

---

H-France Review Vol. 14 (April 2014), No. 59

Dan R. Stiver, *Ricœur and Theology*. London: Bloomsbury, 2012. 192 pp. \$24.95 U.S. (pb). ISBN: 978-05671-3020-4 and Christopher Ben Simpson, *Deleuze and Theology*. London: Bloomsbury, 2012. 112 pp. \$90.00 U.S. (hb). ISBN: 978-0-5673-6335-0.

Review by Kevin Hart, University of Virginia.

For some years now, Bloomsbury has been publishing a series whose books have the uniform title “X and Theology.” It’s an odd series, since the press advertises no general editor and gives no description of the series in any of its books and there is very little on their website of what these books are supposed to do or who they are imagined to be for. All that is said on the website is “The Philosophy and Theology series looks at major philosophers and explores their relevance to theological thought as well as the response of theology.” Now that we have twenty-odd titles in the series, though, perhaps we can begin to discern its rationale. The title of the series is “Philosophy and Theology,” and so each X is a philosopher. Or, rather, each X is a European philosopher; it looks unlikely that William Alston, Alvin Plantinga or Richard Swinburne will ever be named in this series. Analytic philosophy has long appropriated the word “philosophy” to itself, and now it seems that continental philosophy at Bloomsbury is trying to do the same. So far at least there is only one X in the series who is female, and only two X’s who are Jewish. Not one Muslim. “Philosophy and Theology” is overwhelmingly male and overwhelmingly Christian in its orientation, although the Christianity is for the most part highly attenuated.

Curiously, the series mostly bypasses those philosophers who are close to theology in one or more respects. True, there are volumes devoted to Kant, Hegel, Kierkegaard, Weil and Girard; but so far nothing on ancient and medieval thinkers, and little on those major modern thinkers whose thought has been influenced by theology or has influenced it. I am thinking of Fichte, Gadamer, Heidegger, Husserl, Schelling and Scheler, not to mention contemporaries and their precursors such as Hannah Arendt, Jean-Louis Chrétien, Jean-François Courtine, Emmanuel Falque, Michel Henry, Vladimir Jankélévitch, Jean-Yves Lacoste, François Laruelle, and Jean-Luc Marion. Perhaps titles on these (and other) figures are in preparation. One might have thought that for this series, as it has developed, Jean-Luc Nancy would be a natural choice, even though his writing on Christianity is less impressive than his studies of community and art. Instead of the people I have named, one finds volumes on philosophers whose main concerns are quite other than theology: Agamben and Badiou (who have, though, written breezily on Paul); Levinas whose overriding interest was in ethics (yet who sought a God who comes to mind in moral action, not by way of revelation); Nietzsche who proposed that we revalue all values (and who declared the death of God), and Vattimo and Derrida who inherited from him in significant ways. Fergus Kerr and D. Z. Phillips have long insisted that theologians have much to gain from reading Wittgenstein, so important a figure in Anglo-Austrian philosophy, and there is reasonably a volume on him.

One finds titles devoted to Adorno, Badiou, Baudrillard, Foucault, Habermas, and Lyotard; and these are roughly the sort of books that try brightly to find a connection between the thinker in question and thinking about God or the sacred. (There is always bound to be *something* to find, as Bonaventure well knew long ago when he titled a little book *De reductione artium ad theologiam*.) When coming across a

title such as *Foucault and Theology*, I wonder why that book is on offer in preference to one not written, *Hadot and Theology*, which could have been a useful study for students of theology. And then, emboldened, the devil that sits on my left shoulder whispers into my ear that, given some of the titles are a bit of a stretch, why doesn't someone propose a book entitled *Rancière and Theology*. (As the whisper dies away, I can almost see a chapter entitled "God as Ignorant Schoolmaster.") There is inevitably a volume devoted to Žižek. Of course, one sees his name everywhere these days now that he writes on religion, and he serves an important function in the western intellectual world: to see just how much daft and dotty work on religion contemporary culture can welcome. The answer seems to be "A great deal."

So the question arises: What does "Theology" mean in "X and Theology"? And beside it there is another question: Who are these books written for? For the most part, "theology" in these books does not presume anything confessional, and it does not name the academic discipline taught in seminaries and many universities. Rather, "theology" seems to be a cipher that allows the author to pick out references to God, critiques of religion, versions of "religion without religion," ideas of transcendence in the philosopher in question, or whatever slim pickings seem to be available. Now it might well be that there are faculty and students in seminaries, departments of religious studies, and divinity schools who read some of these books. They will have heard of, say, Badiou and would like to find out a bit about him without going to the bother of plowing through *Being and Event*, and it is all to the good if theology is the guiding thread of the book. At least they will remain partly on home ground, and, with luck, not have to work up anything to do with set theory. More than likely, however, the intended audience consists of faculty and students outside the formal study of religion, for whom "theology" has become an intellectually fashionable word. As church attendance decreases, so, it seems, talk of theology increases, but not by dint of reading Aquinas, Palamas or Barth but by way of Agamben, Vattimo, and Žižek. God help us.

As it happens, the two books under review provide a snapshot of the extremes of the entire series. Dan Stiver's *Ricoeur and Theology* introduces a distinguished French philosopher many of whose writings are certainly of interest to theologians even when they are not explicitly on religious topics and who was himself receptive to some currents of theology. Christopher Ben Simpson's *Deleuze and Theology* makes one think, at first, that the unnamed general editor must be teasing us, for (as Simpson admits) Deleuze shows next to no interest in God or anything to do with theology, and it is hard to see how, outside the superannuated "death of God" school, theologians can do much with Deleuze. Yet we pick up the volume with interest, much as though we were enticed into a conversation at a party in which a suave, well-educated person was trying to show that there really are compelling, if hidden, connections between Dick Cheney and socialism.

Stiver's Ricoeur is, as one might well expect, a phenomenologist who grafts hermeneutics onto what he has learned from Husserl in order to prevent what he suspects is a slide into idealism. Said with more pathos, he is, as he liked to say, a thinker who turned from the tradition of "reflexive philosophy" to brood on the "wounded *cogito*": the "I" that is never transparent to itself but that always calls for endless interpretation. I should say that I have never been convinced that Husserl was on the road to idealism, although, to be sure, his language was sometimes less than reassuring at important points when he touched on the matter. There never was any one reduction that led singly to transcendental consciousness, and transcendental consciousness was only ever an aspect of consciousness, not a separate entity (as Fink thought it was). Husserl may well have relied overly on notions of presence, especially in his prizing of perception, yet he was fundamentally concerned with the play of presence and absence; and if there are moments in *Ideas I* when Husserl seemed to commit himself to a mentalist notion of reality, that appearance was largely corrected in *Ideas II*. Merleau-Ponty was alert to the value of *Ideas II* in this regard, though he made more heavy weather of the transcendental reduction than was perhaps warranted. There is reason to think that transcendental phenomenology is *itself* a hermeneutic,

one that can be used for reading demanding poems, novels, or scriptures, and it is a pity that Stiver does not put any pressure on Ricœur's reasons for grafting hermeneutics onto phenomenology.

*Ricœur and Theology* is a work of explanation of the philosopher's ideas, not a critical engagement with them; and this is generally the case with other titles in the series. At times, however, the explanation is rather muddled. We don't get far into the book in hand before we are told that "deconstructive postmodernism...implies relativism...and a denial of reason altogether" (pp. 19–20). It's unfortunate that Stiver opts for a vague label with no proper name attached to it. Who exactly is being criticized here (and without the slightest evidence)? If it is Jacques Derrida, then the shaft is misdirected; there is no moment in Derrida's voluminous writings when he denies reason in this fashion. A couple of pages later Stiver tells us that the "eidetic reduction"...supposedly allowed one to transcend any presuppositions or influences and thus to see things, Cartesian-like, clearly and with certainty" (p. 22). Here the adverb "supposedly" does the work that proper explication and argument should do, and the sentence is followed by a suborning nod to Merleau-Ponty who observed that "[t]he most important lesson which the reduction teaches us is the impossibility of a complete reduction" (p. 22). Here Stiver conflates the eidetic reduction and the transcendental-phenomenological reduction, which Husserl takes pains to distinguish. I make the eidetic reduction each and every time I put fruit into a bowl and see that only five apples (or at most six) will fit without overbalancing the whole. But this is a long way from making the transcendental-phenomenological reduction, in which I stand beside myself, as it were, and see that phenomena do not come already shaped by meaning but that I am constituting, making present, their meaning by way of noesis, noema, and ὄλη. Besides, when did Husserl ever suggest that the transcendental-phenomenological reduction was ever complete? That would be like saying that brushing one's teeth just once will keep them perfectly clean forever. If anything, Husserl harped on the need for reduction on reduction.

Stiver is at his best when summarizing Ricœur and when taking the philosopher's views at his own estimation of them. So a student of theology who reads Stiver's book will get a decent sense of Ricœur's philosophy of the self, his model of hermeneutics, and even his views on justice. I could wish that there had been a more concrete engagement with some of the material in *The Symbolism of Evil*, *Essays in Biblical Interpretation* and *Figuring the Sacred*, and especially a discussion and assessment of Ricœur's distinction in "Toward a Hermeneutic of the Idea of Revelation" between biblical and non-biblical (or poetic) revelation.[1] Is Ricœur right to assimilate revelation and manifestation in this manner? Is there no reason to think that the divine self-revelation in scripture, which believers take to be the case, involves both revealing and re-veiling? And is Derrida right to assimilate Ricœur to his project of "religion without religion" by dint of the distinction between biblical and non-biblical revelation?

Perhaps the most satisfactory part of Stiver's book is his discussion of the dispute over the proper way to read scripture that took place between the Chicago and Yale schools of divinity. On the one hand, we have Hans Frei and George Lindbeck, each marked by an encounter with Karl Barth, especially by his view that scripture generates its own horizon; and on the other hand, we have David Tracy for whom, it was said, all texts when read these days must find themselves inescapably within the horizon of philosophical modernity. This is crudely put, but no more so than moments of the dispute, especially for those holding the Yale key to interpretation. Ricœur, who taught for many years at Chicago, was, as Stiver points out, caught in the crossfire. His position, like Tracy's, was far subtler than the Yalies thought. At times the citizens of New Haven criticized those of Chicago for holding positions they had identified and rejected. It hardly gave a reassuring idea of the hermeneutical skills taught in the Yale Divinity School of those days. Yet the Chicago-Yale dispute remains important, even for the misunderstandings that were part of it, and there is reason to inspect it anew, especially now that we are beginning to experience challenges to the historical criticism, including some from the "new phenomenology" currently practiced in France and the United States.

When Constantin Boundas mentioned to Deleuze that Paul Ricœur was writing a book not unlike *What Is Philosophy?*, Deleuze simply said, “Yes, but he is a Christian,” by which he meant that the two books were not likely to overlap.<sup>[2]</sup> As Simpson admits, Deleuze was “largely indifferent to religion—not so much anti-clerical as aclerical” (p. 49), though one might wonder about the implicit identification of clericalism and religion here and wonder too where theology stands with respect to both. One can imagine Deleuze also replying to Boundas, “Yes, but he is a phenomenologist,” for Deleuze kept a distance from Husserl and Heidegger throughout his life, although, to be sure, he quietly drew from Husserl from time to time (material on “passive syntheses,” for instance), admired Henri Maldiney with whom he worked at Lyon, and was impressed by Merleau-Ponty’s last works. If he and Derrida were close in their commitment to difference, their proximity was a matter of meeting one another from very distant starting points.

Of course, one would not go to Deleuze to find an intriguing account of transcendence. He had a thoroughgoing, radical commitment to immanence; after all, his most important teachers were Hume, Spinoza, and Nietzsche. Nor does one visit Deleuze’s books for a bracing criticism of theological positions: he was an odd philosopher in that he took little interest in arguments.<sup>[3]</sup> Instead, Deleuze proposes a new way of engaging with life, one that begins with philosophy in order to leave it, at least as traditionally understood, and that defends its new concepts—rhizomatics, multiplicities, desire independent of objects, nomadism, and so on—entirely by way of whether they work. Just plug in your concerns and see if the Deleuze-Guattari machine works for you. Behold, it does! All sorts of things seem clearer once that machine is turned on. You can understand lots about Proust and Kafka, about Francis Bacon, about modern sex, about politics, and much else. Christopher Ben Simpson knows this, and is clearer than most guides to Deleuze, though the palm for lucidity and penetration in Deleuze Studies still goes to Claire Colebrook.

What happens if you plug Christian theology into the Deleuze-Guattari machine? Not very much, I’m afraid. The machine splutters, starts spitting out something about God as a lobster, the Old Testament as the “first novel,” a few interesting remarks about Pierre Klossowski’s narratives, and then breaks down.<sup>[4]</sup> You have to call your local French Department for help. (They are familiar with the difficulty, and can offer some useful tips, for they have been called out before.<sup>[5]</sup>) Part of the problem is that the machine is programmed to think about theology in highly reductive terms: a more or less Platonic Christian theology predicated on the One, and a judgmental God (with huge pincers for grabbing people, most likely by their private parts). Another part of the problem is that the machine is made to do other things. You can shear away apologetics and dogma from theology with an expression of distaste; you can remove God from occupying the chilly role of the One beyond being; you can orient the whole discipline towards immanence; you can be very relaxed about first-order moral views; you can re-read Bergson through Deleuzian lenses with a view to seeing something to do with “spirituality”; you can interest yourself in the Trinity and the angels in much the same way as you contemplate Meinongian objects; you can think of the *corpus mysticum* as a body without organs; you can stop thinking of the Bible as a “great code” and regard it as multiple flows stopped only by blockages such as those called “Nicaea” or “Geneva”; and you can see, once again, what can be retrieved from the Gnostics.

You can do all that, but in the end you won’t have engaged very productively with theology, either by way of withering critique or by way of displacement of old categories to create new concepts. Theology will still be going on behind your back: all the usual voices, of course, but also those of Ricœur, Derrida, Henry, Marion, Lacoste, Falque, and all sorts of others. It will be going on just as before—a vast crowd of people (liberal, conservative, and everything in between and beyond) talking all at once, often past one another—because, for better or worse, those conversations are felt by those who partake of them to be richer than the ones that come about when you introduce Deleuze to theology. In the end, your time would have been better spent seeing how Deleuze can help us read D. H. Lawrence or Whitman, Faulkner or García Marquez.

Not all philosophers, not even all interesting ones, are served well by being put into conversation with theology. Nor is theology always well served by having those particular conversation partners. The best conversations are chosen for the promise of maximum intensity, and we quickly tire of those in which the current is thin.

## NOTES

[1] Paul Ricoeur, *The Symbolism of Evil*, trans. Emerson Buchanan (Boston: Beacon Press, 1967); Ricoeur, *Essays on Biblical Interpretation*, ed. and intro. Lewis S. Mudge (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1980); Ricoeur, *Figuring the Sacred: Religion, Narrative, and Imagination*, trans. David Pellauer, ed. Mark I. Wallace (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995); Ricoeur, "Toward a Hermeneutic of the Idea of Revelation" in Ricoeur, *Essays on Biblical Interpretation*.

[2] François Dosse, *Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, Intersecting Lives*, trans. Deborah Glassman (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010), p. 471.

[3] See, for example, Gilles Deleuze and Claire Parnet, *Dialogues*, trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Barbara Habberjam (New York: Columbia University Press, 1987), pp. 1, 10.

[4] On the Old Testament as the "first novel," see Deleuze and Parnet, *Dialogues*, p. 41. How such diverse texts written over a long period, many of them as poetry, can constitute a novel is not explained. A better candidate for a Latin text would be Apuleius's *Metamorphoses*, and there are other candidates from Greek literature by Chariton, Achilles Tatius, Longus, and Heliodorus of Emesa.

[5] See Mary Bryden, ed., *Deleuze and Religion* (London: Routledge, 2001).

Kevin Hart  
University of Virginia  
[kjh9u@cms.mail.virginia.edu](mailto:kjh9u@cms.mail.virginia.edu)

Copyright © 2014 by the Society for French Historical Studies, all rights reserved. The Society for French Historical Studies permits the electronic distribution of individual reviews for nonprofit educational purposes, provided that full and accurate credit is given to the author, the date of publication, and the location of the review on the H-France website. The Society for French Historical Studies reserves the right to withdraw the license for edistribution/republication of individual reviews at any time and for any specific case. Neither bulk redistribution/ republication in electronic form of more than five percent of the contents of H-France Review nor re-publication of any amount in print form will be permitted without permission. For any other proposed uses, contact the Editor-in-Chief of H-France. The views posted on H-France Review are not necessarily the views of the Society for French Historical Studies.

ISSN 1553-9172