

FIDES ET RATIO IN THE RENAISSANCE

Paul Richard Blum, *Philosophy of Religion in the Renaissance* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2010), ISBN-13: 9780754607816 (hbk.), 9781409402626 (ebk.), ISBN-10: CHECK, ISBN-10: 075460781X, pp. ix + 211 pp.

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Philosophy of religion, once taken out of determined contexts such as seventeenth century Cambridge, eighteenth century salons or contemporary analytic departments, is an elusive notion. In this book it covers all discourse on God and creation, be it theological, religious or philosophic. However, the definition that Paul Richard Blum puts forward is simple: “philosophy of religion is theology for non-believers” (p. vii). Given that much of the book is concerned with philosophical projects that sought, in one way or another, a rationalization of the revelation, – which displayed a level of anthropocentrism that sometimes went beyond what Christian theology was willing to accommodate – the book stays true to the definition given. Blum’s thesis is that, “although no philosophy is without antecedents,” a specific dialectical relationship between theology (which discusses the reality of the existence of God), philosophy (the unengaged treatment of the concept of God, abstracted from its reality) and religion (the expression of faith in human practice) “is the achievement of Renaissance thought of the fourteenth through to the sixteenth century” (p. vii). His investigation will thus uncover the overlapping and delimitations of the areas of competence of these three fields, in a narrative meant to show that a specific equilibrium between them came into place in the Renaissance. It implies that the development of modern day philosophy of religion had its origin in the restructuration of Latin natural theology (*praeambula fidei*), brought about by new inquiries into the historicity of religion carried out by Renaissance thinkers.

This is an important contribution aiming to fill a gap in Renaissance studies. Standard Anglophone textbooks either ignore the field (e.g. *The Cambridge History of Renaissance Philosophy*)¹ or are insufficient for someone looking for an overview (e.g. *The Cambridge Companion to Renaissance Philosophy*).² Perhaps owing to the sheer diversity of doctrines, the history of Renaissance philosophy is still dominated by the model of collected studies on individual authors. This book is no exception, being composed of independent chapters on specific figures, each presented from different and original perspectives that presuppose and should complement standard comprehensive accounts. It displays both minute philosophical, theological or philological analysis and insightful general claims. What we get is a rich panorama of ideas related to the concept of God that marks the expected luxuriant audacities of the Renaissance era,

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while avoiding the usual pedagogical limitations of periodization. Topics cover the rationalization of the concept of God, theological arcana such as the mystery of the Trinity, the limits of reason, the politics of religion, metaphysical and epistemological themes, logic and language or ancient mythology, in authors from the thirteenth to the late sixteenth century. One common denominator of these studies is the effort of appropriation of non-Christian knowledge and its incorporation into Christianity. The author ecumenically avoids seeing in this development the germs of secularization; after all, Saint Augustine or Saint Thomas too had access to ancient wisdom.

The first chapter, on faith, reason and fideism from Lull to Montaigne, sets the tone for what it means *to do* philosophy of religion in the Renaissance. Raymond Lull, is seen as the pioneer who “introduced the basics of modern thought” by achieving a reduction of the epistemological gap between creation and God through the use of combinatory logic. But this is not the chapter’s focus. Lull’s project is insightfully presented through his apologetics and his plea for Christian missionaryism. A detailed investigation of his petition to Pope Boniface VIII to step up missionary efforts, a call to use the double sword of the church, reveals the earthly motivations for his unification of the celestial and the practical. This line of argument for praxis is motivated through a presentation of Lull’s ontological analysis of the dignities of God. Applying linguistic performance to God’s attributes considered as *rationes reales*, Lull forges a concept of the dignities of God as active essences that are inherently and practically productive. The political activity (in this case militarized evangelization) is a direct translation of the productivity of the essences of God. The consequence is that the mystery of the ontological composition of God is submitted to a natural epistemology, thus putting it on a par with other aspects of nature.

The chapter progresses somewhat unexpectedly to the *Natural Theology* of Raymond Sebond and to his famous critique by Montaigne, who plays the voice of common sense and reaffirms the intellectual infirmity of the human mind, but without leaving the subtleties of Sebond’s thought unacknowledged. The author underscores the distinction between Lull’s and Sebond’s projects, both confident in the intelligibility of God and his creation, and Montaigne’s profound skepticism. Cusanus is read through the eyes of a late sixteenth century intellectual, Pietro Bongo, who published a book on numerology inspired by him (*Numerorum Mysteria*, 1599). Bongo’s project was to demonstrate the compatibility of Pythagorean numerology with Christianity. The chapter progresses from showing the presence of Cusanian ideas in this text to Cusanus’s own technical numerological speculations from his sermons. These speculations, instead of being cast out into medieval mysticism, are integrated into a coherent programme for capturing the connection between the intellect and the world through numbers.

A big part of the effort of Renaissance Christian thinkers was one of accommodation of pagan ancient mythology to the tenets of the Christian faith. This effort is traced in the chapter on Coluccio Salutati. But the reverse was perhaps a more interesting challenge: to show in what way ancient mythology illuminates Christianity itself. This could have been the project of the enigmatic Georgios Gemistos Plethon, if he hadn’t gone too far. His extreme trajectory spanned from

Constantinople to Florence, from Aristotelianism to Platonism and from Christianity to neo-paganism. Plethon is introduced through a curious reference from Ficino's translation of Plotinus quoting him as one of the few reliable interpreters of Aristotle, on a par with Themistius, Simplicius, Prophyry or Avicenna. Not to mention that Ficino claims in this text the same status of sound Aristotelians for himself and Pico! The chapter studies Plethon's treatise *Νόμωνσυγγραφή*, a reformatory book that drew heavily on ancient and esoteric knowledge. A reply to Plato's *Laws*, Plethon's aim is a theory of the political and moral implications of religion, in a marked anthropological vein: in order to reach beatitude, a study of man is required, and a study of man requires a study of nature. But in order to even begin to do so, Plethon invokes the help of the Gods and launches in an elaborated syncretic mythology that is difficult to assess as genuine or metaphoric. In the tribulations of the Orthodox Church between the Scylla of the Ottoman Empire and the Charybdis of the Roman Church, Plethon's treatise suggests an attempt to revive Byzantine culture through the restoration of ancient mythology combined with Zoroastrianism. This did not stop his former disciple, Georgios Gennadios Scholarios, who became Ecumenical Patriarch of fallen Constantinople, from partially destroying it. Instead of dwelling on the question of Plethon's alleged neo-paganism, the author helpfully goes beyond, into the moral and political scope of the treatise and presents it as a work of instruction on societal order. In this light, his restoration of ancient mythology is subordinated to a project of rational philosophy, thus making the Byzantine sage a forerunner of Spinoza or Helvetius: the purpose of religion is to serve the perfection of morals. Plethon's carefully assembled theogony is an exercise in applying scholastic Aristotelian and Platonist metaphysical concepts to forge a rational mythology. His theology becomes an experimental endeavour of self-reconstruction.

It would be an unjust effort to try to summarize all the tight analyses proposed in this book, spanning from Lorenzo Valla's re-evaluation of language combined with Pauline piety, to the Carmelite Giovanni Battista Spagnoli Mantovano's anti-Thomist historicism, or to Bruno's systematic struggles with theological speculation. Two central projects for the integration of ancient sources into Christianity are those of Ficino and Pico. The author offers new insights into traditional topics such as the Ficinian hierarchy of beings, the notion of oneness and Ficino's concept of religion. However abstract Ficino's appropriation of Platonism may seem, the author recognizes the anthropocentric tendency in a theology that makes the ascent to the divine an essential feature of humanity. A counterpart to this direction is given by the chapter on Pico, focused on the Florentine quarrel on Platonic love. Pico's critique of Ficino and neo-paganism, his lucidity in receiving Platonism and discerning its incompatibility with Christianity was a welcome complement to the general Platonic enthusiasm of the era. The chapter on Campanella brings this lucidity to the level of a philosophical system that integrated Christian tenets and achieved perhaps the best justification for a Renaissance philosophy of religion.

The substantial chapter on Francisco's Suárez's noetics and divine ideas is a welcome addition to the dynamic Suárezian literature. The author's aim is to highlight

the combination of a Platonic notion of ideas, received via Saint Thomas, with Aristotelian metaphysics, and thus picture Suárez as a mediator between the two main currents of the sixteenth century, namely scholastic Aristotelianism and Renaissance Neoplatonism. The innovation of this analysis in placing Suarez in the context of Renaissance neoplatonism deserves praise; it is high time that scholars looked at the two currents together and acknowledge their contemporaneity. One tendency of the Neoplatonic authors presented in the previous chapters, such as Ficino or Campanella, was to rely on the medieval scholastic doctrine of the transcendentals in order to put a Platonic epistemology in place. Blum shows that this appropriation tended to displace the notion of transcendentals from a predicative notion to the ontological claim that one transcendental just *is* God (the idea of oneness is assimilated both to the transcendental one and to the One). Suárez reacts to this tendency by reaffirming the predicative nature of transcendentals: properties do not equal being. This reaction of reinforcing an orthodox doctrine is taken to show that Suárez was aware of the contemporary Neoplatonic interpretation of transcendentals.

Following this Platonic vein, the author presents Suárez's original conceptualization of divine ideas as forms "destined towards realization" (p. 171). True forms and not just beings of reason, divine ideas are for Suárez a formal concept that represents things as "susceptible to be created" (*ut repraesentat creaturas factibiles*), the very property that makes them *divine* ideas co-eternally present. Blum's nuanced analysis shows how the Suárezian conceptualization of divine ideas can transcend the Aristotelian critique of their reality by positing a new type of being independent of the condition of reality – the type of being of "a concept that encompasses the nonexistence of the essence as potentially realized" (p. 171). Suárez overcomes the famous Aristotelian critique of ideas by using the very Aristotelian notion of potentiality, I would add. One notable fruit of this endeavour is the interpretation of the Aristotelian *ens qua ens* in terms of dependency on the Creator: *ens qua factibile*. The knowledge of this dependency is precisely what the *viator* can attain in the knowledge of things. Suárez's magisterial display of a profound assimilation of Greek philosophy into Christianity is an inspired choice for ending a book on the Renaissance.

This is an intelligently constructed book and a scholarly tour de force that will bring joy to Renaissance scholars. In spite of the necessarily selective choice of figures and themes, it sets itself up as the most comprehensive treatment of Renaissance thinking on religion to date. The question remains whether this thinking represented a specific cultural achievement of the Renaissance; the epilogue of the book tries to situate this ethos in a multi-strategic effort to overcome conflicting truth claims about religion. One could claim that such an effort is inherent to the historical development of religious praxis. Some historians have argued that the assimilation of foreign doctrines and religious expression is an essential trait of Christianity, its *via romana*. Whatever the contribution of humanism to dramatically enhance the reception of antiquity may have been, the Renaissance certainly didn't suffer from a culture shock that would have demanded an excess of rationalization or relativism. The articulation between philosophy, theology and religion in classical Latin Christianity favoured a hierarchical model of disciplines that refused conflict. Philosophical doctrines were to

be used to the extent that they helped the ascent to the theological knowledge of the truth of faith, one that religious practice expressed. Church fathers and medieval doctors were not so vacillating in their confrontation with antiquity because of their ecumenical belief that Greek or Arab wisdom could be distilled and fructified by gently orienting it towards revelation. The truth of faith neither replaced nor antagonized the truth of philosophy; it simply completed it – it made it better. When going through the rich picture of Renaissance projects offered in this book, one gets the sense that it is this side of the story that is missing in a narrative about the birth of the philosophy of religion, namely the non-conflictual, hierarchical and symbiotic articulation between philosophy, theology and practice. Perhaps this is so because philosophy of religion was born with the expense of an erosion of this understanding.

References

¹ Schmitt, C.B., Skinner, Q., Kessler E., and Kraye, J. (eds.), *The Cambridge History of Renaissance Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988).

² Hankins, J. (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Renaissance Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007).