

*After the Postsecular and the Postmodern:
New Essays in Continental Philosophy of Religion*

edited by Anthony Paul Smith and Daniel Whistler

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IN THE “EDITOR’S INTRODUCTION,” Anthony Paul Smith and Daniel Whistler declare that this volume is “concerned with contaminations” (2). In a Deleuzian sense, it might be stated that this volume is about connections. However, the connections enacted in *After the Postsecular and the Postmodern* are not concerned with treading a familiar line of critical thought in the field that is largely understood as “philosophy of religion”; neither are these connections merely alluded to. Instead, the book itself embodies an alternative and peculiar manifestation of “speculative philosophy of religion” as a discipline that is eminently concerned with the “practice of philosophy which avoids dissolving into theology or becoming a tool of theological thought” (2).

Throughout the twenty essays (including the “Editor’s Introduction” and the “Afterword”) a consistent (though sometimes silent) theme is that the field designated “Continental Philosophy of Religion” has, in many respects, been contaminated by theological thought, which has since peppered said literature with commitments to religious superstition and metaphysical transcendence. With the increased popularity of the French Phenomenological tradition’s attention to theology, philosophers such as Merold Westphal, James K. A. Smith, Richard Kearney, John Caputo, and Bruce Ellis Benson

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have attended considerably to philosophers in said field (as well as others) in order to bridge the divide that (supposedly) exists *tout court* between philosophy and theology. The oft-seen result is a “theologisation” of philosophy, with the latter performing a supportive role to the principle characters of God, liturgy, and the church. This is seen most explicitly in those outspoken opponents of modern secular thought—the loosely affiliated group known as Radical Orthodoxy. The result of the connections and contaminations of the essays contained in this volume however skirt such “postsecular” tendencies in favor of a renewed and vigorous approach to the future hope of a true Modernity; one that retains the hope for the New that lit the West afire post Descartes, that has learned from its postmodern critics, but that doesn’t fall into either crude reductive materialism or fideism. The result is a collection of essays that gel together to create a symphonic piece that resists the pitfalls of the “theological turn” (while often critically engaging with those who carry said mantle) and that embodies an alternative understanding of philosophy of religion itself as a speculative philosophical discipline.

Divided into three sections, this volume is self-professedly modeled upon Deleuze’s “account of the liberation and automation of philosophy of religion” (6); and as such stresses *modernity*, *secularity*, and *speculative philosophy*. The first section therefore stresses “the significance of the early modern period for philosophical thinking about God” (6). For example, the first essay by Rocco Gangle outlines the “chimerical” sense of Spinoza’s *Ethics*, whereby the latter employs medieval Scholastic and early modern philosophical terminology in new ways (i.e. through new connections) to the end that “new syntactical practices and systematically constructed relations” (26) might alter presupposed philosophical methods and assumptions. Two such terms that undergo the chimerical process in Spinoza, according to Gangle, are *individuation* and *affect*. The former term had been generally understood as a process arising at (what Deleuze would call) the molar level. However, Gangle demonstrates the radical move of Spinoza toward immanence: “For Spinoza...individuation

is conceived independently of any witnessing consciousness and without reference to any transcendental unity of experience...[Individuation] is an event immanent to the unique causal order of universal Nature, or God, and is not a function of any subjective-objective or noetic-noematic correlate or polarity” (33). By placing individuation pre-subject-object, Spinoza sketched an affective metaphysics of dynamic physical processes within the Real (in a Lauruellian sense, by whom Gangle’s reading of Spinoza is greatly influenced). Therefore, while there are differences among bodies, at the core there is “an underlying continuity of nature” (34). This interplay of dynamical processes allows us, Gangle claims, to better understand the sense of affects in *Ethics*: “Spinozist affects are defined as capacities of bodies to affect and to be affected by other bodies in all specifically determined ways... It is impossible to distinguish what a thing is from what it does...The essence or nature of a thing, for Spinoza, becomes understood as the sum of its internal and external affects” (37). According to Gangle, the resultant affective monism that Spinoza advances disorients the transcendental presupposition that has shaped most of the philosophical tradition, “namely the very presupposition that thought is itself governed transcendently” (38). In this disorientating chimerical project, Gangle sees hope for thought itself. Through a “strategy of the chimera,” Gangle envisions that it would be possible to overcome, for example, the duality of theological orthodoxy/heterodoxy altogether, in favor of a “new instrument of affectivity and a new employment of thought” (41). As he summarizes in the closing paragraph, “Immanence does not realize one possible figure of thought. It is not a framework, template, or schema. It does not interpret. It unlocks. And thought’s every real future remains foreclosed if thinking itself is not first made truly free” (42).

Throughout the remaining five chapters in the opening section, similar excursions are taken through modern thinkers such as Irish Philosopher John Toland, Schelling, Kant, Bergson, Rozenzweig, Kierkegaard, and Heidegger. Though the specific task changes, each essay in this section functions

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very much like the task outlined by Gangle in Spinoza's *Ethics*: an unlocking of thought that (1) highlights the oft-neglected speculative intent of modern philosophy of religion and that (2) challenges the notion and content of the "secular" in modern philosophy of religion. The goal of the first section is to therefore rethink and reenact key modern thinkers through creating new connections in order to allow the resultant philosophical machines of "Modernity" to affect anew what Continental Philosophy of Religion might become.

The second section continues the process of disorientation by reformulating the sense of secularity. Thus, the claim is that the modern "secular" is only "secular" to a degree because of its emergence from a profoundly Judeo-Christian heritage. Instead, the essays in this section attempt think anew the secular which "takes up the modern emancipation of philosophy in the service of a new speculative construction of a true secular. This requires a reconsideration of discussions of the secular in modernity so as to take up what is most powerful therein, and recast it in a new critical form" (15). While the second section continues the process of the first, there is a substantial leap forward by way of the overall project of the volume. It might be best to view the first section as the opening act, where characters are introduced, plots are developed, and dynamic tension is established. In other words, there is a clear script that is followed (for the most part, although some improvisation is included). The second section however is where the actors break script and begin to create. The essays in this section bring together a cacophony of voices: Asad, Deleuze, Bergson, Hegel, Agamben, Badiou, Jambet, Foucault, Feuerbach, Virno, Häggglund, Bataille, and others are all employed to architect a secularism that is "located equally in all religious traditions" rather than the present post-Christian secularity that subversively insists in the hands of Western powers (16). With great articles by Daniel Barber, John Mullarkey, Clare Greer, Adam Kotsko, Albert Toscano, Nina Power, and Alex Andrews, this section (for me) is the strongest and most intriguing section, as well as the most explicitly political.

The final section of the volume is by far the most audacious

of the lot. If the second section is where the actors begin to create, then the final section can only be considered “philosophia dell’arte.” Contributing to the burgeoning speculative movement in contemporary philosophy, this section follows a similar vein to the work of Harman, Grant, Brassier, and Meillassoux. Of particular notice for readers of *Speculations* are the essays by Anthony Paul Smith, Michael Burns, and Daniel Whistler, who all engage with figures who have had considerable influence on the current speculative trend in philosophy. Smith’s essay considers the radical immanence of François Laruelle’s non-philosophy and the possible implications the latter might have on constructing a non-theology that thinks *from* the Real (rather than *of* the Real) and what such a non-theology might be able to offer the future of a truly secular philosophy of religion that resists succumbing to the sufficiency of religious material. As one of the few English-speaking expositors of Laruelle’s non-philosophy, Smith’s essay is a real treat for those interested in teasing out the former’s thought as developed in Brassier’s *Nihil Unbound*. Likewise, Michael’s Burns’ essay spends considerable time developing a Kierkegaardian reading of Meillassoux’s *After Finitude* that attempts to supplement the shortcomings of the latter’s “divinology” (i.e. God-as-possible) with a Žižekian-Kierkegaardian inspired materialism that posits God as possibility itself. Then arguing against the “radical atheism” of Martin Hägglund, Burns turns to Badiou’s concept of “materialist dialectics” in order to advance a philosophy of infinitude that both escapes the drab “bio-material struggle for life” (of Hägglund) and that remains committed to Meillassoux’s notion that “anything is possible.” Finally, Whistler’s article addresses in what a speculative approach to religion might consist. The path he takes to answering this question is through the work of F. W. J. Schelling. Engaging with the work of Ian Hamilton Grant, Whistler asks of speculative philosophy in general and of Grant’s philosophy of nature in particular: “Do [they] have the range and capacity to provide an adequate account of religion” (339)? Through a “physics of language” and geology, Whistler develops Schelling’s

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Naturphilosophie to show how religious studies, philology, and geology are *physically related* and therefore “have the same ground (the unruly) and are generated by the same subject (productive nature)” (354). This leads to the conclusion that both “language and religion are subjected to the speculative process: they are incorporated as regional subjects of an overarching, unconditioned *Naturphilosophie*” (354).

Although only a select few of the essays were highlighted above, each one of the essays in the volume offers a considerable amount to the overall project of *After the Postsecular and the Postmodern* and to the future of Continental Philosophy of Religion. Whether or not one agrees with the various writers of the volume, the “chimerical” process of the project will surely provide fodder for future debate. That said, I highly recommend this volume for anyone interested in current developments in “Continental Philosophy.” Whether it’s read straight through or used piecemeal, this volume is a necessary tool for thinkers interested in the future of speculative philosophy. (For those interested, the editors have provided open access to the “Editors Introduction” online at www.scribd.com/doc/32287542/Editors-Intro)