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Colby Dickinson, ed., *The Postmodern Saints of France: Refiguring 'the Holy' in Contemporary French Philosophy*. New York and London: Bloomsbury T & T Clark, 2013. xi + 264 pp. \$32.00 U.S. (pb). ISBN 978-0-5671-7058-3.

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*“Tout commence en mystique et finit en politique,”* Charles Péguy once remarked: “everything begins in mysticism and ends in politics.”<sup>[1]</sup> Had Péguy lived in our own day, he might have added: “everything, perhaps, except postmodernism.” Postmodernism’s brief history would appear to illustrate a seemingly improbable counter-evolution. When it first emerged several decades ago, postmodernism presented itself as an aesthetic and political avant-garde. If anything, it was defiantly, even transgressively secular, wielding concepts such as *jouissance*, phallogocentrism, and power-knowledge like so many war machines against the foundations of Western thought. Thus deconstruction, in its efforts to liberate thinking from its metaphysical fixation on meaning, transparency, and “presence,” once struck a quasi-revolutionary stance. True, its targets were mainly words; yet dismantling the rules and categories which govern thought and language was, as its proponents never tired of asserting, an enterprise fraught with political significance. Movements like queer theory and postcolonial studies were founded, in part, on this premise. Yet in recent years, postmodernist discourse has assumed a chastened tone, as it has reoriented itself in more spiritual directions. Deconstruction has traded in its radical ambitions for a kind of quietism, even as deconstructive motifs, such as the undecidability of language and *différance* (the process through which the meaning of words is both destabilized and indefinitely postponed), have lost their purchase as indictments of authority. Increasingly, they underwrite an attitude of postmodern mysticism, in which the ineffability of being, the inadequacies of language, and the paradoxes of reason become intimations of divinity—or at least of some elusive spiritual “other.”

*The Postmodern Saints of France*, a volume edited by Colby Dickinson, is both a symptom of and a sustained reflection on postmodernism’s theological turn. The book’s seventeen essays are written by philosophers, theologians, and religious studies scholars in the United States, the United Kingdom, Belgium, and Australia. Theologically, the authors lean Catholic (at least in terms of institutional affiliation); philosophically, they are (unsurprisingly) Continental rather than analytical. Each essay follows an unstated rule of thumb: pick a twentieth-century French thinker or writer and see what happens when her or his thought is considered in light of the concepts of sainthood, sanctity, and holiness. Taking their cue from Jean-Paul Sartre’s famous study of Jean Genet, a few authors canonize their subjects, giving us “Maurice de la Passion du Dehors” (Blanchot), “Saint Gilles” (Deleuze), “Saint Jacques” (Derrida), and “Saint Lyotard.” The article on Foucault does not quite elevate him to sainthood—this honor was bestowed upon him years ago by David Halperin<sup>[2]</sup>—but its title informs us that he “may yet become St. Paul.” This game is typical of the volume’s whimsical character: thus Robyn Horner opens her essay by apostrophizing Derrida from beyond the grave (“I hadn’t even known that you were sick,” she writes [p. 95]).

While these essays are playful, their play is most definitely serious. The mischievous irony once associated with postmodernism, at least in academic circles, is largely absent from this volume. Holiness, it would seem, is too important a matter for wordplay. Though the essays exemplify the kind of

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erudition French philosophy frequently inspires, the authors clearly believe that the issues they address, far from being abstruse academic considerations, are of existential import.

While it refrains from advancing any overarching thesis (a point to which we will return below), the volume's main contribution is an insight into some of the main ways in which contemporary French philosophers have not only grappled with religious phenomena and categories, but have also probed the porous boundary between the sacred and the secular. These positions arise less from specific methodologies or well-defined intellectual paradigms than from fundamental philosophical assumptions. These essays bring to light—though without ever explicitly naming them—two distinct theoretical orientations which tend to characterize the thinkers it loosely categorizes as “postmodern.” The first might be called phenomenological transcendentalism. The second is best described as the philosophy of difference.

For phenomenological transcendentalism, the sacred occurs when ordinary experience somehow takes us beyond ordinary experience. Thus for Emmanuel Levinas, as Michael Purcell explains in an essay devoted to him, requires the renunciation of any effort to know god as such in favor of ethical relationships with other human beings, by encounters with the human face as a moral, rather than a physical, phenomenon. Yet it is ultimately through such relationships, Levinas maintains, that an experience of god becomes possible. Kevin Hart argues that the writing of Maurice Blanchot, Levinas's friend and lifelong interlocutor, testifies to the conversion experience triggered by what Blanchot calls the “outside”: “a denial of divine transcendence,” which affirms that “the truth of being is ‘nothing,’” yet a nothing which, in its very pervasiveness, acquires a transcendental power that expresses itself in the sacred, particularly as manifested in art (p. 60). In his fascinating essay on Paul Ricoeur, Todd S. Mei draws on the French philosopher to sketch a phenomenology of sainthood. Saints, according to Ricoeur, reinterpret traditions: they allow us to see in plain light the possibilities lurking within familiar words and practices, yet which have somehow eluded us. Traditions which had seemed familiar and backward-looking suddenly become uncanny and innovative, like Saint Francis of Assisi's reinterpretation of frugality, which “points towards a ‘new’ relation that celebrates an ontological and religious abundance contrasting with and potentially transforming our relation to the economic” (p. 149).

A number of recent French Christian philosophers discussed in the volume also justify their religious commitments on the basis of conceptions of transcendence rooted in phenomenology. In Michel Henry's “phenomenological Christology,” Christ's incarnation becomes the mystical condition of possibility of the broader problem of embodiment, which Edmund Husserl, in his phenomenology of the body, had conceptualized as *Leibkörper*. Summing up Henry's position, Joseph Rivera explains: “Christ's Incarnation, in short, makes possible my own coming into flesh as one who feels this body that I have as my own body” (p. 223). At the same time, I experience my body, according to Henry, not as my own, but as something given to me: recognizing one's body as a gift is, properly understood, the experience of Christ. The philosophy of Jean-Luc Marion is also based on a critical engagement with phenomenology. As Petra Elaine Turner argues in her illuminating essay, for Marion, the effort to lay bare the structures through which the world appears as meaningful, most notably through the phenomenological concept of intentionality (the notion that consciousness is never empty, but always directed at the world in a particular way) is a form of idolatry. Phenomenology (and indeed, philosophy as such) is idolatrous in its commitment to the there-ness of the world and in its need to access reality through neat mental categories. Holiness (*la sainteté*), for Marion, is something that happens to consciousness: a jarring, sublime experience in which the world either slips away from or overloads our capacity to grasp it cognitively. Paraphrasing Marion, Turner writes: “when one experiences *la sainteté*, one always experiences it as something outside of and foreign to oneself, and perceives and receives it as a conceptual lack, as a space where the profane cannot enter” (p. 235). On this basis, Marion maintains that the essence of religious experience must be found in what he calls “saturated” phenomena, which “exceed and precede the perceiver's constituting intentionality” (p. 236). Though Marion conceives of

the holy as a transcendental disruption of consciousness' investment in the world, phenomenology nonetheless remains the idiom in which his analysis of holiness occurs.

The sensibility informing phenomenological transcendentalism's approach to religion differs significantly from that of the philosophy of difference, despite the fact that both positions are intertwined in the volume. Rather than dwelling on the little leaps of faith upon which ordinary experience depends, the philosophy of difference is dazzled by the relentless, pulsating, almost obscene way in which the world generates multiplicity. The philosophy of difference embraces a kind of latter-day Epicureanism, in its vision of the universe as a throbbing chaos. As such, its engagement with religion is Nietzschean in spirit: from this perspective, recognizing the world's teeming multiplicity leads us not only to reject divine oneness, but also to transvalue our values, reinvesting in life itself affects that we previously directed towards otherworldly concerns.

Like transcendental phenomenology, the philosophy of difference's engagement with religion can take any number of forms. In Georges Bataille's "atheology," the transgressive act of denying and desecrating god is a recipe for purging oneself of any lingering absolute beliefs, in order to experience what Charlie Blake, writing on Bataille, calls the "polyvocality" of the world: the recognition that "there are as many substances as there are grains of sand on an infinite beach" and that they "flicker in and out of existence against the substrate of absolute nothingness, like elementary particles in the quantum vacuum of space and time" (p. 119). Turning to another thinker in this tradition, Clayton Crockett makes the uncontroversial point that it "would be difficult to claim that [Gilles] Deleuze is a saint in any conventional sense" (p. 85), but proceeds to argue that Deleuze can nonetheless be seen as a "heretical saint" (p. 92), in that his philosophy seeks to redeem difference rather than identity. "Deleuze's saintly work," he writes, "is to redeem differences, processes, flows and becomings, which ultimately means to redeem the intervals or interstices between beings" (p. 85).

Though he is often classified as a "post-postmodernist" thinker, the philosopher Alain Badiou nonetheless remains loyal to postmodernism in the central importance he accords to the concept of difference. The paradox—some might say incoherence—of his thought lies in the fact that difference is the ground upon which Badiou seeks to re-establish ontology, truth, universality, and subjectivity, the very concepts that, for, say, Derrida or Deleuze, the notion of difference was specifically intended to subvert. Badiou says he wants to bring philosophy back to ontology; yet what he really proposes is an anti-ontology, premised on the claim that "being is not," and that "[e]verything...even Oneness, is contingent and multiple in its being," as Meghan Helsel writes in her essay on Badiou (p. 185). As Helsel demonstrates, Badiou's defense of the philosophical enterprise, which is premised on his idiosyncratic understanding of truth, subjectivity, and universality, is closely connected to his condemnation of what he calls "anti-philosophy": the intellectual gesture which rejects such concepts as subjectivity and truth as illusory, and, as such, becomes a stand-in for the views commonly associated with postmodernism. Because anti-philosophy can imply a kind of irrational fideism—Badiou associates it with Pascal and Kierkegaard, among others—he often, Helsel notes, characterizes it as "saintly." This allows Badiou to redescribe the longstanding conflict between reason and faith and philosophy and religion using his own philosophical vocabulary, in which "saintliness" refers to "an unacceptably risky subjectivity, a singularity that does not instantiate a truth but vanishes into pure act" (p. 184). Helsel argues that the opposition Badiou posits between philosophy and anti-philosophy is, in fact, far from clear: if being is simply a void, can one blame the anti-philosophers for renouncing the concepts of truth and ontology to which Badiou paradoxically clings? What prevents Badiou from drawing nihilistic conclusions from his conception of the truth is his view that love, like philosophy, is a "truth procedure," one that is founded precisely on the recognition of difference. Love leads Badiou to rehabilitate the notion of humanity, which he presents as a newfangled secular humanism against anti-philosophy's quasi-religious antinomianism. Helsel concludes that, in fact, the internal logic of Badiou's thought suggests a complementarity of philosophy and anti-philosophy: "the philosopher," she argues, "needs the saint" (p. 196) (she specifically makes this point while discussing how Badiou genders philosophy as

male and anti-philosophy as female). But what her article really shows is the muddle that lies at the heart of Badiou's thinking, specifically as it relates to difference: in Badiou's hands, difference would seem to underwrite both philosophy (the ontology founded on being's multiplicity) and, at least implicitly, anti-philosophy (the rejection of truth and subjectivity as illusory universals). If this is the case, it is far from clear why one position should be understood as "philosophical" and tacitly secular, while the other is described as "saintly."

Philip E. Davis explores another perspective on the religious implications of the philosophy of difference in his essay on Jean-François Lyotard. Specifically, he examines Lyotard's claim that the very way in which we join sentences together inevitably silences the tensions and discrepancies (which he calls "*différends*") that are constitutive of our discourse. Yet, while recognizing that Lyotard denounced Christianity as a "master narrative"—a particularly dense concatenation of discourse that is especially repressive of its *différends*—he makes the case that Christian theology can be enriched by Lyotard's insights. His critique of oppressive speech, Davis contends, should inspire an "open narrative of love" which "bear[s] witness to the differend" (p. 132), respecting, rather than muting, the alterity which shapes discourse (and, presumably, the social groups who express themselves through it). In this way, Davis demonstrates that the philosophy of difference need not imply a Heraclitean vision of the world as flux, but could inform a redemptive theology which seeks to atone, as it were, for the sins which unity and identity have committed against difference and otherness.

While *Postmodern Saints* provides ample evidence that phenomenological transcendentalism and the philosophy of difference are the primary theoretical orientations informing postmodernism's engagement with religious concepts, it also shows how these two paradigms frequently overlap. Perhaps the best example of this can be seen in the work of arguably the most important philosopher of difference, Jacques Derrida. On the one hand, Derrida's central concept of *différance* suggests that the perpetual deferral of any final and unitary meaning arising from the fact that language is structured by difference foils any possibility of transcendence, as there is no absolute, self-evident experience that can overcome the difference/deferral of meaning. On other hand, *différance* seems to integrate a quasi-transcendence into the fundamental texture of reality: what is the slippage of meaning, if not continuous and generalized transcendence? Though Derrida once insisted that *différance* cannot be recuperated by theology, even negative theology [3], it is nonetheless the name he gives to the discreet miracles that pervade our discourse, as words overcome and subvert their meaning through their articulation with and differentiation from other words. In her essay on Derrida, Robyn Horner shows how the logic of *différance* applies to his analysis of the distinction between the sacred, which "refers to what we dedicate to God," and the holy, which is "of God, and as such reflects the purity of the transcendent" (p. 97). Moreover, this distinction dovetails with the antinomy between paganism (the realm of the sacred) and monotheism (characterized by the holy). Yet for Derrida, Horner contends, the sacred and holy can never be rigorously differentiated; their relationship is governed by *différance*. "The holy might be *otherwise*, but even as we name it, it is haunted by the sacred, as the sacred is sacred only because of the profane and by means of sacrifice. The purity of the *saint* retains this impurity; holiness cannot present itself *as such*" (p. 98, Horner's emphases). Whatever one makes of Derrida as a thinker, his importance, from the standpoint of the issues raised by this volume, lies in the way that he incorporates both a philosophy of difference and a reflection on transcendence, suggesting that difference can have very different philosophical and theological implications than those emphasized by thinkers such as Deleuze and Badiou.

*Postmodern Saints* demonstrates that, since at least the mid-twentieth century, French thinkers have engaged in a distinctive conversation about the nature of holiness and faith. What makes the volume frustrating is its reluctance to characterize the terms of this conversation and to explain its historical context. Essays are devoted to Albert Camus and Jean Genet, who were not even tangentially connected to postmodernism, and Paul Ricoeur, who defended a form of philosophical hermeneutics which frequently placed him at odds with Derridean deconstruction and Foucauldian genealogy (thinkers who

are the subject of essays that have not been otherwise mentioned in this review include René Girard, Luce Irigaray, Jean-Yves Lacoste, and François Laruelle). There are also a few striking omissions: for instance, no essay is devoted to Jacques Lacan, despite his intriguing pronouncements on religion.[4] Nor do the authors reflect on the historical or contextual factors that might account for this peculiarly French conversation about religion. The *guerre des deux Frances* which pitted republicans against Catholics for much of the nineteenth century, the concept of *laïcité*, the development of schools of sociology and anthropology which explored the social function of the sacred, a spiritual and sacrificial conception of the nation, a fascination with religious ideas and images among the literary avant-garde, a tradition of “secular religiosity” in political thought—none of these features of the French historical experience, which might shed some light on why so many thinkers were drawn to religious questions, are evoked, much less considered at length. In other words, the volume’s authors remain largely indifferent to two of the main questions their subject matter raises: what makes this discussion of religion “postmodern”? And what makes it French? The book’s refusal to grapple with these questions is disappointing, even if the material it covers suggests a number of interesting clues.

First, as we have seen, the volume demonstrates that postmodernism, at least as it relates to religion, converges around two ideas: a reconfiguration of the idea of transcendence and a quasi-ontological claim about the irreducible multiplicity of being. Neither one of these ideas necessarily implies a well-defined theological position. What Blanchot calls the “outside,” particularly when it takes the form of the never-ending flow of discourse, can assume a transcendent quality, yet it implies a conception of existence so depleted of meaning that no divinity could ever refill it. For Marion, consciousness’s experience of moments, which transcend its capacity for conceptual thought, create a breach through which *la sainteté* enters the profane world. Similarly, Bataille’s vision of a fundamentally polyvocal world underwrites his “atheology,” while Deleuze’s and Lyotard’s understanding of difference can—according to the essays devoted to them, if not to the thinkers themselves—be recuperated for theology, through the notion of a “redemption of difference,” for the former, and that of “open narratives of love,” for the latter. While both these ideas pervade postmodernism (understood broadly as a moment in continental European thought, rather than as a specific movement) and each admits multiple positions on religion, it would seem that those who make use of the notion of transcendence are more inclined to see their thought as having theistic implications, while those who emphasize difference tend to be atheistic or secular. In any case, seeing postmodernism as lying at the intersection of a reconfigured idea of transcendence and a philosophy of difference goes beyond and enriches many of the more commonplace definitions with which postmodernism is associated (the decline of master narratives, the discursive character of knowledge and truth, an attitude of ironic playfulness, and so on).

The question of what makes this postmodern conversation about religion French is somewhat more elusive. One suspects that the answer lies in the editors’ astute choice to focus not on the question of religion per se, but on the related notions of the sacred, saintliness, and the holy. The French connection in this conversation might have become evident if greater reference had been made to (admittedly non-postmodern) figures such as Emile Durkheim, Marcel Mauss, and Roger Caillois—thinkers, in other words, who devoted themselves to understanding the sacred. If there is a French character to this conversation, it seems to lie in the way in which this concept has fascinated generations of French thinkers. And while this point can only be speculative, it is tempting to relate this intellectual obsession to the particular way in which French society experienced modernity: through a political revolution which sought to end the influence of the Catholic Church and which compelled those who embraced the revolutionary legacy to understand religion’s essence while also seeking to capture some of religion’s aura for decidedly secular purposes. France’s “postmodern saints,” in short, can be seen as an extension of the broader problem of secular religiosity in French intellectual life, in which the concept of the sacred has often played a critical role.[5] While *Postmodern Saints of France* misses an occasion to reflect on the contextual factors that shaped late twentieth-century French religious thought, it nonetheless offers an impressive—if imperfect—panorama of the multiple ways in which religious and theological traditions have been grappled with by an important group of modern thinkers.

## LIST OF ESSAYS

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Anthony Paul Smith, "Laruelle and the Messiah before the Saints"

## NOTES

[1] Charles Péguy, *Notre jeunesse* (Paris: Gallimard, 1993 [1910]).

[2] David M. Halperin, *Saint Foucault: Towards a Gay Hagiography* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995).

[3] Jacques Derrida, "La différance," in *Marges de la philosophie* (Paris: Editions de Minuit, 1968), p. 6.

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[4] For a fascinating exploration of the religious implications of Lacan's thought, see Davis Hankins' forthcoming book, *The Book of Job and the Immanent Genesis of Transcendence* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2014).

[5] The literature on this topic is vast, but some of the key works to have addressed it include: Suzanne Desan, *Reclaiming the Sacred: Lay Religion and Popular Politics in Revolutionary France* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1990); D. G. Charlton, *Secular Religions in France, 1815-1870* (London: Oxford University Press, 1963); Edward Berenson, *Populist Religion and Left-Wing Politics in France, 1830-1852* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1984); Ivan Strenski, *Contesting Sacrifice: Religion, Nationalism, and Social Thought in France* (Chicago, Ill.: Chicago University Press, 2002); and Marcel Gauchet, *La religion dans la démocratie* (Paris: Gallimard, 2001).

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