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Review Of "Religion" By J. Derrida And G. Vattimo

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Review by: Mark I. Wallace

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gion: Limits and Possibilities,” is a good example of Dupré’s style; it is, moreover, the most important essay in the collection, for it sets out Dupré’s agenda and method. Although a complete analysis and evaluation of the essay is beyond the scope of this review, some attention to it is merited here because of its methodological significance.

At issue in the essay—and recurring throughout the volume—are the roles of faith, the word, the religious act, and experience in the context of the study of religion. Dupré critiques classical phenomenologists of religion, especially Gerardus Van der Leeuw and Mircea Eliade, for failing to attend to the ontological implications of classical phenomenology, especially as represented by Edmund Husserl. According to Dupré, the irenic epoch, so often viewed as a normative model of scholarly comportment, fundamentally precludes complete understanding of religious data; the disposition of detachment thus reduces phenomenology to uninteresting and insufficient programs of description and typology. Dupré’s position instead insists on assertively engaging the ontological and metaphysical implications of religious data, especially the religious act. The significance of the religious act lies not only in the meaning identified by the subject but by meaning brought to the subject by the object. This challenging and controversial position impacts related issues of experience, interpretation, revelation, and truth, all of which come under Dupré’s scrutiny in this and the other essays of the collection. Each of these issues, however, shares a common theme, namely the need to take seriously the structures and implications of faith in philosophical reflection. The successful manner in which he does this himself suggests that philosophers may have a significant, though untapped, resource in their various programs of rational reflection, namely, the experience of faith.

Versions of Dupré’s approach to issues in the study of religion—theological at its core—of course can be seen in other thinkers unapologetically operating in a context of faith, such as Karl Rahner, Paul Tillich, and Urs von Balthasar (whose work launches Dupré’s own reflections on symbolism). Dupré’s work is an attempt to bridge the academic worlds of history of religions and philosophical theology in ways that are both challenging and constructive. For this reason scholars from both intellectual disciplines should find themselves stimulated by *Religious Mystery and Rational Reflection*.

THOMAS A. FORSTHOEFEL, *Mercyhurst College*.

DERRIDA, JACQUES, and VATTIMO, GIANNI, eds. *Religion*. Cultural Memory in the Present Series. Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1998. x+221 pp. \$49.50 (cloth); \$14.95 (paper).

In the winter of 1994, a small group of European philosophers gathered on the isle of Capris to discuss why the question of religion is a such a burning issue in our time. The group consisted of Jacques Derrida, Maurizio Ferraris, Hans-Georg Gadamer, Aldo Gargani, Eugenio Trias, Gianni Vattimo, and Vincenzo Vitiello. The papers read at this conference are gathered here. All the papers represent a broadly postmodernist focus on the resurgence of religious belief and practice in the aftermath of the modernist dismissal of religion as an exercise in dogmatism and superstition. In the spirit of Martin Heidegger’s attempt to overcome metaphysics—albeit a failed attempt, according to some of the authors here—these authors seek to develop a postfoundational theological method of inquiry. In this regard, the essays by Derrida and Vattimo are especially note-

worthy and constitute the heart of the argument. I will confine my review to these two essays and refer the reader to the other essays as attempts to expand and deepen the issues raised by Derrida and Vattimo.

Derrida's essay, "Faith and Knowledge: The Two Sources of 'Religion' at the Limits of Reason Alone," proposes a dialectical notion of religion in the contemporary information age. Two strains of religion are evident today, he argues. Contrary to Enlightenment despisers of religion who averred that a secular world had no place for otherworldly faith, fundamentalist religion today is a militantly resurgent reality on the rise and on the attack. In this strain, postsecularist religion is the ideological engine for "globalatinization," the brutally phallic regime of social and political repression under the putative authority of the Western monotheistic faiths. Essentially, fundamentalist religion is a market phenomenon: it utilizes global capital and telecommunications in its battle for the allegiance of the body politic. But religion today also presents itself as a singular and unique challenge to the world domination system. In this other strain, religion is the irruption of justice and peace in a techno world wracked by theologically sanctioned violence. Here religion undermines its own presentation of itself as a global, market phenomenon. This other type of religion is archoriginary in that it precedes all forms of determinate religion and culture; it is messianic (though not in a positive, historical sense) as the imaginary opening to a democratic future in which all persons are respected as singular individuals; and it is *chora*, to use Plato's term from the *Timaeus*, as the desert-like "place" that infinitely resists attempts to rationalize and thereby suppress the heterogeneity and alterity within human experience. Derrida champions an anchoritic spirituality that seeks the quiet emptiness of the desert as a challenge to the global religions of televangelism, political terror, and market values. Genuine faith, according to Derrida, is the "chance of this desert in the desert . . . [for] in uprooting the tradition that bears it, in atheologizing it, this abstraction, without denying faith, liberates a universal rationality and the political democracy that cannot be dissociated from it" (p. 19).

Vattimo in "The Trace of the Trace" also argues that beyond its secular critics, religion is enjoying a return to popular consciousness. But what is the nature of this return, he asks? For many persons, the return of religion is characterized by a nostalgia for an ultimate, metaphysical foundation. In this nostalgia, religion legitimates flight from the ambiguities of late-modern existence to the security of a philosophical system that purports to ground all reality. But the promise of religion for our era, Vattimo argues, is not in the pseudosecurity of a determinate foundation but as "an irruption of the 'Other' and as discontinuity in the horizontal course of history" (p. 86). For Vattimo, this irruption of the other has a distinctly Levinasian, ethical cast; it is the call to conscience to work toward the well-being of the other person. Nevertheless, the demand of the other to take up her welfare is a demand that can never be fully met. Vattimo argues that the experience of radical finitude and personal failure in the face of this demand paves the way for religion's most important contribution to postmodern subjectivity: the offer of forgiveness. The awareness of one's fallenness in one's inability to care fully for the other can engender a disabling sense of sin and guilt. But the surprise of grace breaks the cycle of moral inadequacy suffered by the subject unable to respond sufficiently to the other's cries and demands for love and justice. Religion provides a transcendent source of comfort and renewal for the person who struggles to make sense of the moral demands pressing upon her in a broken and fallen world.

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While I am in general agreement with the thrust of this volume, there are problems with aspects of the argument. In particular, I found Vattimo's critique of Levinas troubling (pp. 90–93). Vattimo maintains that Levinas, in focusing exclusively on the demands of the other, returns to a sort of moral foundationalism grounded in an "Old Testament" sense of prescription and obligation. Vattimo's dismissal of Levinas as an apologist for "God the Father" is an echo of the hoary law versus gospel polemic of earlier times. It misses the point of Levinas's thesis that the demand of the other is never felt as a legalistic burden but as an occasion for awakening one's ownmost desires to care for and nurture one's neighbor. Otherwise, there is much to recommend in this volume's compelling proposals for genuine religious faith and practice in the wake of the collapse of the high-handed secularism that has defined many Western cultures.

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LYNCH, MICHAEL P. *Truth in Context: An Essay on Pluralism and Objectivity*. Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1998. 184 pp. \$35.00 (cloth).

Michael Lynch argues that what he terms "metaphysical pluralism is compatible with a realistic theory of truth." He defends a "relativized Kantianism, according to which all thought and fact is internal to one among a possible plurality of conceptual schemes, and yet truth is a relation between our thought and the world" (p. 13). This quote may give some sense of the distinctive, difficult task Lynch has set for himself. We are used to thinking of pluralism as resting comfortably with broadly epistemic theories of truth—say, pragmatist or coherentist—but Lynch wants a nonepistemic, realist approach to truth, one on which "a proposition is true when the world is as the proposition says it is" (p. 3).

Motivating Lynch's metaphysical pluralism is the "peculiar intractability of metaphysical debate" (p. 16). He lists, as examples, problems of personal identity, of mereology, the nature of substance, and the ontological status of numbers. Not only do these long-running disagreements seem intractable, but "the nature of the concepts themselves seem to be responsible for the suspicion that there is no absolute way to resolve the dispute" (p. 19). Relief, according to Lynch, comes with the realization that "the content of an assertion is intrinsically related to a conceptual scheme" (p. 21). There may be more than one true account of the world.

Lynch is forthright in acknowledging important objections to his position. And, of course, there are many. He gives some attention to Davidson's claim that the "very idea" of a conceptual scheme (let alone a plurality of them) is incoherent. There are two separable strands to Davidson's claim—one depending on his allegiance to a Tarski-style account of truth in combination with an analysis of meaning in terms of truth conditions. Lynch rejects the truth-conditional approach to semantics (p. 40) and so does not consider this strand a threat. Davidson's second argument strikes me as a more difficult foe. It depends on the claim that natural languages have certain properties that constrain how we can correctly interpret others. For example, Davidson has argued for a version of the principle of charity, for holism about meaning, for the ascription of at least minimal rationality, and for the necessity of finding many basic sentences true at those times that they are held true by the speaker. The upshot is supposed to be that we cannot intelligibly attribute an alternative conceptual scheme to anyone whose words we claim to have interpreted.