

Nick Trakakis

The End of Philosophy of Religion.

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Nick Trakakis' book is built around the opposition between analytic and continental philosophy, as he interprets it. Analytic philosophy is supposed to be of no use in helping us to live our lives; by contrast, continental philosophy's deep existential value is affirmed. As Trakakis sees things, an analytic *philosophy of religion* necessarily eliminates what could be called the *Kierkegaardian* element: fear and trembling, feelings and experience. Analytic philosophy attaches only to the more rationalistic aspects of rational theology. It is a philosophy, or even a metaphysics, of theism or atheism. A metaphor illuminates Trakakis' claims: analytic philosophy is to religious life what osteology is to animal life; whereas continental philosophy enters, Trakakis suggests, into the flesh of our religious life. On the one side, Trakakis sets the analytic philosophers whose preoccupations are almost exclusively logical and epistemological: Swinburne and Plantinga for example. They are, in the philosophy of religion, the counterparts of Ayer, Carnap or Quine in general philosophy. On the other side, Trakakis sets the continental philosophers of religion: Phillips, Westphal, Caputo, Marion. They are the counterparts of Heidegger, Deleuze, Derrida.

'My aim will be to show that the analytic tradition of philosophy, by virtue of its attachment to scientific norms of rationality and truth, cannot come to terms with the mysterious transcendent reality that is disclosed in religious practice' (2), Trakakis declares. In Chapter 2 of his book, Trakakis exemplifies this approach by looking at the question of theodicy and the problem of evil. He criticizes the 'friends of Cleanthes' (an expression borrowed from D. Phillips and referring to the character in Hume's *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*), 'who attempt to shore up religious beliefs with empirical evidence and philosophical demonstrations' (12). Trakakis here applies an insensitivity argument: any use of the principle of sufficient reason, or even of arguments on matters of theodicy, are said to reveal an inexcusable moral insensitivity to the suffering of innocents. Trakakis rejects the distinction between the theoretical problem of evil and the practical problem of evil. Finally, he clearly endorses K. Surin's claim that 'theodicies mediate a praxis that sanctions evil' (28-9).

Chapters 3 and 4 are devoted to the description of the analytic-continental divide in the philosophy of religion. Trakakis presents arguments in favor of each of these ways of doing philosophy. For example, he rightly claims that 'modernist art and not modern science provides the model for continental philosophers' (50). He identifies two main characteristics of continental philosophy of religion: perspectivism and non-realism. He convincingly defends the former against the argument that the perspective of

perspectivism must be non-perspectival, and so self-contradictory. And he endorses the analysis of D. Phillips (the main hero of continental philosophy of religion, according to Trakakis) against *religious realism*: the view that ‘the existence or non-existence of God is a fact independent of whether you or I believe that God exists’, in the words of J. Hick (quoted on p. 76). The non-realist thinks that there is no God who is independent of the way we think about Him. Trakakis endorses the non-realist view that theological propositions are not referential. Religious belief has nothing to do with belief in the existence of an object, but with a way of living. And this is supposed to have been indisputably shown by Wittgenstein.

Prior to Chapter 5, we may say that Trakakis synthesizes, with clarity and rigor, the intellectual viewpoints adopted on the respective sides of the great divide between continental and analytic philosophers of religion. He defends continental philosophy of religion, but employs a rather analytic style. Yet I doubt that the picture he gives of the continental philosophy of religion is sufficiently comprehensive. He focuses, in fact, upon Anglo-American ‘continental’ philosophers (Phillips, Westphal, Caputo). In European continental philosophy—if it is possible to use such appellation—what has been a main characteristic of the philosophy of religion is a certain use of phenomenology (Heidegger, Levinas, Ricoeur, Marion, Henry, Chrétien), but Trakakis says nothing about this. He claims that analytic philosophers of religion do not give importance to religious experience. He seems to know nothing of W. Alston and his book *Perceiving God*, or K. Yandell’s *Epistemology of Religious Experience*. Nor does he show any awareness of the philosophers who belong to the analytic tradition, but who do not accept Swinburne’s program of natural theology. I think also that Trakakis’ ideas about ‘scientific-minded’ analytic philosophers are not relevant to many, Paul Helm, for example. And discussions about the elusive God (e.g. P. Moser’s *The Elusive God*) do not really cleave to the kind of theological realism discussed in Trakakis’ book and, misleadingly presented there as representative of the whole analytic philosophy of religion. Trakakis’ description of current philosophy of religion is partial, both on the side of continental philosophy, where he says nothing about phenomenology, and on the analytic side, where the philosophy of religion is far more diverse, nuanced and complex than Trakakis lets on.

In Chapter 5, Trakakis’ style and method change radically. He offers a sample of ‘philosophy without philosophy’ (84), a look at what a discourse on religion might be like in the wake of ‘the end of the philosophy of religion’ (that is, the end of the analytic, perversely rationalistic, philosophy of religion). Trakakis here presents us with a sort of meditation on Nikos Kazantzakis’ *The Poor Man of God*, a book on Francis of Assisi. These pages are suggestive but are devoid of any argument. What is presented is a patchwork of eclectic quotations in which some very strange parallels are drawn. Trakakis says, for example, that ‘communion with nature is communion with God’ (109) and quotes Spinoza’s, ‘*Deus sive natura*’. But I doubt that Spinoza’s formula should be interpreted so as to reflect the sentiment, ‘God bless Brother Water’, as Francis put it. And I am not sure that Pascal was in fact inspired with the sort of religious enthusiasm

indicated in the quotations from Kanzantzakis that Trakakis selects for this chapter. Similar remarks may be made about his further examples. In short, Trakakis' 'philosophy without philosophy' provides little that commands our serious attention.

Trakakis suggests (84) that continental philosophy—free (as he thinks) of the logical, objectivist and argumentative practices that characterize analytic philosophy—lacks the institutional backing (and thus the fetters) of the academic establishment. Here, he is ill informed, for in France, at least, this is simply false. Continental philosophy is the official philosophy of the French establishment, not only within the academic milieu, but also in the press, radio and television. Trakakis' description of continental philosophy is rather naïve and irenic. He seems to think that analytic philosophy—but not continental philosophy—is an artifact of the institutionalized university (see 117). But continental philosophy is also a university affair; and continental philosophers try, as much as analytic philosophers, to promote themselves as professionals. (Jean-Luc Marion, one of the European continental philosophers of religion quoted by Trakakis, has recently been elected a member of the Académie Française: not really a non-institutional venue for a rebel philosopher!) Trakakis rejects the 'institutionalization of reason' (118). But what about the *institutionalization of unreason*? Is that any better? One can agree that the question of the ethics of philosophy, and of intellectual practice in general, is an important one, as is suggested in the concluding section of Trakakis' book. But it is difficult to see why the rejection of objectivity and reason would strengthen ethical practices in philosophy.

Trakakis says that 'religion is one area where the existential and lived dimension cannot be neglected or reduced to purely abstract concerns without doing violence to the very object of inquiry' (115). But one can wonder whether some of the continental philosophers he approves of do not also do violence to serious thought. We may detect a sort of epistemic violence and intellectual vice in the way they use rhetorical tricks, slogans (like 'the end of metaphysics') and obscure concepts, rejecting argumentation and reason, and ignoring criticisms.

Are Augustine, Anselm, and Thomas Aquinas philosophers of religion of the sort that Trakakis condemns? Analytic philosophers are more truly the descendants of traditional philosophy than the continental philosophers who disavow the whole tradition and consider that it has in fact come to an end. Trakakis says that we must rediscover, through continental philosophy, old forms of religious thinking that have become buried in the sophisticated technical discourse of scientific-minded philosophers. But this is a very doubtful aim from the perspective of the current continental philosophy of religion, with its characteristically postmodern trajectory. And, moreover, few analytic philosophers of religion are well described as 'scientific-minded'; most of them are old-fashioned philosophical rationalists, which is very different. Through distorting the character of the analytic philosophy of religion, Trakakis fails to appreciate that it is the analytic, rather than the continental, philosophers of religion who are the

conservators of the tradition that he hopes to ‘rediscover’.

Seeking authority from Derrida, Trakakis declares that ‘each clear and precise statement about God must be upset and subverted, contaminated with paradox, in order be true to the reality it seeks to express’ (117). But Derrida, like Nietzsche before him, would surely have disapproved of this idea of being ‘true to a reality’. In giving tongue to such a program Trakakis indicates that he may not, ironically enough, understand very well what postmodern philosophy is all about.

To sum up: despite making some interesting points along the way, Trakakis’ critical comparison between analytic and continental philosophy of religion in their contemporary situation is overall ill-informed and ill-conceived. By distorting both sides, he does justice to neither and presents a critique of the analytic philosophy of religion that has little to recommend it from any point of view. The perspectivism and non-realism that Trakakis favors in the philosophy of religion are defensible points of view (not least within the analytic tradition), but like all philosophical stances, they are controversial and are at home within a context of reasoned debate. Trakakis has little or nothing to add to what others have said in their defense or to the discursive critique of opposing points of view. Indeed, he eschews the presentation of reasons, in the postmodern manner. The philosophy of religion is alive and well, on both sides of the Channel (and on both sides of the Atlantic, for that matter), and is indeed moving ahead, while Trakakis fruitlessly searches for it in the graveyard.

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