develop an understanding where Christianity legitimizes secularization and the exit of religion. Depoortere criticizes, and rightly so, I hold,
their position as being too idealistic, and not based in any firm understanding of what it means to be human (cf. 31). The latter is a very important point, and one which I think would benefit from being elaborated even further.

The ‘hero’ of the book turns, unsurprisingly, out to be René Girard, who is the one among the positions discussed that stands closest to the Christian tradition. However, also Girard is, so Depoortere holds, in need of further development if his views on Christianity are to be made fully applicable to the present theological and religious situation (e.g., with regard to religious pluralism and inter-religious dialogue).

Moreover, among the many benefits of the book is also that it offers an accessible introduction to the not easily accessible (and sometimes apparently self-contradictory) thought of Slavoj Žižek. Žižek is a highly original thinker and approaches religion from perspectives that need much space in order to come fully to attention, and Depoortere uses such space. However, there is still a need for situating and framing Žižek in a wider horizon of thought, and to discuss his positions critically from an immanent point of view. In this regard, I think the book remains in want.

After having read the book the question occurs immediately as to what extent the present volume is a work in the field of philosophy of religion (a question that might be of interest to readers of the present journal). There are two reasons that speak against such a description, and they are not mentioned here in order to lessen the quality of the volume, but for the reader to get an idea about the scope and more specific content of the book:

Firstly, only one of the figures analyzed by Depoortere is a professional philosopher (Vattimo). Girard is, as is well known, a literary critic and an anthropologist, while Žižek is a psychoanalyst as much as he is a philosopher trained in the Marxist tradition. Hence, the impact of the latter two on the present scene of philosophy of religion comes via an analysis of cultural phenomena that are not only present in religion – but provides a better framework for understanding religion. In this lies, indeed, one of their main contributions to the development of the discipline of philosophy of religion in the present: this discipline is no longer able to define or understand religion only from the point of view of the cognitive statements, or the conceptions within the sphere of religion itself, but has to be expanded by including other types of knowledge and investigations that takes place in the broader field of religious studies. Indirectly, the design and the choice of material in Depoortere’s book speaks affirmative to this situation.

On the other hand, Depoortere himself does not seem to place himself in the broader field of religious studies, but is firmly rooted in dogmatic theology. This position becomes apparent in the way he seems to assess all the positions analyzed on the basis of their ability to be in accordance with the biblical material (and I think that has to be read as how this biblical material is interpreted and brought to use in a specific, religious and institutionalized context). This approach occasionally gives some of his evaluations of the material and the positions a rather external or outward character, and to some extent it limits the more philosophical discussion that I think is required of all the positions in question.
However, this should not be read as if Depoortere simply censors the thinkers in question from the basis of a religious and dogmatic position. He does not: Each chapter offers a list of critical, philosophical questions that he is able to identify by means of his thorough analysis, and I think that everyone who is willing to engage critically and philosophically with Vattimo, Girard and Žižek will have to work on these questions. My (small) objection is that these issues would benefit not only from being identified. They should also be elaborated more in terms of why they emerge and what they really say about the positions in question, and especially with regard to the relevance that Vattimo, Girard and Žižek may have for understanding and interpreting religion and religious phenomena.