

# Faith and Philosophy: Journal of the Society of Christian Philosophers

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Volume 26 | Issue 4

Article 8

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10-1-2009

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### Recommended Citation

Benson, Bruce Ellis (2009) "A Response to Smith's "Continental Philosophy of Religion: Prescriptions for a Healthy Subdiscipline", *Faith and Philosophy: Journal of the Society of Christian Philosophers*: Vol. 26 : Iss. 4 , Article 8.

Available at: <https://place.asburyseminary.edu/faithandphilosophy/vol26/iss4/8>

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# A RESPONSE TO SMITH'S "CONTINENTAL PHILOSOPHY OF RELIGION: PRESCRIPTIONS FOR A HEALTHY SUBDISCIPLINE"

Bruce Ellis Benson

All of us working in continental philosophy of religion can be grateful to James K. A. Smith for his call to consider which practices will best further the "health" of the burgeoning subdiscipline of continental philosophy of religion. Given that he offers his suggestions "in the spirit of 'conversation starters,'" my response is designed to continue what I hope will be an ongoing conversation. With that goal in mind, I respond to Smith by considering not only the practicality of each suggestion but also whether adopting practices he suggests would actually improve the health of the subdiscipline.

That "continental philosophy of religion" has finally arrived at the stage of development at which it would seem that a review of best practices is in order is truly a cause for celebration. It was not all that long ago when the phrase "continental philosophy of religion" would have sounded odd. It was not that there *were* no continental philosophers writing from an explicitly religious perspective. For instance, the Protestant philosopher Paul Ricoeur had published *The Symbolism of Evil* already in 1960 and the Jewish philosopher Emmanuel Levinas's landmark text *Totality and Infinity* appeared in 1961. Of course, Levinas spent most of his academic career in positions on the margins of academic life, receiving a position at the Sorbonne only at the end of his teaching career (1973–1976) and receiving serious attention in the US only about a decade later. Although Michel Henry published *The Essence of Manifestation* in 1963, in the US his work has become known only in the past few years. Jean-Luc Marion's *The Idol and Distance* appeared in 1977 and then *God without Being* in 1982, but his reputation developed in the US during the 90s. Yet, by the time Dominique Janicaud published his official report on the state of French philosophy from 1975–1990 (*The Theological Turn in French Phenomenology*) in 1991, phenomenology was clearly the dominant mode of philosophy in France and, from Janicaud's point of view, French phenomenology had been theologically "corrupted" by the likes of Levinas, Henry, Marion, and Jean-Louis Chrétien—one Jew and three Christians. Even other philosophers are usually quite shocked when I mention that (arguably) the most prominent living French philosopher—Jean-Luc Marion—is a conservative Roman Catholic.

James K. A. Smith's point, of course, is that such growth in the field of continental philosophy of religion is even broader and deeper than that.



And such is a development that is both truly significant and worthy of examination. Since considering the ways in which any discipline works is always an instructive practice and absolutely necessary for its health, one cannot help but welcome Smith's call to think through our *modus operandi*. To quote him, Smith offers "an anecdotal diagnosis of the field" and then goes on to "suggest some practices in response." "Both," he adds, "are offered in the spirit of 'conversation starters.'" <sup>1</sup> Thus, what follows is some conversation in return that is likewise somewhat—though not totally— anecdotal, due both to the nature of Smith's suggestions and to the lack of anything like a scientific study of current practices. Although I have points of difference with Smith regarding the success of particular practices and how exactly to make them better, I am fully in agreement with the underlying concerns and aspirations. For the sake of simplicity and clarity, I will respond to each of his suggestions in turn.

To begin with his first suggestion, one can hardly quibble with any call for the training of future continental philosophers of religion to be "rigorous, pluralistic, and rooted in the history of philosophy." All of these are uncontested desiderata. As it turns out, many schools that particularly emphasize continental philosophy (Boston College, Fordham University, the University of Leuven—to name a few) simply do not allow graduates to get through without a heavy dose of the entire history of philosophy. As to "a propensity to retreat to enclaves, and an ironic hostility to difference and critique," here it may be uncomfortable to name names, but such is none the less necessary in order to determine whether such a "propensity" exists. Smith speaks specifically of his own training as being "exclusively 'continental,'" so it would seem as if he has in mind either his M.Phil. from the Institute for Christian Studies or his Ph.D. from Villanova University (or both). From what I am able to gather regarding their respective curricula, it would seem neither institution has a particularly strong emphasis on analytic philosophy. However, if I follow Smith's lead and speak from my own experience, what I discovered as a graduate student at Leuven was that the analytic/continental divide simply didn't exist: there was just good and bad philosophy. While in the US it would be unusual to find an analytic philosopher of language who was equally well versed in continental philosophy of language, the professor at Leuven who taught Wittgenstein as mediated by Saul Kripke saw nothing ironic about the fact that he was also a good friend of Jacques Derrida and highly admired Derrida's work.

The reality in the US is that it is quite difficult to find programs that attempt to balance the two traditions. Such schools as Fordham, Chicago, and Emory try to do that. To be sure, one could probably add some other names to this list, but it would still be a relatively short list. However, this problem cuts a number of ways. On the one hand, most prestigious universities in the United States simply do not have a significant continental presence in their philosophy departments (though they may well have one in their literary theory or religion departments). Perhaps they have a "token" continental philosopher (one specializing in Husserl seems often to be preferred, since both Husserl's concerns and argumentation

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<sup>1</sup>Quoted from Smith's footnote fourteen.

are similar to that of analytic philosophers), but that is the extent of the “continental presence.” On the other hand, there are programs that are largely continental that have the inverse “token” analytic philosopher or two. Although Smith seems to have this latter sort in mind as being “enclavish” and “insular,” it must be admitted (if one is to be fair) that the same is often true of the former. The only difference is that, since “analytic philosophy” is “mainstream” in English-speaking countries, philosophy departments in such countries wouldn’t consider themselves “enclavish.” I am greatly in favor of avoiding *any* kind of philosophical insularity and routinely recommend to my students that they learn the language/techniques of both traditions. Of course, one must also recognize that really being willing to *engage* both traditions is hardly easy. The two traditions definitely overlap in important ways, yet each has its jargon, its figures, and its problems or themes. This is a reality to be navigated, though, not somehow simply willed away.

As to suggestion two—moving from edited collections to peer-reviewed journals—here it is helpful to consider how edited volumes come into existence. Many are the fruit of conferences in which either a) the papers are first vetted for the conference or b) the speakers are invited because they are recognized as superior scholars in their respective fields. In the first case, papers are effectively vetted twice (at the time of acceptance for the conference and at the time when the resulting manuscript is sent to reviewers).<sup>2</sup> In the second case, it is expected that the invited speakers will produce a paper that is fully worthy of being published. In the relatively rare case in which such a paper does not meet proper standards, the editor of the volume will ask the contributor to revise the piece until it does. Then there is the manuscript review, at which time a paper may be either singled out for revision or else simply dropped. Of course, there are other ways in which edited volumes come into existence, such as when an editor puts together a collection of papers on a selected topic. Normally, the invited writers have (again) an established reputation and the resulting volume still has to withstand the rigors of peer-review.

Smith should acknowledge that there is a spectrum of how tightly things are controlled. He says that “such collections tend to be repetitions of the usual suspects.” First, I do not see how this is a “problem.” It only stands to reason that edited volumes are going to be dominated by 1) scholars who are particularly expert in their field and 2) such names that will ensure the volumes sell (which is a crucial consideration is today’s

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<sup>2</sup>Consider the following example: For the Society for Continental Philosophy and Theology conference on prayer that led to the volume *The Phenomenology of Prayer* (Fordham University Press, 2005) we received forty-three papers. Given the format of a day and a half conference with only plenary sessions and two keynote speakers, my colleague Norman Wirzba and I were able to accept only seven papers (a 16% acceptance rate), and the decision was made by way of blind review. After the conference, we put together a manuscript that included a few of the papers that couldn’t be accepted for the conference. Then we sent that manuscript to the press and waited for the readers’ reports. Although the readers did not require extensive changes, there were still revisions that were required for publication. So the papers were effectively peer-reviewed at two different stages.

market).<sup>3</sup> Moreover, if this tendency is truly a problem, then it is one that is a problem for edited volumes *in general*. Indeed, a quick glance at edited volumes put out by “analytic” philosophers of religion confirms this same “usual suspect” tendency.

Yet, having said that, I am also not sure that turning to peer-reviewed articles necessarily “fixes” this “problem.” For there are at least three difficulties with this suggestion. First, philosophical journals themselves represent quite a spectrum in terms of quality and percentage of articles accepted. Like edited volumes, some are quite selective, while others accept a very high percentage of papers submitted. Second, journals themselves are sometimes “enclavish” and “repetitions of the usual suspects” (or “repetitions of the usual *subjects*”). To cite an example quite removed from philosophy of religion, the *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* (JAAC) tends to be dominated by a group of “usual suspects.” JAAC is a particularly useful example for it demonstrates certain features common to both aesthetics and continental philosophy of religion—1) a limited number of people working in this specialty (which makes it at least seem “enclavish” and thus dominated by the “usual suspects”) and 2) the fact that people writing for the journal and the people reviewing the submissions tend to be more or less the same group. While JAAC fits this kind of description particularly well, many other journals have a similarly limited focus and so exhibit the same tendencies. Of course, JAAC has a very low acceptance rate, as does *Faith and Philosophy*. So merely because a journal serves a particular philosophical “niche” does not mean that the papers it publishes are of poor quality or that they do not receive rigorous vetting. Third, I would be all for having a “go to” journal for some of these discussions in continental philosophy of religion, but what journal will that be? It certainly won’t be *Faith and Philosophy*, which would have to change its profile rather significantly to become a central journal for work in continental philosophy of religion (and, to be frank, such a change would likely be unwanted by most readers of and contributors to *F&P*). Further, I am not sure if *Continental Philosophy Review* or *Philosophy Today* or the *Journal for Cultural and Religious Theory* will fit that bill. It may well be that we need a journal specifically devoted to continental philosophy of religion.

This leads to suggestion three. Smith advises that continental philosophers of religion publish with more “‘mainstream’ channels.” The problem is again one of enclaves or, to quote him, “alternative societies and meetings” and “friendly” publishing venues. This suggestion, however, is even more problematic than the previous one. First, it must be remembered that, for instance, the Society for Phenomenology and Existential Philosophy (SPEP) arose in 1962 precisely because the APA program committees

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<sup>3</sup>When I contacted Merold Westphal regarding the concern about edited volumes not being rigorously enough reviewed, his response was as follows: “My experience on the inside of Fordham and Indiana University Presses and my experience as a referee for a variety of journals strongly confirms your reply. In my experience, it is a myth that journal reviewing is more rigorous than refereeing essays for symposium volumes. While there may be nepotism in this area, it is far from clear that this is unique either to symposium volumes or to continental philosophy of religion, and I’ve seen referees be very hard on their friends in symposium volumes.”

weren't willing to accept papers written on "continental philosophy." It is a sign of currently thawing relations that the APA is much keener today on accepting "continental" philosophy and this is greatly to be celebrated. But this is a relatively new development. It wasn't very long ago when sending in a Heidegger paper for an APA conference was an act of futility. And, to make matters worse, it would seem that SPEP is even today not particularly friendly to papers that attempt to work at the intersection between continental and analytic philosophy. So it goes both ways.

Of course, such a problem of "unfriendliness" was once true for Christian philosophers and the APA, and that leads me to a second problem. One of the main reasons for founding the SCP and its journal *Faith and Philosophy* was precisely to provide a "friendly" venue for analytic philosophy of religion done by Christians. As it turns out, over the course of time, *F&P* has *itself* become "mainstream" and one of the premier journals of philosophy of religion. But part of its original founding was certainly that of providing a "friendly" atmosphere for philosophy of religion discussions. In the same way that analytic philosophy of religion produced by Christians has come of age, I suspect continental philosophy of religion will in time come of age—and will thus become more mainstream. Yet we should not forget that Christian continental philosophers of religion face not just the handicap that they are Christian but also the handicap that their particular issues, figures, etc. are not necessarily mainstream *philosophically*.

Third, when Smith suggests that continental philosophers of religion "relinquish the ease and comfort of in-house jargon," there is part of me that greets such a suggestion with a very hearty endorsement and another part that cautions "wait a moment." On the one hand, there is simply no reason for continental philosophers of religion to resort to jargon. Indeed, if we are interested in having our work read as widely as possible, then making ourselves as clear as possible is truly desirable. Smith is quite right in pointing to Merold Westphal as an example of someone who writes in a way that is accessible to both the analytic and the continental traditions, and Westphal is a fine example to follow. On the other hand, it is not clear whether Smith is suggesting a "one-way" or a "two-way" street. For the problem of jargon is hardly unique to continental philosophers. It would be a very welcome development were philosophers in *both* traditions willing to write in such a way as to be accessible to one another. However, it won't do for the analytic philosopher to criticize the continental philosopher for speaking in jargon, any more than it will do for the Midwesterner to criticize the Southerner for "having an accent," all the while thinking that people from the Midwest "have no accent." We all have philosophical "accents" and, if we are really going to have a discussion that includes everyone, we had *all* better learn how to explain ourselves in language that everyone else can understand. Such a move would produce a far better and richer dialogue. Yet let us recognize from the beginning that such a move will not be easy—and that some on both "sides" will be highly resistant.

Fourth, though clearly related to my second point, one of the reasons for having these alternative venues is not merely that they provide a *friendly* place but that they provide a *place at all*. There simply isn't enough room in current APA meetings to absorb the papers of SPEP, SCP, and the

Society for Continental Philosophy and Theology (SCPT). Even with the American Academy of Religion (AAR), there still aren't enough venues for the work currently being done.<sup>4</sup> Moreover, having separate SCP or SCPT conferences is a way to focus on a particular theme—something that really couldn't be easily done through either the APA or AAR. Having more continental philosophy of religion papers accepted at APA conferences is certainly desirable, though that will hardly significantly alter the current philosophical landscape.

As to suggestion four, I think literature reviews can be very desirable. There is no question that examining previous work on a topic or figure and then showing how one's own work truly makes a contribution is both helpful and often needed to contextualize whatever the author is arguing. Indeed, analytic philosophers have discovered just how many of their current discussions were either presaged or else played out rather similarly in medieval philosophy. However, I'm not sure that a literature review should be *de rigueur* for all articles.

First, if one examines many of the most influential and classic analytic articles, one will not find anything like a literature review. There may well be interaction with others who have written on the same point, but that is a far cry from a complete literature review. Thus, Smith is simply empirically incorrect when he says that "conversations in analytic philosophy always begin with a literature review." Actually, the sentence before that seems to be a better appraisal of the current situation. For Smith speaks of "certain subfields of analytic philosophy" as having a "tight sense of the 'state of the art.'" It may well be that certain subfields require a literature review, but many articles written by analytic philosophers do not begin with a literature review. Having said that, though, I'm still very much in favor of writing in such a way that one is in dialogue with others who have written on a particular topic. Not only does this keep one from reinventing the wheel, but it also shows how a particular article is a contribution to a particular discussion.

However, such dialogue—and certainly the strong requirement of a literature review—is considerably more of a hurdle for the continental philosopher of religion. On the one hand, continental philosophers tend to be read by scholars in many different disciplines. It is not uncommon, then, that working on, say, Derrida's views regarding religion may well require that one reads the secondary literature in such fields as anthropology, communications, foreign languages (French and German, obviously, but other languages too), literary theory, sociology, and religion. And that list is hardly exhaustive, for it would also need to include the various "studies" departments that one finds at many universities. On the other hand, and even more daunting, any literature review worth its salt will have to include work done in Dutch, French, German, Italian, and Spanish (at a minimum). Knowing those languages well enough to

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<sup>4</sup>In the interest of full disclosure, I should state that I am a co-founder of SCPT and currently serve as its executive director. I am also co-chair of the Theology and Continental Philosophy group that is part of AAR. Both of those facts may make my comments less "objective," but serving in those capacities allows me to see just how much demand there is for continental philosophy of religion public venues.

read the secondary literature is itself a rather a stiff requirement that far eclipses the French and/or German “competency tests” required by most US departments of philosophy. One could quite easily pass one of those tests without being able to work (in any meaningful sense) in the respective language. Then, finding the time to *read* the literature is even more of a challenge. In contrast, since most analytic philosophy is done in English, it is simply much easier to consult. Were one to respond to this problem that simply doing a literature review in English would be sufficient, then one would simply misunderstand the nature of a thorough literature review in continental philosophy.

These reasons in no way let the continental philosopher of religion off the hook, but they should make clear why such literature reviews are a challenge that surpasses the one faced by the analytic philosopher. What might make more sense would be the wider use of the *Literaturbericht* that one finds in the German tradition: in such an essay, one surveys the literature on a particular topic and lays out the various views. Such essays are *simply* literature reviews, rather than articles that begin with a literature review and then explain how the author’s view relates to the others.

In suggestion five, Smith advises that continental philosophers of religion “move beyond ‘victimhood’ and embrace critique.” First, how could one argue against embracing thoughtful critique? Yes, there is a “victim” mentality among some continental philosophers. But, then, some of us have had to work in contexts in which there simply *hasn’t been* much in the way of “objective” critique of our work. In other words, some of that critique *has been* “ideologically driven.” But, if someone (whether continental or analytically oriented) has substantive, non-ideological critique, then “let’s hear it”! However, I think the real problem that continental philosophers face is finding analytic philosophers who are truly willing to take the time to understand what we are saying, even if we *are* saying it as clearly as we are able. It seems safe to say that we need to cultivate a culture in which there is an openness to dialogue *on both sides*. That is a goal to be achieved, though, not at all the present reality.

Finally, there is every reason to embrace “authentic pluralism.” Smith seems to suggest that it doesn’t exist in continental philosophy of religion. His examples of exclusion include work inflected by the Derridean notion of “religion without religion,” the thought of Vattimo, and the (negative) response to Radical Orthodoxy (for more specifics, consult footnote twenty-two of Smith’s text). In effect, Smith’s point is that precisely those who preach the gospel of “difference” don’t actually have much room for it, especially if it comes in the form of Christian orthodoxy. Regarding that point, I must leave it to the reader to decide whether such supposed openness really doesn’t exist; one could easily reel off a long list of names who are either orthodox Christians themselves or very much open to orthodox Christianity.<sup>5</sup> Yet, even if there is a lack of openness in certain quarters, Smith’s portrayal of continental philosophy of religion seems “monolithic”

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<sup>5</sup>Besides putting myself squarely in that group, one could name Jean-Louis Chrétien, Louis Dupre, Kevin Hart, Richard Kearney, Jean-Luc Marion, Adriaan Peperzak, Robert Sokolowski, Merold Westphal, and Norman Wirzba. This is just the beginning of such a list.



in a way that simply does not reflect continental philosophy of religion as practiced both on this continent and the continent of Europe. Instead, this is a very lively and open exchange that includes players from a wide variety of perspectives. Even though some of those perspectives are critical of the others, there isn't anything like the "creeping hegemony" that bothers Smith. Sure, there may be those who are allergic to orthodox Christianity, but that is hardly more of a problem in continental philosophy of religion than it is in analytic philosophy of religion. Christian analytic philosophers of religion have long had to deal with such opposition.

As should be clear, all of what I've said so far is to put Smith's suggestions in perspective. As such, it should be taken simply as continuing a conversation. There is clearly much more to be said. But let me conclude by summarizing what I've noted above. First, in full agreement with Smith, being "rigorous, pluralistic, and rooted in the history of philosophy" should be a desideratum for *all* graduate departments, not merely ones that specialize in continental philosophy. Second, peer-review is always going to be the "gold standard" of philosophy, but I am not sure that such review comes only from publishing in journals, nor does publishing in journals necessarily guarantee high-quality peer-review. Third, if any particular philosophical group or specialty is being insular merely to "escape" wider critique, then that is surely problematic. However, there may be good reasons for having publishing venues that are read largely by those in a particular sub-specialty, and those venues need not lack rigor or be enclavish. Fourth, there is much to commend the literature review, though it needs to be recognized that such a review is not necessarily standard for analytic philosophy and that it presents a particular challenge for continental philosophers of religion. Fifth, continental philosophers of religion should indeed "embrace critique," but we need philosophers to step up to the plate and provide truly thoughtful, non-ideological critique. Finally, authentic pluralism is an excellent goal for any discipline. However, pluralism does not mean that one does not take stands on particular issues or that one welcomes all voices without criticism.

In conclusion, for pushing us not necessarily to begin (for the conversation has been going on for quite some time) but to go much further, Smith is certainly to be thanked. In turn, I can only add: "let the conversation continue."

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