
H-France Review Vol. 20 (December 2020), No. 213

Edward Baring, *Converts to the Real: Catholicism and the Making of Continental Philosophy*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2019. 504 pp. \$49.95 U.S. (hb). ISBN 978-0-674988-37-8.

Review by Stephen Schloesser, Loyola University Chicago.

In March 1927, Georges Bernanos delivered a lecture entitled “A Catholic Vision of the Real.”^[1] He had recently achieved both fame and notoriety following the March 1926 publication of his first novel, *Sous le soleil de Satan*, in Jacques Maritain’s *Roseau d’or* series.^[2] Bernanos gave his lecture in Brussels as a speaker in the “conférences Cardinal Mercier” series, named for Désiré-Joseph Mercier, the recently deceased Cardinal Archbishop of Malines-Bruxelles (Mechelen-Brussels). As Belgium’s Catholic primate, Mercier had achieved heroic stature as a resistance figure during the Germans’ Great War invasion and occupation.^[3] But a quarter-century earlier, he had also achieved international renown in Catholic philosophical circles for his 1889 founding of the Institut Supérieur de Philosophie (ISP) at the Université catholique de Louvain.

The ISP played a crucial international role in the reestablishment of neoscholasticism in Catholic institutions across the globe. This retrieval, mandated by Pope Leo XIII in 1879, was an effort to meet various modern philosophical challenges with a recovery of the critical realism embodied in the work of the medieval scholastic Thomas Aquinas. Beyond the implicit homage to Mercier’s leading role, Bernanos’s “Catholic Vision of the Real” also met the aspirations of a postwar generation. In late 1926, a group of students at Louvain had founded the review *La Nouvelle Équipe*. Exclaiming that their generation had a “crazy need for synthesis!” of mystic realism, they singled out as models the “work of Thomas Aquinas,” Mercier’s ISP, and Maritain. Maritain sent a congratulatory note: “You have taken account of the gravity of the hour, you are directing yourselves, under the sign of Saint Thomas, toward the *immense work of restoring spiritual unity*.”^[4] Neoscholasticism’s pursuit of the “real” was the *renouveau catholique*’s vital contribution to postwar reconstruction.

The denominational particularity in this story likely strikes contemporary readers—even Catholic readers—as unimaginably parochial (if perhaps quaint) in the current globalist, pluralist context. And yet Edward Baring argues that Continental philosophy’s making depended precisely upon this Catholic milieu—a transnational infrastructure of schools, scholars, conferences, and publications—of which Louvain was one small but outstanding member. “The Catholic reception of phenomenology,” writes Baring, “was a subterranean but massive structure, linking many of the most important developments in the history of twentieth-century

philosophy.” Indeed, “the first continental philosophy of the twentieth century was Catholic” (p. 20). As a result, “Continental philosophy today is haunted by religion” (p. 343).

“Continental” philosophy is commonly contrasted with its “analytic” counterpart. This distinction is partly conceived geographically, origins inscribed in the explicit reference to the European continent as distinct from the British Isles. In writing a transnational intellectual history, Baring might conceivably have opted for a modified geographical account: intellectual exchanges with frequent border crossings over frontiers defined by nations and states. Given the fact that Belgians and French were, geopolitically speaking, bitter enemies of Germans throughout most of the period under consideration, the story of a common “continental” intellectual community could indeed use some explaining. However, rather than opt for such a modified account, and in order to avoid privileging national differences in phenomenology’s reception, Baring instead prioritizes “a factor that, *though apparently marginal in each country*, was nonetheless common to all and thus emerges through a process of accumulation as the single most important explanation for the international success of phenomenology in the twentieth century: Catholicism” (p. 5, emphasis added).

Why Catholicism? First, Catholic institutions “provided the links holding together developments across Europe.” As a result, their production of “a critical mass of the early scholarship” set the terms of the debate in several ways: “They introduced phenomenology to many better-known thinkers; they served as important interlocutors; and they provided a receptive audience for phenomenological and existential texts” (p. 9). Asymmetrical social and cultural status plays an essential role throughout this story. Marginal (low status) Catholics on national cultural peripheries sought connections with central (high status) intellectual figures for legitimation beyond confessional boundaries. Conversely, high status figures depended upon a low status confessional (yet cosmopolitan) network for their scholarship’s transnational diffusion. Iconic figures like Jean-Paul Sartre and Simone de Beauvoir illustrate the point: philosophers interested in phenomenology in the 1920s, 1930s, and 1940s, whether Catholic or not, “could not ignore Catholic readings, to which they felt compelled to respond” (p. 9). In sum, Baring argues that “we can speak of ‘continental philosophy’ because phenomenology could tap into the networks of a Church that already operated on a continental scale.... The geography of phenomenology is best described, not to the contours of mainland Europe”—i.e., the “continent”—but rather “by the reach of the universal Church” (p. 11).

Closely connected is Baring’s key concept of “conversion”—i.e., *Converts to the Real*. Where “continent” evokes a settled static landmass, “conversion” implies motion. Insofar as conversion is a process of movement, migration, border crossings (and possible transgressions), eventual resettlement and reconstitution, it focuses our attention on time as well as space. The words “convert” and “conversion” play multiple roles in Baring’s method. At a basic level, the “project of conversion” assumes that ideas, rather than being limited or static, speak across intellectual and cultural boundaries. Authors “appeal to those with different sets of beliefs” (p. 17).

At another level, a rhetorical level, authors write precisely “in order to change their readers’ minds—which is to say, to convert them.” The very possibility of change presumes that context is never completely determinative. Drawing on Jacques Derrida (the subject of his first monograph), Baring notes that contextualization is not “a form of containment.” [5] Rather, texts “detach themselves from their context; they can be read and understood in new and interesting ways by people in other times and other places” (p. 16). Ideas mutate as they migrate.

As a result, at a final level, those seeking to convert others can end up themselves being converted: “arguments can be just as effective on the author who wields them.” Since “intellectuals bind themselves more or less tightly” to the consequences of a particular line of reasoning, the “consequences that they do not always see clearly in advance” may well be unintended (p. 17).

Baring’s story is thus filled with authors’ shape-shifting “conversions” across borders and boundaries of various kinds: to and from religious convictions and confessions; to and from various forms of unbelief; to and from opposing philosophical positions. Critical and passionate engagement produces many “converts to the real,” even as the precise meaning of the “real” always eludes them. Indeed, the endless indeterminacy of, and unsettled quest for, the “real” lures the seekers forward.

This vast assemblage of characters, institutions, publications, and events in constant flux poses an enormous structural challenge. Although Baring organizes this welter around three seminal German thinkers—Edmund Husserl (1859-1938), Martin Heidegger (1889-1976), and Max Scheler (1874-1928)—Francophone structures played an especially vital role in their transnational diffusion. An iconic example is the Université catholique de Louvain, whose library the Germans destroyed not once but twice, first in 1914 and then again in 1940.[6] Fittingly enough, Baring’s broad exposition of neoscholasticism’s revival focuses on Mercier’s establishment of Louvain’s ISP as progressive Thomism’s global center. Mercier’s motto “Nova et vetera”—“New and old”—expressed a conciliatory vision of adapting medieval thought to contemporary demands; and this “open” strain, one that accepted historical change, would be diametrically opposed to the Roman approach (p. 32).[7] Although on the periphery of Rome’s center from an ecclesiastical standpoint, “The topology of Catholic intellectual networks made Louvain a model for progressive neo-scholastics around the world” (p. 36).

Having set out this institutional landscape, Baring turns to the intellectual issues. Because of perceived threats posed by both Kantians and positivists, epistemology became central to the neoscholastic renewal. Although this focus departed significantly from the medieval Thomas’s ontological orientation, progressive Thomists held that “the letter of Aquinas’s work, suited to the needs of the thirteenth century, was less important than its spirit” (p. 38). However, Mercier’s own proposed solution to the problem of the “real”—i.e., “whether the subject of our judgments was ‘real, that is realized, or at the very least intrinsically possible and realizable in nature?’”—left many unsatisfied. Anxiety gnawed: “Was Mercier really an improvement on Kant?” (p. 36).

This neoscholastic legitimation crisis set the stage for the 1900-1901 Catholic reception of Husserl’s *Logical Investigations*. The publication’s “importance had little to do with Husserl’s religious convictions as a Jewish convert to Lutheranism” (p. 39). Rather, Husserl’s fierce opposition to psychologism—indeed, his recent *conversion from* psychologism—paralleled neoscholastics’ desire to escape their felt entrapment in the neo-Kantian mind. Husserl also shared neoscholastics’ broad desire to escape positivism, and critiqued both psychologism and empiricism—respectively privileging thoughts and things—as “forms of relativism, which made the error of trying to derive the ideal from the real” (p.47). “Husserl’s account of truth looked very much like Mercier’s reformation of the traditional correspondence theory,” and it seemed to offer (in the later words of Edith Stein) a “new scholasticism,” a medieval-modern bridge endowed with high cultural status (p. 48).

Three key factors established in this opening survey guide the rest of Baring's study. On the level of ideas, phenomenology's search for the "real"—an anxious dissatisfaction over the seeming binary choice between thoughts or things—deeply resonated with Catholic neoscholastic concerns. (In the 1930s, neoscholasticism gave way to Christian existentialism as the main Catholic player.) On the level of infrastructure, ideas were transmitted via an international network of Catholic scholarly institutions and publications, and the ISP's predominance identifies that network as initially progressive. Finally, in terms of cultural capital and status inconsistency, German (high status) phenomenology's anxiety over nineteenth-century legacies seemed to bestow cultural legitimacy on those same anxieties shared by marginal (low status) Catholics. Having set up this framework, Baring turns to excavating numerous conversions.

In the existentialist 1930s, Francophone circles dominate as interest in phenomenology grows outside Germany amidst the Great Depression's economic turmoil, autocratic regimes, and movement toward a Second World War. Baring first surveys the transnational landscape in which Christian existentialism emerges as a generational challenge to the 1920s progressivist Thomists. Gabriel Marcel's after-dinner study groups, held at his home at 21, rue de Tournon, a short distance from the Jardin du Luxembourg, became "one of the most important, if least studied, institutions of interwar French philosophy" (p. 153). Attendees over the years would include Simone de Beauvoir, Nicolai Berdyaev, Emmanuel Levinas, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Paul Ricoeur, and Jean-Paul Sartre. Marcel posited a fundamental distinction between "having" (*avoir*) and "being" (*être*). "Having" belongs to the realm that can be grasped objectively, while "being" belongs to the world of "mystery"—Marcel's key concept—the realm that resists thought's tendency and desire to objectify. Marcel's "mystery" is ontological, a form of participation we initially encounter in our own existential situation of finite spatiotemporal embodiment. Since we participate in being, "this participation is also why all attempts to grasp being objectively will fail" (p.159). Maritain attempted to reconcile Marcel with Thomism by arguing that "the two philosophies converged in their understanding of being as a 'mystery,'" i.e., as a plenitude that continually expands and overflows (p. 163). Baring, however, focuses instead on their nonconvergence to make a larger point: "Christian existentialism is best understood as the intellectual space that stretched between them: For Maritain new experiences enriched our account of the world, for Marcel they constantly threatened to disrupt it" (p. 165). The distinction between enrichment and disruption is one iteration of a recurrent trope in this book: continuity vs. rupture. Wholeness vs. otherness: two competing visions of the "real."

Having set up existentialism, Baring's use of Scheler to introduce "personalism" enters the fray of 1930s politics. Although Scheler had died in 1928, his recuperation of Nietzschean "vitalist" values offered neoscholastics and Christian existentialists "a means for thinking through a possible alliance" between Fascism and Catholic Action, the international lay movement aimed at "a broader re-Christianization of society" (pp. 253, 251). Central for countering liberalism was Scheler's "recognition of the singularity of the 'person,' in contrast to the universalist abstraction of Kant's subject" (p. 258).

A key figure for personalism is the little-known Paul-Louis (formerly Paul-Ludwig) Landsberg who, by contrast, used Scheler to develop instead a theory of resistance to Fascism. In the 1920s, Landsberg had been one of the most important figures in Scheler's German Catholic reception. After the Nazis came to power in 1933, his Jewish ancestry forced him to migrate, first to Switzerland, then to Paris, and then to Spain—where he taught until 1936 as the Spanish Civil War forced him back to Paris. In 1934, Landsberg began exerting a powerful influence on

Emmanuel Mounier, and he became a regular attendee at Maritain's Thomistic study circle. Landsberg's evolving personalist vision focused on the "person" as defined by their acts so that "the person can be grasped in a more adequate manner as the process of personalization, rather than as a static substance" (p. 262). Landsberg's influential essay "Personal Engagement" (1937) defined engagement as a "concrete assumption of the responsibility for a task that is to be realized in the future." Since "fidelity to a chosen direction" was "essential to the constitution of this personal life," it implied "authenticity" as a "definitive value" for personalism (p. 262). Existence precedes essence. Engagement and authenticity. Sartre before Sartre.

After the war, Mounier's *Introduction to Existentialisms* (1947) assigned Sartre the role of an "unrepentant Nietzschean" whose embrace of atheism "led to a 'disoriented and delirious freedom' cut off from higher values." Mounier's protagonists were instead Sartre's Christian existentialist opponents, a rubric under which he included his now deceased interwar mentors, Scheler and Landsberg (who had died for the Resistance in the Oranienberg concentration camp). For Baring, "Mounier's account of existentialism can stand in for an account of postwar phenomenology more broadly," since 1930s confrontations between Thomists and Christian existentialists "prefigured many of the debates involving non-Catholics in the postwar period" (pp. 274-276).

Although this kind of spillover from intra-Catholic debates into non-Catholic arenas has been Baring's recurring motif, at this point he posits a postwar pivot. "As this process continued, the Catholics who helped promote phenomenological ideas around Europe withdrew from the stage." If Continental philosophy is in fact "haunted by religion," this moment signals the entrance of the specters as the script that they had written "persisted, to be picked up and adapted by new actors" (p. 276).

The sprawling study closes with a return to the "all-important French scene" (p. 20). Baring opens by evoking the chaos of the August 1944 Liberation and the ugly "semi-official purging (in French, *l'épuration*)." An attempt to shape an official narrative in preparation for the Fourth Republic, this purification recast "the Vichy Regime and the Occupation as the work of a small band of collaborationists against a nation of resisters." The self-portrait was also generational, a younger cohort's emphasis on radical rupture. A clean break provided the context for the existentialism (led by Sartre) "that had Paris abuzz in the autumn of 1945, which draped itself in the colors of the Resistance and liberation." However, having summarized the conventional tale, Baring here interjects a rupture of his own: this portrait "looks very different from the one that I have traced over the last five chapters" (p. 309). The deeply subversive character of Baring's archeological dig throughout the previous 300 densely packed pages becomes clear.

Baring's alternative account of genealogical inheritance and appropriation concludes with Maurice Merleau-Ponty (a former Catholic) and Paul Ricoeur (a Protestant), "the two figures who would have the greatest impact on postwar academic phenomenology in France" (p. 308). Among this book's several iterations of wholeness confronting otherness, none seem so clear as Merleau-Ponty's 1945 *The Phenomenology of Perception*—"one of the most important and influential phenomenological texts of the twentieth century"—as contrasted with Ricoeur's 1950 *The Voluntary and the Involuntary*, dedicated to Marcel (pp. 317, 319). While both thinkers showed "a similar [Gabriel] Marcelian bent," they took divergent paths regarding the "existential fault" in human embodiment. Merleau-Ponty's perception "resulted in exactly the type of 'indistinct existential monism' that Ricoeur had wanted to 'shatter'" (pp. 322, 323). Wholeness vs. otherness: a final iteration of competing visions of the "real."

Baring revisits Louvain one last time in the penultimate chapter, “Saving the Husserl Archives.” After Husserl’s death in 1938, his manuscripts were rescued, hidden, and eventually housed at the ISP—thanks largely to the Franciscan Fr. Herman Leo Van Breda.[8] In addition to being a wartime page-turner, this story vividly illustrates asymmetrical status. Even Van Breda himself worked to downplay the ISP’s religious identity as he sought financial support from UNESCO. Decades later, although the “Church and the ISP were instrumental in saving [Husserl’s] papers, hiding them during the war, and supporting the archives”—and even though “the archives are still a part of the Catholic University in Leuven”—“there is little suggestion that the edition work is a Catholic undertaking” (pp. 306, 307). Asymmetrical status: Continental and Catholic.

Returning to Bernanos’s 1927 “Catholic Vision of the Real” brings to mind the title of Lucien Febvre’s and François Crouzet’s work, authored seventy years ago but only recently published: *Nous sommes des sang-mêlés*. We Are of Mixed Blood.[9] To what extent would today’s luminaries in Continental philosophy—figures like Giorgio Agamben, Alain Badiou, Jean-Luc Nancy—recognize themselves as descendants of neoscholasticism, Louvain’s ISP, and numerous associated figures: Hedwig Conrad-Martius, Léon Noël, Erich Przywara, Alberto Wagner de Reyna, Sofia Vanni Rovighi, Xavier Zubiri, and so many more (many forgotten)?

Maybe not much. And yet this mixed-blood pedigree need not be seen as impoverishment. Febvre wrote analogously (and prophetically) about a new mode of imagining French civilization as a fraternal growth of mixed cultures: “French civilization, to speak only of that, has always gone beyond the political borders of France and the French state. Knowledge of this fact does not belittle France; on the contrary it makes the country greater. It is a source of hope for her future.”[10] So, too, with Baring, a globalist pluralist method founded on flux. Context and conversion, migration and mutation: they enlarge our heritage. We are all of mixed blood now.

NOTES

[1] Georges Bernanos, “Une Vision Catholique du Réel,” in Bernanos, *Essais et écrits de combat*, eds. Yves Bridel, Jacques Chabot, Michel Estève, Joseph Jurt, et al. (Paris: Gallimard, 1971), pp. 1074–1089.

[2] Georges Bernanos, *Sous le soleil de Satan* (Paris: Plon-Nourrit et cie, 1926). See Stephen Schloesser, *Jazz Age Catholicism: Mystic Modernism in Postwar Paris* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2005), pp. 245–281.

[3] Jan de Volder, *Cardinal Mercier in the First World War: Belgium, Germany, and the Catholic Church* (Leuven: Leuven University Press, 2018).

[4] Schloesser, *Jazz Age Catholicism*, pp. 33–35, 116–119, 125–126, 131–134.

[5] Edward Baring, *The Young Derrida and French Philosophy, 1945–1968* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011).

[6] Schloesser, *Jazz Age Catholicism*, pp. 85–86.

[7] Gabriel Daly, *Transcendence and Immanence: A Study in Catholic Modernism and Integralism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1980), p. 11.

[8] Toon Horsten, *De pater en de filosoof: de redding van het Husserl-archief* [The Father and the Philosopher: Saving the Husserl Archives] (Antwerp: Uitgeverij Vrijdag, 2018). For the archives' location within the ISP--today's Hoger Instituut voor Wijsbegeerte (HIW)--see this virtual tour starting at Kardinaal Mercierplein (Cardinal Mercier Square): <https://limel.kuleuven.be/vt/hiw/> (date of last access 29 November 2020).

[9] Lucien Febvre and François Crouzet, *Nous sommes des sang-mêlés: Manuel d'histoire de la civilisation française*, eds Denis Crouzet and Élisabeth Crouzet (Paris: A. Michel, 2012).

[10] Lucien Febvre, quoted by Patrick Boucheron in *France in the World: A New Global History*, eds Boucheron et al., English-language edition ed. Stéphane Gerson (New York: Other Press, 2019), xxxv; orig. *Histoire mondiale de la France* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 2017).

Stephen Schloesser
Loyola University Chicago
sschloesser@luc.edu

Copyright © 2020 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 redistribution/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 republication 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