

CONFERENCE REPORT

Quoi?

'Questioning Religion', British Society for Phenomenology,
University of Greenwich, 11–13 July 2003

On some of the hottest days of the summer, amidst the designs of Wren and Hawksmoor at the University of Greenwich's Maritime Campus, around forty speakers and many more participants attended the BSP's 'Questioning Religion' conference. Perhaps the surroundings gave a languid air to proceedings. What might have been an occasion for fierce arguments proved more congenial, with only the occasional abortive attempt at scripture ping-pong: 'Matt. 5:24', 'Romans 7:13', 'No, I'm sorry I don't know that one, you'll have to quote it to me.' Alternatively, this may have been the result of the absence of any scheduled theological disputes: meaty questions of soteriology and atonement generally exceed phenomenological coordinates and well-mannered restraint.

That said, the presence of such theology, as distinct from religious experience and ecclesiastical doctrine (the former being the systematization and rationalization of the latter), might have clarified certain methodological issues arising from the putative 'theological turn' in phenomenology. Since the phenomenology of religious experience is not per se theological, it requires a speculative moment to render it so. Disappointingly, few returned to Levinas's claim in *Totality and Infinity* that metaphysics is first philosophy. Too many papers offered theological supplements to resolve philosophical problems without attending to the critical problems of presentation thus generated.

In contrast, Paul Davies carefully undermined the accepted distinction between philosophical, theological and religious writing by examining the presence of the Tenth Commandment, 'Thou shalt not covet...', within Kant, Levinas and the Pauline epistles. And Howard Caygill's paper early on Sunday morning laid further foundation for such questioning. By examining Henri Corbin's confrontation of phenomenology with Iranian philosophy of the post-medieval period, Caygill developed the concepts of theophany (the manifestation of the *hiddenness* of the divine, over the rationalization of religious experience) and prophecy in order to provide a counterpoint to Levinas. Reading Levinas as a legal thinker, creating applications of law to novel cases, Caygill used the perspective gained by these theological concepts to resituate the tensions between justice and the state. On the latter reading, the face of the Other is understood as a moment of singular theophany: one which cannot be historicized into a sacred or universal history.

The interconnections between neo-Kantianism and theological concerns in Hermann Cohen and Frantz Rosenzweig, and the continuation of these concerns into Walter Benjamin's writing, were the topic of Nickolas Lambrianou's paper. It put into question the changed conditions which determine the current reception of these thinkers. Similarly, Joanna Hodge's paper on Heidegger's early lecture series on phenomenology and religious life had the potential to ignite current understanding of *Being and Time*. Combining discussions on the philosophy of history with lectures on Augustine, Galatians and Thessalonians, Heidegger aimed to release the latter texts so that they could be read 'phenomenologically'. But this early, explicit connection between phenomenology and 'religious life', which produces a different access to thinking time, supports the possibility of a new reading of 'authenticity' and conversion experience – an *Umkehrung*, which, in the same panel, Laurence Hemming suggested could still be prepared, even though it may be centuries away from the present.

In his paper on Bataille and Klossowski, Jones Irwin illustrated the critical charge that the sacred possesses in its opposition to bourgeois, secular rationalism. This claim found

a weak echo in Jeremy Carrette's suggestion that, given changed historical conditions, the basis of all criticism today is the critique of the interrelated disciplines of psychology and economics with the aim of providing an alternative model of 'being human in a neoliberal world'. Unfortunately, the only attempt to develop this idea at the conference rested with those seeking to develop a new religion of 'critical piety'. It is tempting to read this idea through a Sorelian optic, but academic philosophy seems an ill-starred vehicle for the message: 'Repent, attend to what matters, for the end of capitalism is nigh.' Even if certain experiences may help to liberate our thinking from instrumentality, there was little thought given to the demands of philosophical presentation. For example, if mysticism appeals to modern intuition, it needs to be asked how it ties in today with an orthodoxy of individualism. In the conclusion to her paper on Hadewijch of Antwerp's positive concept of the fecund abyss of creation, Grace Jantzen suggested that such reinvigoration of the 'abyss' as philosophical trope could provide the resources to articulate modern problems of gender, race and colonialism, whilst avoiding the nihilism of postmodern relativism. But this assertion was left hanging, unsubstantiated on this occasion.

That such a promise could be treated seriously marks a strengthening, yet ambivalent, tendency in contemporary philosophy for which this conference created an illuminating platform. The danger is that it might only offer a new twist on *bricolage*, so long as it trusts in intuition rather than critique. The latter's productive charge is too easily dissipated when asked to shore up pre-given positions.

Andrew McGettigan

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