RELIGION AFTER METAPHYSICS

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CHAPTER 1

Introduction: metaphysics and onto-theology

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Since Plato, philosophers in the West have proposed various conceptions of a supreme being that was the ground of the existence and intelligibility of all that is. In the works of St. Augustine (and perhaps before), this metaphysical god became identified with the Judeo-Christian creator God. In modernity, however, the philosopher's foundationalist conception of God has become increasingly implausible. The decline of the metaphysical God was perhaps first noted when Pascal declared that the God of the philosophers was not the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. In any event, by the time that Nietzsche announced "the death of God," it was clear that something important had changed in the form of life prevailing in the West.

Whether Nietzsche's actual diagnosis of the change is right, most contemporary thinkers agree with him that the metaphysical understanding of God is no longer believable. But several of the most distinguished thinkers of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries – for example, Søren Kierkegaard, Fyodor Dostoevsky, Martin Heidegger, and Nietzsche himself – held that the loss of belief in a metaphysical god that is the ground of all existence and intelligibility, and even the loss of belief in a creator God who produced the heaven and the earth, is not itself a disaster. These thinkers argue that the absence of a foundational God opens up access to richer and more relevant ways for us to understand creation and for us to encounter the divine and the sacred. Thus, the death of the philosopher's God may have provided us with new and more authentic possibilities for understanding religion that were blocked by traditional metaphysical theology (or onto-theology).

A note is in order about the title of this volume, and the idea of metaphysics and "onto-theology." This volume grew out of a conference entitled "Religion after Onto-Theology," which was held at Sundance, Utah in July, 2001. The term "onto-theology," as it figured in that title, was popularized by Heidegger as a catch-phrase for the failings of the metaphysical tradition

in philosophy. A central problem of that conference, and consequently of this book, is understanding the consequences of the demise of the metaphysical tradition for thinking about religion.

In the twentieth century, philosophers in both the analytic and continental traditions became concerned to free philosophical inquiry from the dominance of "metaphysics." The oddity of these parallel calls for the "overcoming of metaphysics" lies in the fact that the analytic and the continental camps saw one other as the main culprit in the continuation of metaphysical modes of inquiry. For the analytic, the error of the metaphysical tradition consisted in its striving for an "alleged knowledge of the essence of things which transcends the realm of empirically founded, inductive science."[1] For Heidegger (and the continental philosophers influenced by him), on the other hand, the analytical "elimination" of metaphysics through logical analysis and deference to the empirical sciences could, in fact, only lead to a deeper entanglement in metaphysics. This is because the dominance of logical, scientific, and mathematical modes of thought is, according to Heidegger, the result of the prevailing metaphysical understanding of being, an "alleged knowledge of the essence of things" – one in which beings are best represented in logical and mathematical terms – which fails to ask about the foundation of this understanding of being. Indeed, Heidegger believed that a central trait of metaphysical thought is a preoccupation with beings and a failure to ask properly about their being: "As metaphysics, it is by its very essence excluded from the experience of Being; for it always represents beings (ὄν) only with an eye to that aspect of them that has already manifested itself as being (ᾗ ὄν). But metaphysics never pays attention to what has concealed itself in this very ὄν insofar as it became unconcealed."[2]

According to Heidegger, all metaphysical philosophy was essentially oblivious to being, because all metaphysics took the form of "onto-theology." This means that metaphysics tried to understand the being of everything that is through a simultaneous determination of its essence or most universal trait (the "onto" in "onto-theology"), and a determination of the ground or source of the totality of beings in some highest or divine entity (the "theo" in "onto-theology"). This amounts, according to Heidegger, to a profound confusion, for it tries to understand the transcendental ground of all beings as a transcendent being.[3] In "The Onto-Theo-Logical Constitution of Metaphysics,"[4] Heidegger argues that the onto-theological structure of metaphysical inquiry has had deleterious effects on both philosophy and theology: it has prevented philosophy from thinking about being as something that is not itself a being, and it has misconstrued the nature of God, thereby obstructing our relationship with the divine.

It is worth observing that the contributors to this volume are anything but unanimous in their assessment of the details of Heidegger's critique of onto-theology, and one can find them disagreeing on issues such as: is it indeed the case that all philosophy is "always" metaphysical / onto-theological?,[5] or, what precisely is the failing of onto-theological metaphysics?, or even, is onto-theology something that we should want to overcome?

What does unite the essays in this volume is an interest in the state of religion in an age in which metaphysics has come into disrepute. And whatever their opinion of Heidegger's critique of onto-theology, the contributors all tend to think about metaphysics along the lines projected by Heidegger, rather than along the lines of the analytic opposition to metaphysics. That is to say, the concern is not primarily with metaphysics as a speculative, non-empirical mode of inquiry, but with metaphysics as an obliviousness to the understanding of being that governs an age. In the Heideggerian tradition, the project of overcoming metaphysics cannot be accomplished through logical or conceptual analysis, but only through an openness to the way that an understanding of being comes to prevail. (See Jean-Luc Marion's analysis in the final chapter of this volume.)

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Reflection on religion after metaphysics, then, needs to be understood in terms of thought about the place of religion in an age where the understanding of being that legitimized certain traditional modes of conceptualizing the sacred and the divine is called into question. In thinking about the important changes in the forms of existence that once supported metaphysical theology, the natural starting point is Nietzsche's work, and his account of the history of nihilism and the death of God.

Nietzsche's declaration of the death of God, as Robert Pippin notes, "has come to represent and sum up not just the unbelievability of God in the late modern world, but the 'death' of a Judeo-Christian form of moral life, the end of metaphysics, or the unsuccessful attempt to end metaphysics, or even the end of philosophy itself" (see p. 7 below). Pippin argues, however, that the central focus of Nietzsche's claim is a certain "loss of desire," which has rendered us "pale atheists," unable even to long for the God that is absent. In the face of the widespread pale atheism that characterizes the modern age, the challenge for us after the death of God is, on this view, that of inspiring enough desire and longing to sustain life itself.

For Gianni Vattimo, on the other hand, the death of the onto-theological God needs to be understood in terms of the impossibility of believing in an

objective truth or a uniquely valid language or paradigm for understanding the world. Without this metaphysical belief in an objective and universal foundation – that is, with the end of metaphysics – Vattimo argues that there is now room for a "truce" between philosophy, religion, and science. This, in turn, leaves us free to respond to the core of the Judeo-Christian message.

Richard Rorty agrees with Vattimo in reading the end of onto-theology as the end of a certain metaphysical universalism in religion, thus taking religion out of the "epistemic arena" (p. 40). But in contrast to Vattimo, Rorty argues that religion remains a kind of "unjustifiable nostalgia," without which, Rorty hopes, we can eventually learn to live.

Charles Taylor, rather than seeing in our history a uniform and inevitable progress of secularization, argues that the contemporary West is characterized by the progressive fracturing of a unified understanding of being into a multiplicity of "world structures." The predominant world structures tend to "occult or blank out the transcendent" (p. 66), and thus marginalize religious practices and modes of discourse. Taylor argues that the marginalization of religious practices, however, is based on an "over-hasty naturalization" which, when recognized as such, should yield to a more open stance toward religious forms of life.

It should be apparent by now that there is considerable room for disagreement over the nature of the death of the philosopher's God and the direction in which Western culture is moving. As the next set of essays demonstrates, there are also sharply contrasting views of what was wrong with the metaphysical account of God.

Some of the authors see the failure of onto-theology in the way it strips the divine of all personal attributes, thereby turning God into the God of the philosophers. If God is made the transcendental ground of the world and of all intelligibility, the divine no longer is able to have the kind of presence within the world necessary to give our lives worth. On this reading of the onto-theological tradition, the challenge facing a religion after onto-theology is that of reviving the possibility of having a direct relation to the divine. The next two chapters in the volume explore this vision of a non-onto-theological God as the basis for responses to contemporary pragmatic dismissals of religion, typified by Rorty's chapter. Mark Wrathall reviews Heidegger's diagnosis of the ills of contemporary technological society in terms of the reduction of all the things which once mattered to us or made demands on us to mere resources. Heidegger believes that the only hope for salvation from the dangers of technology is a life attuned to the fourfold of earth, sky, mortals, and divinities. A relation to the divine, on the

Heideggerian account, is thus not just a matter of personal preference, but a necessary part of a life worth living in the technological age. Hubert Dreyfus explores the Kierkegaardian response to the nihilism of the present age. Unlike Heidegger, Kierkegaard accepts the futility of resisting the nihilism apparent in the levelling of all meaningful distinctions, because he sees it as the inevitable consequence of the onto-theological tradition. But rather than seeing this as destroying the possibility for an authentic relationship to the divine, Kierkegaard sees it as clearing the way for us to confront our despair at being unable to unify the seemingly contradictory factors in human existence. Christianity, according to Kierkegaard, has shown us the only way to get the factors together and thus escape from despair: namely, by "responding to the call" of a "defining commitment" (p. 96). In this way, Dreyfus argues, "Kierkegaard has succeeded in saving Christianity from onto-theology by replacing the creator God, who is metaphysically infinite and eternal, with the God-man who is finite and temporal" (p. 101).

Rather than seeing the failing of onto-theology in terms of its failure to admit the possibility of encountering God within the world, Peperzak and Caputo understand the limitations of onto-theology in terms of a reduction of God to a being about whom we could come to have a pretension of theoretical clarity. That is, onto-theology obstructed access to an authentic experience of the divine by making God a being who could be understood, whose nature could be categorized, and whose existence could be proved. The hope for religion after onto-theology is, for these authors, to recognize that God has a kind of majesty and incomprehensibility that we do not find in intra-worldly beings. God, Peperzak notes, is "the One who cannot be caught by any categorical or conceptual grasp" (p. 107). While agreeing that the onto-theological attempts at trying to get a conceptual grasp of God "have (at least partially) failed," Peperzak sees the work of Levinas as a basis for a "retrieval of the onto-theo-logical project" (pp. 110, 112) of thinking God simultaneously as a person to whom we can relate and as that which makes all relations possible – in Heideggerian terms, that is, to think God simultaneously as a being and Being. Caputo argues that, after onto-theology, we can engage in a phenomenology of the experience of God, which, he argues, is a phenomenology of the experience of the impossible. The failing of onto-theology, Caputo suggests, was that it was unable to entertain the possibility of the impossible, and thus it "tended to keep a metaphysical lid on experience" (p. 129). The end of onto-theology thus holds out the promise of an authentic relationship to an incomprehensible God.

Of course, in a volume by philosophers on the topic of religion after onto-theology, the nature of post-metaphysical philosophy is at least as much in issue as the nature of post-metaphysical religion. And, not surprisingly, a recurring theme in many of the chapters is the question of the kind of philosophical inquiry appropriate to post-onto-theological religious experience. The last essays in this book address this problem directly. Leora Batnitzky reviews the work of Leo Strauss and Emmanuel Levinas in terms of their efforts to articulate the relation between philosophy and revelation. If the revelation contained in the Bible "is not concerned with the onto-theological status of God" (p. 155), then the philosophical appropriation of the revelation cannot be understood as articulating the metaphysical essentialism implicit in the revelation. Instead, Batnitzky suggests that the task for us is to think through the possibilities for a philosophical but non-metaphysical account of ethics and politics – an account which must be grounded in the revelation if it is to "defend morality to humanity at large" (p. 155).

In the final chapter, Marion brings us back to the general question of the possibilities available for thought at the end of metaphysics – a central issue which, more or less self-consciously, motivates every other chapter in this volume. Marion explores the nature of Heidegger's critique of metaphysics, and his enduring effort to think through the end of metaphysics. Heidegger, Marion argues, opens the horizon of, but hesitates before the possibility of, overcoming metaphysics in and through a thought of the donation – the giving of a clearing by "something other than being" (p. 183). It is this opening that, Marion argues, needs to be pursued if there is to be a "radical overcoming" of metaphysics.

NOTES

1. Rudolf Carnap, "The Elimination of Metaphysics Through Logical Analysis of Language," in *Logical Positivism*, ed. A. J. Ayer (Glencoe, Ill.: Free Press, 1959), p. 80.
2. Martin Heidegger, "Introduction to 'What is Metaphysics?,'" in *Pathmarks*, ed. William McNeill (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), p. 288.
3. See "Nihilism as Determined by the History of Being," *Nietzsche*, vol. IV, ed. David Farrell Krell (New York: Harper & Row, 1982), pp. 210–11.
4. In *Identity and Difference*, trans. Joan Stambaugh (University of Chicago Press, 1969).
5. Heidegger, *Schelling: Vom Wesen der menschlichen Freiheit*, *Gesamtausgabe*, vol. XLII (Frankfurt-on-Main: Klostermann, 1988), p. 88.