

Review of *After the Postsecular and Postmodern: Essays in Continental Philosophy of Religion*, edited by Anthony Paul Smith and Daniel Whistler

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After the Postsecular and the Postmodern: New Essays in Continental Philosophy of Religion is a demanding collection of eighteen essays by scholars working in the discipline that gives the volume its subtitle. In their excellent introduction, editors Anthony Paul Smith and Daniel Whistler provide a thorough historical contextualisation that lends strong coherence to an otherwise diverse collection. According to Smith and Whistler, in the past decade, Continental philosophy of religion has undergone what they term the ‘theologisation of philosophy’. (2) This term is not meant to be taken pejoratively, as the editors credit the ‘theological turn’ of Continental philosophy of religion for an increase in both the popularity and substance of the discipline. Despite these beneficial elements, Smith and Whistler argue that the blurring of distinctions between philosophy and theology has failed to challenge both disciplines equally. The rise in prominence of the Radical Orthodoxy group within theology has led to an increasingly popular view that philosophy does not have autonomy, especially with respect to religion, but instead serves as a handmaiden to theology.

After the Postsecular and the Postmodern is thus positioned as a critique of these tendencies for the benefit of philosophy. The editors are careful to note that they do not seek a return to some kind of purity that keeps philosophy and theology radically distinct. Rather, taking Madame Curie as their model for thought, they concern themselves with both contamination and experimentation in order to create a democracy of thought. They outline two threads of contamination running throughout the book, which are set against the recent history of Continental philosophy of religion: liberation and auto-mutation. Liberation critiques many recent interventions in the field for their partiality towards theology in order ‘to free a practice of philosophy of religion from the restraints imposed on it by theological thinking’. (3) Auto-mutation also liberates philosophy—from both theology and also itself—in order to experiment

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with new forms of philosophical thinking as such. Liberation is thus a philosophical operation that contaminates theology from the outside, whereas auto-mutation is a strategy attempting to philosophically experiment with theology from within; in both cases, the challenge of contamination is a practice of philosophy as complementary to theology that does not cede its theoretical autonomy.

Unlike certain readers of the history of philosophy, Gilles Deleuze argues that early modern philosophers are obsessed with God as a means of liberation and transformation, and not simply because they had more passionate feeling for the divine or were forced to outwardly conform to the demands of religious authorities. Smith and Whistler organise the volume along three topics that Deleuze stresses in his account of early modern philosophers and God. The first part deals with the contributions of modernity, the second part takes up the question of the secular, and the final part pushes the bounds of philosophy of religion by emphasising the speculative intent of the field.

In the second part, Adam Kotsko deploys the strategy of liberation in his essay ‘Dismantling the Theo-political Machine: On Agamben’s Messianic Nihilism’. Kotsko examines Agamben’s allusive *Homo Sacer* project with clarity and depth. Agamben argues that modernity is characterised by a theologico-political machine that controls all of life. Regarding this biopolitical control as inevitable and irreversible, Agamben argues that we need to find some way to jam the machine. He suggests taking up the notion of negative messianism from Benjamin, regarding ‘the messianic revolution as a kind of brake on history’ (219). Kotsko explains that Agamben adds a conception of nihilism to this proposal through his retelling of the rabbinic notion that the primordial, heavenly law is a sequence of letters that have all possible meaning. Agamben extrapolates from this that they also have no meaning, and according to Kotsko, ‘this is what becomes of the law during the messianic era’, which characterises the present moment (219). Agamben also follows Benjamin in not proposing violent overthrow as a solution, arguing instead that the messianic world is the same world in which we now live, but we will have found a way to become human—and continue to become human—differently. Kotsko takes a practice of thought from Agamben that is radical for theology, critiquing and suspending the authority of the tradition from within in order to ‘clear space for thought that can allow us to become human’ (223).

In part three, the strategy of auto-mutation is followed by Clayton Crockett in his essay ‘The Plasticity of Continental Philosophy of Religion’. Here, Crockett argues that a Continental philosophy of religion emerged in the English-speaking world in the 1990s after Derrida’s so-called religious turn. Crockett claims that Derrida’s political and religious aims are inseparable, and that in the development of Continental philosophy of religion, the political urgency of Derrida’s original engagement with religion was lost. For his own constructive purposes, Crockett takes up Catherine Malabou’s concept of plasticity, which she develops in her reading of Hegel. Plasticity pertains to form and has active, passive, and destructive aspects. Crockett argues for the merits of considering religion as plastic in Malabou’s sense. Although he only provides a sketch at the end of the essay, Crockett claims that conceiving of religion as plastic allows it to be put to work and reworked ‘as we shape our history and our future’ (313).

These two contributions merely scratch the surface of a deep and consistently satisfying collection of essays. Typically, such a high volume of essays might make a

book convoluted, but in this case the editors have managed to provide a clear articulation of the debate into which they enter, and thus the quantity of contributions serves to provide many entry points into the volume for curious readers, thereby increasing the quality of the volume overall. The editors are to be commended for assembling a volume that proves essential to anyone wishing to engage in the future of Continental philosophy of religion.