

“Continental Philosophy and Christian Beliefs”: Truth in Being

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The mystery of being touches upon the depths of God’s truth articulated as love. The phenomenological, ontological, and theological approaches to being often invoke the themes of time, truth, existence, death, alterity/otherness, and God. This is because being resides more in mystery and concealment. Where the themes of truth and being come together into a theological domain, they evidence a cohesive structure in the language of faith by producing intelligibility to Christian beliefs. The mystery of truth in being offers an opportunity to understand the nature of reality and existence in terms of divine love.

Responding to the light of religious faith, continental philosophers like Emmanuel Levinas, Franz Rosenzweig, Semyon Frank, Gabriel Marcel, Jacques Maritain, Karol Wojtyła (Pope St. John Paul II), René Girard and Jean-Luc Marion have been open for their philosophical inquiry to be at the service of theology. In contrast, Martin Heidegger found resonance in the creative, poetic, and mystical light of the fourfold to give voice to his search for the meaning of being, a search creating a private religion as it were. Whilst Jean-Paul Sartre lamented the absence of God’s presence, Derrida pursued the messianic spectre of deconstruction to retrieve and awake the archival memory of belief in God lost in atheistic pursuit. This has stirred much interest and passion for Christian or even Jewish Talmudic theology to take an interest in Continental philosophy. We can assert that Continental philosophy can be pressed into service of theology to give light to Christian beliefs, light that finds its beginning in Creation, the immemorial and anarchic (without origin) presence of the divine Word in God through the diachrony of the Spirit (truth in love) animating humanity towards moments of compassion, justice, and mercy (love in truth).

Certainly, continental philosophers can address human concerns and problems outside of religious beliefs and questions about God’s transcendence, such as through a focus on quantum theory, psychoanalysis, political economy and the digital age. Here, Christian beliefs could be perceived as a mere preference to be distrusted in favour of more secular, post-modern or scientific constructs. Perhaps then, the question we can ask is what is first philosophy? And from here, we may very well ponder, what is first theology? From a Levinasian perspective, both philosophy and theology are first ethics and prayer, and hence truth in being rests in acts of justice and mercy ordered and ordained through God’s word in the neighbour’s face.

We can begin to note that continental philosophy is highly original in imagination, making it amenable to theological inquiry. This means that the human imagination can be developed to explore how the essence, existence and reality of truth in being can produce a knowledge of human freedom: to see “the glory of the Lord” (2 Cor 3:18). Here, amid such creative imagination, the truth of Christian beliefs is enunciated to reveal God’s being in an evocative and personal way. The epiphany is evocative because of the Good News “to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favour” (Lk 4:18–19). As personal, the encounter with Christ’s word demands that the good truth of charity becomes the act of conscience: “Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.” (Matt 25:40).

This Special Issue of *Religions*, “Continental Philosophy and Christian Beliefs”, includes twelve searching and evocative responses to the elements of being’s truth and



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goodness as means to respond though the imagination of faith and the intelligibility of reason to create a vision of a new world, not just a better world, in the face of the horror of evil. To herald the age of the healing and patient presence of love is to “strive first for the kingdom of God and his righteousness” (Matt 6:33). Studies in philosophy and theology, oriented by a bold and searching hope, aim not just to merely surmise on the mystery of being but to create a vision of God’s kingdom of blessing and forgiveness that helps to give direction to approach the mystery of God’s truth in love, patience and humility. Such an affectivity of faith evokes the Christian belief that Jesus is the Christ who “did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death—even death on a cross” (Phil 2:6–8).

The twelve papers form together a road map, as it were, to discover various routes to approach the good truth of being as love for God and neighbour. They do this by unveiling a myriad of dangers along the way, such as nominalism; religious rhetoric, polemics and proselytism; idolatrous and arbitrary philosophical criticism; the separation of philosophy from theology; excluding the process of rational intuition and the imagination of faith from the intelligence of reason; reducing philosophical and theological perspectives of being to the essence of self-interest such as ideology, politics, impractical diversions, the compartmentalisation of data and the finitude of relative, unrealistic and illusional projections; precluding religious experience of the sacred and piety from the philosophical and theological imagination; giving primacy to the egoistic totalizing forces of ontology over the language of alterity, ethical metaphysics and transcendence; instrumentalizing tradition with conformance or indolence rather than the reform of the Holy Spirit’s hopeful imagination and inspiration; imposing fundamentalism or naïve realism on Christian beliefs and philosophical inquiry; and divorcing the objectivity of truth from the knowing human subject as a means to purge philosophical and theological discourse from Christian beliefs. Accordingly, the twelve contributions offer an invitation to explore current themes and challenges facing Christian beliefs today by employing the richness of continental philosophy. Especially revealing is the diversity of approaches to facilitate conversation, dialogue and hope for the communication of truth in being. Let us look more closely at these efforts.

Nominalism has various faces moving through the guises of modernism, post-modernism, post-post-modernism and, more recently, hyper-realism, as it were, of wokeism. This can be paralleled by the movement from knowledge (modernism) to information (post-modernism) to control (post-post-modernism) to wokeism (domination of hyper-realities). The threat that nominalism poses to Christian beliefs speaks of the strangulation of reason to remove from Christianity its ability not only to defend itself but to exist through the wellspring of compassion, truth and love. Jean Grondin, drawing from Gadamer’s writings, warns of a Nominalistic age, and in response alerts the reader to the importance of hermeneutics, theories of interpretation, regarding the mystery of being. This signifies safeguarding the meaning of truth and the sensibility of faith from the totality and fundamentalism of empirical science.

Religious beliefs, as the content of faith, offer a context to reflect upon the mystery of God. The nature of religious beliefs is not only cognitive but also liturgical, possessing a sacred architecture to imagine the Divine Word at work in the human soul orienting the emotions towards an affectivity of valuing the difference between space and time. Alejandro Navarro finds resonance in Nietzsche’s philosophy to enter a metaxic or in-between world of piety and the bruising turbulence of a self-emptying God battering hearts. Beyond the turbulence of contaminating forces of ideas, social pressures and constructed wisdom, there lies the conversion and purification of ancient memory maturing since the days of Creation, namely the original, anarchic Good News unbroken, undisturbed by history. The piety of discovering the sacred remains an experiential quest for truth in love as much as love in truth.

The nature of doing theology is often oriented by taking a step back into philosophy. The pre-eminent Levinas scholar, Roger Burggraeve, develops a method of using philosophy to bring out the Bible in a way that awakens the conscience to the maternity and compassion of the little goodness, stirring, shivering and invincible in nature. These are inviting forms of sacramental light, sparkles of grace as it were, guiding Burggraeve's phenomenological breaking open of biblical mystery and truth. Exploring the nature of blessing in terms of religious language, he invites the theological imagination to journey into the encounter of God. The transcendent sense of the beautiful unfolds in goodness and truth by referencing moments of living poetry and prayer, the affectivity and passivity of God in every blessing as a response to the evil in all its horror, profanity and excess. For blessing, of and from God, is the gift of peace "to the far and the near" (Isa 57:19) as beautiful in form and epiphany as the leaven of the "kingdom of heaven" (Matt 13:33).

In contrast to the joy of blessing, there is raw and impulsive excitement. By intensifying passions, such excitement touches the roots of moral evil. This is because self-interested subjectivity represses the image of God, revealing a moral indolence to ignore the neighbour, the poor one and stranger. The resulting fatigue produces a horror of existence, inviting the presence of evil to reduce the other's face to a form of anonymous existence. Ironically, the ego-laden subjectivity coincides with the horror of depersonalizing others as an inanimate object of consciousness. Martin Cajthaml, utilizing Dietrich von Hildebrand's perception of moral evil, presents an insightful understanding of the fabric of discernment as opposed to the illusion of subjective realities that erode the humane condition of duty and responsibility. Accordingly, discernment, uncovering the idolatries of false transcendence, seeks the newness of the kingdom of God "to grow in holiness", a spiritual theme I take up in this book in the light of integral human development and Emmanuel Levinas's ethical metaphysics.

Integral to human development is appreciating how opportunistic mechanical patterns of thinking can separate reason from faith, nature from grace, or the secular from the sacred. Today, the growing reliance on digital, algorithmic forms of thinking can turn into a terrible forgetting of how the transcendentals revive lived experience in terms of the intellect, piety and intuition. The forgetting is "terrible" because of the wounding done to the metaphysical imagination, causing, for example, faith to be amputated, so to speak, from the humanities and social sciences. Universities are suffering marked consequences of Arts and Humanities being judged and exiled into irrelevance. Tracey Rowland, the distinguished Pope Benedict XVI scholar, invites reflection on German Catholic Scholarship in the inter-war years of the 1920s and 1930s. She evokes the contribution of four prophetic Guardians witnessing to the bond between philosophy and theology: Roman Gaurdini, Josef Pieper, Theodor Haecker and Peter Wust. Their humanism, in the face of German idealism and Kantian reductionism, parallels also German-Jewish responses such as those of Martin Buber and Franz Rosenzweig. This is evidence that both Jewish and Christian scholarship can come together to face a common threat of narrowing the place of reason to be devoid of the lived experience of faith and redemption.

The question of whether spiritual lived experience can give light to metaphysical conceptions of selfhood is not just a modern and contemporary question. Jonathon Lo, situating Martin Heidegger's hermeneutics and historicity of the being of Dasein, the existent in search of self-interested possibilities, discovers sapiential resonance in St. Bonaventure's medieval spirituality. The resonance is further revealing because it acknowledges first the limitations inherent in Heidegger's ontological phenomenology. Moving to medieval time, a spiritual architecture and design of knowledge offers to the human intellect a piety animated by affective intuition of God's transforming love in Christ. Heidegger's preoccupation with Dasein's ownmost possibilities forges a totality to approach the mystery of being and time. However, the medieval spiritual mindset is a reminder of the rich tradition and wisdom of how Christian beliefs testify to God's infinity and incarnational truth, God in the finite, rather than totalizing forces falling into self-interest and evil.

Religious experience bears a phenomenological character. It challenges the self to journey towards a flourishing personhood to develop a sense and sensibility of truth. Personhood flourishes in truth where the senses evoked by the encounter of God open towards a spiritual sensibility and maturity. Przemysław Zgórecki draws out the nature of religious experience in terms of the creative energy and imagination of French phenomenology. We have here Jewish and Christian thinkers coming together. The interplay between Judaism and Christianity by way of phenomenology has produced a remarkable turn towards understanding religious experience to bring meaning to tradition so that the self may become a living book of experience. Further, religious experience invites the study of philosophy and theology to be pronounced as freedom for the act of thinking, freedom as a form of blessing for future generations to imagine the truth and word of God's being distilling a kingdom of righteousness, love and new life.

The nature of religious experience has a bearing to truth as unconcealment (*aletheia*). In the light of creating unity in the Church, the Holy Spirit unveils God's will according to the plan of salvation (1 Cor 2:9; 2 Cor 6:2). This means the People of God, seeking communion and covenantal renewal today through a synodality of listening and dialogue, are called to discover the grave mission of love in the unveiling of truth. To give time and space to think and ponder, to reflect and act with charity, truth finds a way to explode the prevalent narrative of lies and excesses of evil contaminating the world with avarice, power and the semi-pelagian forms of idolatry. Ryan McAleer, using Levinas' philosophy, discovers how one can love the Torah more than God, so to speak, to rebel and dissent in the Church. Dialogue needs stirring dissent to give freedom for thought to play out, freedom for the Spirit to make a stance against forms of totality destroying the gift of synodal listening in the Church.

One form of totality that avails itself to power and privilege is possessing a docetic attitude. Giving voice to gnostic fear and self-interest, salvation becomes an entirely secret, personal affair to possess knowledge as a response to evil and suffering. Consequently, there is little care for the well-being of others and the Church resulting in the illusion of a perfect Church and spiritual reality to inhabit, a vessel impenetrable to sin and the concerns of a lesser humanity. Docetism invites fear and a Pelagian desire to form the self into an object of idolatry. Peter Richards, developing a theology of governance in the Anglican Church with the aid of Giorgio Agamben's thought, has highlighted the danger of a lack of consultation in episcopal leadership oriented by secular managerial styles. Noting the transforming character of theology and philosophy, Richards utters the word "reform" in response to the tyranny of authoritarianism in ecclesial governance to return to the egalitarian roots of the early Christian communities.

The world today can seem "ruthless . . . like a winter rainstorm" (Isa 25:4). A secular, post-modern, post-Christian world collapsing into the intense gravity of nominalism and scientific theory produces an apocalyptic future of no escape. Here, lies are constructed in new metanarratives reflecting a "ruthless" humanity bent on war and death. Nevertheless, truth, "the day of the Lord", will emerge "like a thief in the night" (1 Thess 5:2) to announce a "day of salvation" (2 Cor 6:2). Peter Christofides, responding to secular philosophy and the experience of Australian culture, testifies to the Good News by upholding the sacredness of the divine presence. Like Moses, humanity is called to an affectivity of reverence to understand that our world is "holy ground" (Ex 3:5). Like Isaiah, humanity too is called to seek a future world, an ancient Edenic "feast of rich food, a feast of well-matured wines" (Isa 25:6).

The relation between subject and object demands much care. This is because of the "holy ground" and Edenic hope uniting the subject and object, the intuition of the immemorial time of the divine Word creating spaces for thought, understanding and knowledge to witness to truth and goodness so that being in love may overflow into a world tempted by self-care, indecision, chaos, polarization and phrenetic impulses. The Lonergan scholar, Matthew Ogilvie, has invited discussion on the relation between subject and object in the light of Christian Fundamentalism's rejection of the searching

and knowing subject and position of favouring the objectivity and thematization of facts. Levinas, in contrast, speaks of a noesis (act of consciousness) without a noema (giving visibility to being), producing a non-phenomenology of the other's face. Only where being has been uttered in righteousness, justice and the little goodness of mercy, the diachrony of responsibility comes to mind as love without eros, a love free from the totality of evil forming into the horror of anonymous and haunting objectivity.

These contributions offer unique and creative ways and possibilities to give intelligibility to Christian beliefs through the lens of continental thought. As a sum, the writings announce hope to pronounce truth in being, the word of God, with the newness of the spontaneity of faith and the vigilance of love in truth. In every age, there remains the challenge to listen to the Spirit and respond to the mystery proclaimed by St. Paul and Isaiah: "What no eye has seen, nor ear heard, nor the human heart conceived, what God has prepared for those who love him" (1 Cor 2:9; cf. Isa 64:4).

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