

Wesleyan University

From the Selected Works of Mary-Jane Rubenstein

2011

Review of Joy (ed.) *Continental Philosophy and
Philosophy of Religion* and Kearney,
Anatheism

Mary-Jane V Rubenstein, *Wesleyan University*



Available at: https://works.bepress.com/mary_jane_rubenstein/21/

Book reviews

Mary-Jane Rubenstein

Published online: 18 June 2011
© Springer Science+Business Media B.V. 2011

Morny Joy (ed.): Continental philosophy and philosophy of religion. Springer, New York, 2011, 264 pp, \$139 (hb)

Richard Kearney: Anatheism: returning to God after God. Columbia University Press, New York, 2010, xix + 247 pp, \$29.50 (hb), \$22.50 (pb)

One cannot make it past the cover of this new collection of essays without puzzling a bit over the title. Carefully edited by Morny Joy, this is the fourth volume in Springer's *Handbook of Contemporary Philosophy of Religion* (edited by Eugene Long), yet unlike Volume 2: *Analytic Philosophy of Religion*, its title is not *Continental Philosophy of Religion*. Rather, it calls itself *Continental Philosophy and Philosophy of Religion*—a more unwieldy designation than one might hope, the conjunction itself signaling something of a disjunction.

To be sure, “Continental Philosophy of Religion” would be a misnomer for this particular volume, if only because its sources are not philosophers of religion trained in the continental tradition (such as Caputo, Crockett, Hart, Kearney, Raschke, Taylor, Westphal, and many of the contributors to this volume), but rather the thinkers whose work these authors most often engage. More radically, however, there is a subtle suggestion throughout these essays that “continental philosophy” cannot simply be tagged onto “philosophy of religion”—that the former, in fact, presents fundamental challenges to the assumptions, objects, and methods of the latter. Ultimately, the consensus seems to be that a “continental philosophy of religion,” if there were such a thing, would change more or less everything about the discipline.

Joy's introduction begins by defining philosophy of religion as “a sub-discipline of Anglo-American philosophy,” which submits the central concepts of “religion” to rational interrogation (p. 1). As the essays go on, they build a multi-faceted critique

M.-J. Rubenstein (✉)
Wesleyan University, Middletown, CT, USA

of nearly every aspect of the discipline, from its presuppositions (objective truth, conceptual neutrality, “reason” as transhistorical and universal) to its putative agent (the disembodied subject), to its objectives (proving the existence of God, vindicating His [sic] goodness, etc.), and its scope (Protestant Christianity, whether acknowledged as such or masquerading as “religion” itself). The discipline is furthermore called to task for remaining a “distinctively male enterprise,” and for failing to analyze the vectors of race, gender, sex, and class that condition its own possibility (p. 5; see also Armour and Carrette). This volume, then, aims “to encourage philosophy of religion to recognize its shortcomings” (p. 6). In the process, it presents the discipline with thinkers who trouble nearly all its categories of analysis, in the hopes not of supplementing philosophy of religion, but of transforming it.

While each essay addresses a unique set of concerns, the resonances between them present four major challenges to philosophy of religion as it is traditionally conceived. The first, from which the rest arguably follow, is the death of the God of metaphysics. Without exception, the authors engaged here take the Kantian position that it is impossible to prove the existence of God, and the Kierkegaardian-Heideggerian position that any God whose existence could be proven would not be God in the first place. The second challenge is the demise of the disembodied, rational subject whom the God of metaphysics underwrites. Like his transcendent guarantor, the rational subject is shown to have been a historical product, a universalizing projection that remains European and male. Third, these authors unanimously reject the notion that reason *itself* is universal, revealing purportedly neutral concepts (like God, the subject, religion, or secularism) to be the product of concrete socio-political interests and forces. This means that reason is irreducibly embodied and contextual (Foucault, Ricoeur, Kristeva, the Frankfurt School); language is irreducibly gendered, raced, and classed (Irigaray, Levinas, Derrida); and knowledge is irreducibly affective (Deleuze, Marion). Finally, these thinkers call into question not only the neutrality of reason, but also its priority and sufficiency, shifting the task of thinking toward ethics on the one hand and the unthinkable on the other. For many of them, in fact, these two terrains open onto one another: it is only at the limits of thinking that thinking encounters the other *as such*; only when I cannot explain suffering that I can respond to those who actually suffer.

Unlike nearly every other survey of philosophy of religion, this volume is not organized around themes or problems (the existence of God, the problem of evil, the afterlife, the basis of morality, etc.). Rather, each essay focuses on the major works of one thinker or more, tracing lines of inquiry that, together, sketch the contours of a distinctively continental approach to the discipline. Morny Joy begins with a remarkably thorough treatment of Paul Ricoeur, emphasizing his increasing turn from speculative reason toward *phronesis*, politics, and intersubjective ethics. Ellen Armour follows this with a deft tour through the oeuvre of Jacques Derrida, attending in particular to his consistent focus “on the limits of philosophy, of language and its ability to say” (p. 40). Bettina Bergo offers an exhaustive treatment of the priority of ethics in Emmanuel Levinas, following the thread of “sensibility and affectivity” throughout his corpus. Morny Joy then returns to treat Julia Kristeva’s and Luce Irigaray’s differing critiques of the father-God as lynchpin of the symbolic order, as well as their shared attention to love. Jeremy Carrette provides a very capable introduction to the major phases of Michel Foucault’s work, arguing that Foucault’s exposure of the polit-

ical-institutional bases of knowledge amounts to a complete “reconfiguration of the categories of philosophy and religion” (p. 115). Philip Goodchild’s essay on Gilles Deleuze competently wrangles some “implicit” hints about religion into a threefold schema: first indifference, then atheism, and finally “beatitude,” an ethical metaphysics of affirmation through which “the whole of existence comes to seem inspired” (p. 163). In a carefully grounded treatment of Jean-Luc Marion, Christina Gschwandtner calls our attention to the interrelated figures of “God without being” and “saturated phenomena,” each of which marks the limits—indeed, the downfall—of the metaphysical God and transcendental subject. Finally, James Swindal turns our gaze to the major figures of the Frankfurt School, pointing out the religious and even theological concerns that often go unaccounted for in the work of immanent critique—from Benjamin’s messianism to Adorno’s and Horkheimer’s iconoclasm to Habermas’s postsecular intersubjectivity. The volume then concludes with a reflection on the running theme of “otherness,” which Joy traces through all the above mentioned thinkers except the Frankfurt School, plus Sartre.

It is here that the coherence of the volume trembles a bit; insofar as the Frankfurt School does not fit into the concluding chapter, it feels somewhat out of place. Had the conclusion focused on differing interpretations of “transcendence” rather than otherness, it could have included the critical theorists—but even then, the last major thinker engaged would remain Habermas, whose return to objective reason and whose separation of morality from religion seem at odds with the tenor of the other essays (pp. 211–212). Perhaps the book would read more smoothly if the Frankfurt chapter had come immediately after the introduction, considering how (positively or negatively) formative the school has been for all the other thinkers in the volume. It is also frustrating that this book, which so courageously names the misogyny that continues to structure the discipline, forces its only two female authors into the same chapter. As Joy concedes, Irigaray and Kristeva do not have much in common at all, and if the basis for their joint treatment is really their shared focus on love (rather than their being women), then Marion arguably belongs in this chapter, as well.

These small criticisms aside, the essays collected in this volume present a bold, trenchant critique of philosophy of religion, as well as a rich set of resources to imagine it otherwise. The lasting impression it gives is not that we must abandon the discipline, but that we may transform it—more precisely, that it is in exposing the fault lines of the old ways that new ways might emerge. A continental approach to philosophy of religion undercuts the metaphysical God, the self-identical subject, disembodied rationality, and theodicy, and in the process produces ways to think and reconfigure transcendence, relation, embodiment, and responsibility. In giving up proofs, it gets back critique; in giving up mastery, it gets back vulnerability; in giving up objectivity, it gets back passion; and in giving up the will toward certainty, it gets back an openness to what is still to come—what may yet be.

This particular double-movement—the dance between renunciation and expectation that Kierkegaard called “repetition”—forms the conceptual core of Richard Kearney’s *Anatheism: Returning to God after God*. Perhaps the most personal of his books so far, *Anatheism* is the first volume of a trilogy-in-progress that draws on numerous religious and philosophical traditions to find a “third way between the extremes of dogmatic theism and militant atheism” (p. 3). For Kearney, this third way

will be “philosophical rather than theological” (p. xv): an unsettling of all theistic and atheistic certainty by means of a permanent critique he calls *anatheism*.

In coining this neologism, Kearney is drawing upon the sense of repetition that the prefix gives. *Ana-theos*: God-again, or in Kearney’s language, “God after God” (p. 3). As he did in *The God Who May Be* (Indiana, 2001), Kearney attunes us to the God who might emerge out of the ruins of metaphysics—to the God after continental philosophy’s death of God. In the present volume, *anatheism* comes to name the whole process of loss and return: the abandonment of the Divine Monarch, the passage through an atheist “between,” and the decision either for or against a God beyond the God we can no longer believe in. In this light, Kearney’s anatheism can be read as an extended meditation on Bonhoeffer’s “religionless Christianity”: a destruction of the monarchical God for the sake of the God of the suffering, an abandonment of the *deus ex machina* for the sake of the God among us. Or—and this is always an option in Kearney’s view—a choice to refuse the return journey and remain instead in the *agnosis* of the death of God. Either way, Kearney’s hermeneutic stance trembles throughout this book, the anatheistic opening drawing us before or beyond any safe distinction between philosophy and theology.

The first movement of anatheism is unknowing: a sudden strangeness of the familiar that exposes our previous convictions as illusory or impossible. This apophatic shock comes in many forms for Kearney: it can hit us through the horrors of history, the disorientation of art, or an encounter with a religious tradition that differ from our own. In each case, we experience an “instan[t] of deep disorientation, doubt, or dread, when we are no longer sure exactly where we are going” (p. 5). The illusion of some Divine Plan crumbles; the world seems utterly strange; and the knowing self that the old God held in place is radically dispossessed (pp. 5, 13, 58). However discomfiting, Kearney maintains that this space of unknowing is crucial to imagining God, the self, and the world *otherwise*—and whether it comes through ethics, aesthetics, or interpersonal relationships, this creative *agnosis* is prompted each time by the coming of a stranger. Above all, then, anatheism is a matter of hospitality.

In this particular sense, anatheism is nothing new; as far as Kearney is concerned, hospitality is the inaugurating gesture and central occupation of the three “Abrahamic” traditions themselves. From “Abraham’s encounter with desert strangers [to] Mary’s answer to the Annunciation [to] Muhammed’s response to a voice in a cave,” Kearney marks the arrival of a stranger as the destabilizing moment that prompts a decision either for or against “faith” (p. 8). More concretely, the decision is whether and how to receive the unexpected. And Kearney admits that for every gesture of hospitality in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, there is a corresponding gesture of hostility (pp. 4, 19, 23). There is, in short a duplicity at the heart of each tradition—a commendation of both love and violence that demands tireless interpretation and continual decision.

Unlike the “moment” of Climacus’s *Fragments*, then, Kearney’s anatheistic wager is never made “once and for all.” Rather, “it needs to be repeated again and again—every time we speak in the name of God or ask why he has abandoned us” (p. 16). Existing in this “bracing oscillation between doubt and faith,” the atheist comes to inhabit a space between the sacred and the secular, in which the everyday becomes holy (pp. 56, 86). This “sacramental” relation to the world is the effect of the anathe-

ist movement between “protest and prophesy”—the rejection of the familiar and the opening out to new possibilities. As such, the sacramental is the self-exceeding terrain in which a God after God might return—differently. Kearney explores this sacro-secularity through meticulous and progressively dazzling readings of Joyce, Proust, and Woolf, in whose work he finds an anatheistic turn to the “holy in happenstance”—a set of epiphanic repetitions whereby a lost past becomes repeated forward, delivering the characters (and reader) “to a reconfigured existence” (pp. 103, 117).

Crucially, this reconfigured existence remains open to and responsible for the sacramental world as such. For this reason, the book ends with a chapter on ethics, focusing on the work of Dorothy Day, Jean Vanier, and Mahatma Gandhi. That said, the anatheistic journey has been ethical from the start. After all, the initial renunciation of the familiar is prompted by an encounter with a stranger—a stranger who, in the monotheistic traditions at least, is “associated with the name of God” (p. 21). Deciding to receive this stranger therefore means deciding to see the face of God in her, responding to the marginalized in the world as God in the world. Because the God after God can only show up as a stranger, Kearney insists that atheism “leads inevitably to an option for the poor and oppressed” (p. 136). And so after the death of the “God of power,” the anatheistic wager receives back the “God as guest”: the God whose very being demands our response (p. 165).

Of the many conceptual moves *Anatheism* makes, perhaps the most profound are its welding of apophaticism to ethics and its giving this apophatic ethic an interreligious character. From the outset, Kearney insists that “to ignore strange Gods is...to neglect the basic experience of God as a Stranger” (p. 4). As we learn, in fact, it is often the encounter with these “strange Gods” that makes one’s own God strange, prompting the decision either for or against the God-as-Stranger. For this reason, atheism’s apophatic ethic is irreducibly one of “interconfessional hospitality”—of openness to the truth-claims of “alien faiths” (pp. 49, 51).

One of the ways Kearney reaffirms this imperative is to isolate a trans-traditional focus on hospitality itself, which he sees in the acts of

Moses taking an African spouse, Solomon embracing the Shulammitte woman, Jesus greeting the Samaritan woman at the well, or, to extend our range of reference, the Buddha welcoming those from alien and alienated castes, Sufi poets responding to the ‘uninvited guest,’ or the famous instance of Baucis and Philomen receiving Zeus and Hermes as disguised ‘strangers’ (p. 49).

This list exemplifies a practice that Kearney calls “crossreading”: “an endless and reversible process of translation between one religion and the next” (p. 50). Yet while the ethical and interpretive value of such work is clear, the strategy as enacted in *Anatheism* leaves this reader with a bit of a reservation. For although Kearney says repeatedly that the aim of this process is to illuminate differences among traditions as well as similarities (pp. 50–51, 150–151, 175), the book does not work through—or even name—any of these differences.

This emphasis on sameness over what J. Z. Smith would call “incongruity” seems to be a function of two factors: a lack of historical context on the one hand, and a reduction of religion to “belief” or “faith” on the other—specifically, belief or faith

in a “God.” Throughout the book, the concept of religion and its various subcategories are taken to be self-evident, as though “Hinduism,” “Buddhism,” “religion,” etc. were not themselves the products of (oftentimes violent) intercultural exchange—of colonial, neo-colonial, and anti-colonial practices that have privileged, among other factors, “belief” in some sort of “God.” In short, if the encounter between “alien faiths” promises to lead to what Kearney calls “the interreligious God,” it is partly because these terms have been dictated from the outset by a Protestantized, globalizing Christianity. This is not to deny the importance of the interreligious dialogue and exchange that Kearney so rightly commends. It is simply to say that the “difference” he seeks to hold in tension with similarity might best be preserved by historicizing and contextualizing these traditions themselves. To be sure, there will be more room for such work in Kearney’s forthcoming *Interreligious Imagination* and *Caves: Filling the God Void*—volumes that promise to keep questioning the presuppositions of analytic and continental philosophies alike, opening them to ever more possibilities.