

Jean GREISCH, *Le Buisson ardent et les lumières de la raison: L'invention de la philosophie de la religion. Tome I: Héritages et héritiers du XIXe siècle*. Paris: Éditions du Cerf, Collection 'Philosophie & Théologie', 2002. 626 pp. 44 Euros, ISBN 2-204-06857-8.

IS PHILOSOPHY OF RELIGION a "dead knowledge" (Fredric Jameson) as appears to be the case with the disciplines born contemporaneously with it at the close of the eighteenth century: philosophy of history, philosophy of art, and philosophy of nature? Or has it a vital critical function such as can still be claimed by political philosophy and the philosophy of science? Jean Greisch argues that a philosophical reflection on the nature and status of religion has an essential role in a triangular cooperation with fundamental theology and the history of religions. Without it, theology hardens into dogmatism and the history of religions loses itself in positivism or is absorbed by sociology or psychology. A free play of the philosophical mind over the phenomena of religion lends space and sanity to the other two disciplines. Both theologians and historians of religion generally ignore philosophy of religion, confident that they can supply from their own resources whatever reflection their disciplines demand as the need arises. It seems the destiny of philosophy to be shunted

aside as superfluous. Worse still, even within philosophy, this particular branch is threatened by the ancient tradition of natural theology and by philosophies of a religious hue, expressions of what Karl Jaspers calls "philosophical faith," which often misname themselves philosophy of religion (or, ambiguously, 宗教哲学 as in the Kyoto school).

As a disciple of Paul Ricoeur and a commentator on Heidegger, Jean Greisch is convinced of the value, in every realm, of a hermeneutic reflection guided solely by the imperative of disinterested understanding. Standing back from the immediacy of direct investment in a given discourse, be it theological, ethical, political, or literary, he sets each perspective in relation to its alternatives and rivals, overcoming the naivety of single vision and defusing its passions, in order to uncover the underlying conditions of the fragile human effort to construct meaning. Born in the same village as the author of *Rénerit*, the masterpiece of Luxembourg's literature (an 1872 poem based on Goethe's *Reineke Fuchs*), he describes himself as a "fox" rather than a "hedgehog" (8), a philosopher of long detours and spacious panoramas rather than the champion of a single directing idea. From his chair in the Institut Catholique de Paris, he has projected throughout the Catholic world a deeper awareness of the historicity of philosophical and theological discourse and of the need for the patience of interpretation. His salutary influence has been aided by his unfailingly irenic and ecumenical outlook, his pellucid style in French and German, and his serene, balanced, contemplative, and gently humorous temperament.

In this first volume Greisch expounds the "speculative" and "critical" approaches to philosophy of religion; in the second volume he will present the "phenomenological," "analytical," and "hermeneutical" approaches. Presumably the last of these approaches is Greisch's own, and will be revealed as the most flexible and comprehensive one. Or more likely, given his habitual catholicity of vision, all five approaches will be seen to be indispensable. In the present volume, one suspects that his sympathies lie most with Schleiermacher (somewhat surprisingly classed with Hegel, Schelling, Franz Rosenzweig, and Karl Rahner as a "speculative" philosopher of religion) and with Ernst Troeltsch (presented along with Hermann Cohen, Tillich, Henry Duméry as an heir of the Kantian critical approach, while Feuerbach, Nietzsche, and Ernst Bloch represent the "anthropological" critique). Of the thirteen thinkers treated, all but one are Germans. Greisch is an astute smuggler of German intellectual tradition onto Gallic soil. In the English-speaking world philosophy of religion leads a shadowy existence, as indicated by the absence of an entry under that heading in the *Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. Analytical philosophy of religion, whether in the key of Wittgensteinian fideism or that of hard-headed rationalism, has little sense of historicity or hermeneutics. That is why an English version of the present survey would be a valuable textbook or reference work. The transition to the English-speaking milieu might not, however, be entirely without bumps. Greisch's sunny picture of the relations of religion and science will surprise readers of Richard Dawkins and Daniel C. Dennett: "antireligious propaganda carried out in the

name of science has ended in complete failure.... From the cultural point of view, the conflict of science and ideology is more virulent than that of faith and knowledge, and in this conflict science and religion can paradoxically become objective allies" (48). The intellectual atmosphere in which Greisch moves is built on an attunement to deep-rooted European values which may not win immediate appreciation in the more prosaic Anglo-Saxon milieu.

Philosophy of religion was born with the discovery of religious pluralism by European thinkers and it flourishes at times when the consciousness of pluralism is most acute, as indicated by the flurry of works dating from 1921 to 1923 (listed on pp. 352–53). Regrettably, Greisch does not exhume these studies, as his policy is to deal only with authors who continue to be influential in contemporary debate. Philosophy of religion was crushed in the Catholic world by the crackdown on Modernism and in the Protestant world by the avalanche of Dialectical Theology. With the demise of Barthianism, we can appreciate anew the insights of Schleiermacher in the last of his five *Speeches on Religion* and Troeltsch's sophisticated sense of the changing status of religious claims in an age of historical awareness. Greisch states that for Schleiermacher the principle of individuation of religions is "a particular intuition of the universe" (108); he does not take account of Schleiermacher's modification of this in later editions of the *Speeches*. Schleiermacher deplored Christian division yet held religious pluralism to be a blessing, for "it is founded on the very essence of religion which demands a plurality of manifestations" (106). He prized "the plasticity and creativity of religion, just as surprising and unpredictable as the evolution of individuals," and played it off against "the grey uniformity of natural religion and the cramped uniformity of the sectarian attitude" (108). If he tended to view religions as Platonic essences, underestimating the shadow side of their historical positivity, it was because of his confidence that one can overcome the externals of a degraded religious tradition by remounting to its original wellsprings (107). Here we note how philosophers of religion tend quietly to assume that they are more capable than theologians of healing distorted traditions. This raises the fear of a Midas touch that would rob religions of life as it transmutes them into philosophical gold.

This idealizing side of Schleiermacher lives on in Troeltsch. Troeltsch saw that the absoluteness of Christianity could not be established by a speculative vision like Hegel's that sees the essence of religion as manifest in history and completely realized in Christianity. Historicity goes all the way down. At no point does the absolute make a historical appearance. Yet exposure to history also corrects simplistic relativism, for it reveals that the number of fundamental choices facing humanity in the religious realm is quite small, and that Christianity emerges, as far as we can see, as "the point of convergence of all the directions in which religion has developed" (quoted, p. 400); moreover, "Christianity will not cease to evolve historically and to bring about new historical syntheses" (400). The first naivety of religious absolutism thus yields in the end to a second naivety, a reflective recovery of the initial conviction of the absoluteness of Christianity. But to attain that second level one must

forego “the artificial absoluteness of church apologetics”; “one must risk all to gain all” (quoted, pp. 401, 402). Troeltsch based the status of Christianity on such rational insight into the course of religious history. The theological feebleness of this was exposed in Barth’s revival of orthodox insistence on the self-grounded authority of revelation. Greisch does not consider the problem of apologetics or fundamental theology posed by the Barth-Troeltsch showdown, the problem of giving a credible presentation of Christian self-awareness in the pluralistic context.

Greisch performs a valuable service in discussing Tillich’s writings on philosophy of religion, which are little known. Tillich saw philosophy of religion as an exercise of autonomous reason that recognizes religion to be founded on the theonomous concept of the unconditioned. Barth dismissed this as creating “a peaceful heaven, infinitely tedious, truly worthy of Schleiermacher” and “playing hide-and-seek with the frozen monster of the unconditioned instead of speaking frankly of the good Lord” (420). The problem with philosophy of religion is that religion so fiercely resists becoming an object of philosophy. But Tillich did not give up. “Theological method rests on a normative concept of religion, drawn from a particular religious experience. In seeking to pass off this normative concept as the essence of religion, the theologian commits an unjustified categorical transgression” (424). In the end, though, this philosophy tends to become a theology of the unconditioned, or of ultimate concern, in rivalry to positive, biblical theology. “It looks as if religion brings the answers to questions that only philosophy is capable of raising” (438).

Nietzsche’s genealogy of religion is not an exercise in historicist explanation, which he would have regarded as pedantic, but a divinatory questioning of hidden, shameful origins, guided by the premise that humans are motivated by the will to power. Priding himself on his insight into the archaic forces lurking under the surface of religious feeling, he views the evolution of religion as a theatre of fear, hatred, and cruelty (537). Greisch expounds Nietzsche’s subversive views with an adroit choice of quotations, but draws the serene conclusion that to read Nietzsche is also to learn to defend oneself against him: “The best critical attitude to Nietzsche is to take seriously his own maxim: ‘You are always another’ ” (566). Religion, as René Girard teaches us, can meet Nietzsche’s challenge only by changing, only by facing and overcoming its dark side. Religion must take on board critical lucidity and intellectual honesty: “No one passes unscathed through a reading of Nietzsche, for he obliges us to face truths which wound and hurt, instead of holding on only to those that console” (567). “He invites us to resist the blackmail that equiparates every doubt to a sin and would have us jump into faith as into a lake, to pass our lives swimming there” (570). This openness is admirable in a Catholic philosopher of religion, but one would wish as well a strongly argued overcoming of Nietzsche, such as Heidegger was able to achieve on the philosophical plane. One needs to counter Nietzsche step by step with reasoned arguments. Dull and platitudinous ones will not do, for his acerbic quicksilver wit will make them look ridiculous. Rather, as in Judo, his force

must be turned back on itself in a series of skillful throws. It is not yet too late for someone to enter the lists with an "Against Nietzsche" that might do for the twenty-first Christian century what Origen's "Against Celsus" did for the third. Greisch does point out that Nietzsche, always consumed with a thirst for the absolute, fell victim to a religious fanaticism of his own, centered on the (rather weird) idea of the Eternal Return. Perhaps the most promising riposte to Nietzsche has come from Nishitani Keiji, who draws on Buddhist emptiness to induce a self-overcoming of nihilism—a regrettable absence from Greisch's bibliography that may be remedied in the second volume. A Buddhist-inspired response to Feuerbach and Nietzsche would concede the truth of their insights into the flimsy, contingent, all-too-human texture of religious traditions, yet would rescue a function for these traditions as skillful means, which in their very emptiness can operate as conventional vehicles of ultimacy. The idealizing extraction of essential religious choices from history, practiced by Schleiermacher and Troeltsch, could then yield to a full recognition of the brokenness of humankind's religious constructions, which at their best can aspire only after a provisional, contextual adequacy. At the same time this would clear the horizon for the phenomenological recognition of the quality of ultimacy attaching to classical moments in religious history, especially the founding events and scriptures, and for their retrieval in contemporary perspective.

The condemnation of Duméry by the Holy Office in 1957 reveals that philosophy of religion, in its claim to mediate between dogmatic faith and the scientific study of religion, has aroused church fear as giving too much autonomy to rational judgment. "The Modernist crisis is not yet terminated" (444). Duméry was accused of "complete ignorance of the analogy of being" (443). In contrast, Karl Rahner's philosophy of religion is structured about the analogy of being, to a point that it fits ill in the company of the more historical-minded philosophies expounded here. Kant, Rosenzweig, and Cohen are not very historical-minded either. Indeed, the heterogeneity of the authors studied, and of the critical questions put to them, confirms Duméry's image of philosophy of religion as "an immense lumber-room"; "As long as it is not in possession of its methods and laws, philosophy of religion will remain a disappointing, impure, and useless genre" (449). One wishes that Greisch would pursue more systematically one or two methodological issues, and make more trenchant judgments on his authors in reference to these issues. An excess of hermeneutic charity can rob the exposition of needed relief. He refers to his "incapacity (psychological or metaphysical, I know not) to ratify the henological presuppositions of Duméry's philosophy of religion" (471). But this topic, the subordination of the figure of God to that of the One, or of a nothingness beyond God, is so crucial in the problematic of philosophy of religion that a more thorough critique is required here. Will Greisch take up Duméry's project of putting philosophy of religion on a secure epistemological footing? He has made the task difficult for himself and for all of us by revealing the vast historical sweep of the discipline and by the scholarly scruple that prevents him from overriding differences and forging factitious

alliances. In any case, study of this encyclopedic work should have a chastening effect on anyone inclined to make sweeping statements about religion, while challenging us to do better, if we can, than the great minds who have foundered in this intractable domain.

Joseph S. O'Leary
Sophia University