

SCTIW Review

Journal of the Society for Contemporary Thought and the Islamicate World

ISSN: 2374-9288

March 12, 2015

Will the Future Ever Come? – Practices of Continental Philosophy of Religion: A Review Essay of The Future of Continental Philosophy of Religion

Clayton Crockett, B. Keith Putt, and Jeffery W. Robbins, eds., *The Future of Continental Philosophy of Religion*, Indiana University Press, 2014, \$40.00 US (pbk), 302 pp., ISBN: 9780253013880.

Introduction: Questioning the Future

Before the future one may strike a figure not unlike Job standing before the divine. The future, after all, prefigures us. Paradoxical though it may sound, at least in our spontaneous philosophies, we live for the future. So I type up this review with the idea that in the future it will be published, it will be achieved.¹ But also before the future we are doomed. The future is that universal acid that seeps into the present, eating away at the now with its demands that the now hurry up and become the future. The future will kill us all. But like Job we cry violence, step before it, and we question it. Will the future be just? Why must it persecute the now? What demands does the future make upon us? And perhaps the philosopher's question—it is certainly not Job's—is simply: will there be philosophy then and will it be mine?

This is the unspoken question lingering beneath *The Future of Continental Philosophy of Religion* and in the course of this essay I hope to touch on some kind of a response to these questions. Reviewing an edited volume always presents certain problems, especially in a

¹ This notion of “achievement” and the future that denies the present is the focus of Daniel Colucciello Barber, “The Immanent Refusal of Conversion,” *The Journal of Cultural and Religious Theory* 13.1 (Winter 2014): 142-150. Available online: <<http://www.jcrt.org/archives/13.1/barber.pdf>>. Much of what I say below comes out of a dialogue with Barber's work, specifically the sense that philosophy and Christianity are alloyed in what appears to be an obdurate way, unwilling to attempt to fully separate them out. On this see Daniel Colucciello Barber, “Secularism, Immanence, and the Philosophy of Religion” in *After the Postsecular and the Postmodern: New Essays in Continental Philosophy of Religion* (Newcastle-upon-Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Press, 2010), 152-171 and Daniel Colucciello Barber, “Stop, Think, Stop” in *The Counter-Narratives of Radical Theology and Popular Music: Songs of Fear and Trembling*, ed. Mike Grimshaw (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), 197-210.

space like *SCITW Review* that encourages a deeper engagement with the texts than is sometimes afforded in more traditional academic journals. What follows, then, is a review essay that takes as its touchstone the framework of Continental philosophy of religion manifested by the whole of a book devoted to its future. As such, in the critical and constructive part of this review, I engage more intensely with only some of the essays in the book while others are left aside for various reasons. I will contest this framework throughout my remarks and sketch out possible alternative forms of Continental philosophy of religion as I go on. Ultimately, though, my claim and provocation is that there is no future for Continental philosophy of religion as long it longs for such a future. That nothing will come that hasn't already happened before if Continental philosophy of religion remains philosophical and if it remains religious in the Christian modality. These are just two ways of saying the same thing. If Continental philosophy remains philosophical it remains Christian and if it remains Christian it remains philosophical. But thankfully philosophy may already have its own heretics, it may produce its own "atheists," and it is towards something like that refusal of the future we hope to come at the end of this essay. Perhaps, echoing Deleuze's remarks about Christianity, philosophy too needs its own sorts of atheists or those who refuse to believe in philosophy but build with it none the less.²

Regarding the structure of the review, it takes a double writing. First, for the sake of helping to situate the reader and to do due diligence to the charge one takes as a reviewer, I will first provide a very truncated summary of the contents of the book. Here I offer what amounts to a typical review, with summaries of the book and remarks here and there regarding strengths and weaknesses of some of the individual chapters. I then begin again, this time providing a deeper engagement with certain themes which emerge over the course of the volume in the hopes of surfacing the overall structure of the future of Continental philosophy of religion represented by the volume. Finally, I end with a direct confrontation with that structure and offer a different kind of engagement with philosophy and religion that may be without a future. Though the gambit is that something like good news is found in being without a future.

Disparate Conceptual Terrains, but a Common History

The volume grows out of the fourth and final "Postmodernism, Culture, and Religion" conference hosted by the Department of Religion at Syracuse University and the continuation of John D. Caputo's "Religion and Postmodernism" conferences that had been held at Villanova University years prior. The theme of this conference was the same as the volume's title, *The Future of Continental Philosophy of Religion*, and it marked the looking forward to the future of a discipline that Caputo was and is instrumental to the constitution of. The papers at that conference were as diffuse as the theme of an unknown future might suggest.³ Following this diffuse nature, the volume is somewhat arbitrarily separated into three sections that correspond to the themes of the three keynote speakers: the messianic (Caputo), liberation (Philip Goodchild), and plasticity (Catherine Malabou). Aside from the

² "There is always an atheism to be extracted from religion." Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *What Is Philosophy?*, trans. Graham Burchill and Hugh Tomlinson (London: Verso, 1994), 92.

³ I have to appeal to personal knowledge here, as I presented at the conference with numerous other grad students, junior scholars, and a smattering of senior faculty.

contributions by those three, many of the other essays do not quite fit under the rubric presented, though if you squint you can sort of see why they are placed there.

The first set of essays in many ways pays homage to the work of Caputo, whose own provocatively titled contribution, “Is Continental Philosophy of Religion Dead?” opens the volume setting out his continuing project of a weak theology (this is discussed at greater length below). But alongside Caputo other important figures in the history of Continental philosophy of religion may be found as well. As in B. Keith Putt’s essay, “Friends and Strangers/Poets and Rabbis: Negotiating a ‘Capuphalian’ Philosophy of Religion,” which traces the debates between Caputo and Merald Westphal and argues for a kind of synthesis that marks a future for Continental philosophy of religion. This sort of “looking back at a future” continues with Edward F. Mooney’s essay, “On Faith, the Maternal, and Postmodernism,” which takes Kierkegaard’s *Fear and Trembling* as the Ur-text for Continental philosophy of religion, arguing against various “misreadings” found in Derrida and Caputo while claiming that, instead of the excessive Abraham, the true figure of faith for Johannes de Silentio (Kierkegaard’s pseudonym in *Fear and Trembling*) is the everyday maternal faith of Sarah. With “The Persistence of the Trace: Interrogating the Gods of Speculative Realism,” Steven Shakespeare then inaugurates a sort of merging of cutting edge contemporary work with this look back, as he provides a reading of Derrida to counter his gravediggers that is inspired by the turn away from textuality back to “the Great Outdoors” initiated by Quentin Meillassoux’s *After Finitude*.⁴ In “Speculating God: Speculative Realism and Meillassoux’s Divine Inexistence” Leon Niemoczynski continues this productive counterposing of “speculative realism” with Caputo and Richard Kearny. Katherine Moody also provides a kind of *festschrift* for Caputo in her essay, “Between Deconstruction and Speculation: John D. Caputo and A/Theological Materialism,” which attempts to argue that Caputo and Slavoj Žižek share much in common, despite Žižek’s critique of Caputo, and that their mediation through the figure of St. Paul offers a vision for how Western religion may be reconstructed along an ambiguously a/theistic structure.

The second set of essays, collected under the general title “Liberation,” begins with Philip Goodchild’s contribution, “The Future of Liberation.” In my estimation, this is the standout essay of the volume and for that it is nearly impossible to describe here. In my notes for the review I had suggested quoting nearly so many sections it would have been easier to simply republish the essay here! Goodchild locates the future of Continental philosophy of religion within a real field of apocalyptic distinctions. Facing the showdown between ecology and economy philosophy must respond to a growing violence, as nature, red in tooth and claw, will reassert itself. Philosophy must already face the financialization of culture, where all values are subject to money to determine their ultimate worth, undercutting politics and leading Goodchild to declare “the end of politics” (128). Finally, there is an eclipse of truth in favor of chatter and propaganda that philosophy must engage, but without hoping to return to a time of a secure truth. Instead what now must be enacted is evaluation itself, a creation of truth through the performance of it. Goodchild’s essay is philosophy done within those parameters and I will discuss some of the implications of that in the next section.

“Next to Caputo,” the editors state, “Philip Goodchild has done more to define the field of Continental philosophy of religion than any other contemporary figure” (8). They are

⁴ Quentin Meillassoux, *After Finitude: An Essay on the Necessity of Contingency*, trans. Ray Brassier (London: Continuum, 2008).

absolutely right in this regard and his own works are exemplary for their clarity and independence. Goodchild has aimed to construct a truly transformed philosophy of religion using resources from the Continental tradition, but without simply building on what French or German figures have said about religion. Despite his importance in the creation of the field and his own work standing amongst others as a shining example of how creative the field may be, he does not get the same respectful treatment in the book. The one essay to discuss Goodchild's contribution is a critique by Devin Singh in his "Monetized Philosophy and Theological Money: Uneasy Linkages and the Future of a Discourse." After presenting a fascinating history of the interrelation between money, philosophy/theology, and sovereignty, he criticizes Goodchild for not having done the same and eliding the relationship between money and sovereignty. This critique strikes me as thinking it has more teeth than it really does and confuses a largely genealogical task (Agamben and Singh) with a constructive philosophical one (Goodchild). Goodchild's work acknowledges that sovereignty and money are related, indeed truth and the power to rule that arises from it is subject to economic forms of thought in contemporary society. Goodchild's point in *Capitalism and Religion*⁵ and *Theology of Money*⁶ is that this money form has unmoored itself from any human political sovereignty. We might reference an inverted vision of Nietzsche's bridge to the overman, where instead of overcoming the human as self-creation it is the overcoming of the human to a Cthulhu death cult of capital with investors and creditors hoping that capital eats them last after it rips through the poor and middle class. Gavin Hyman's contribution, "'Between Justice and My Mother': Reflections on and between Levinas and Žižek," seeks to recover a sense of human finitude after the infinite demands imposed upon the human being after the death of God. He explores this through positing the seeming *différend* between Levinas and Žižek, a *différend* which he argues collapses on this point. Joseph Ballan's "*Verbis Indisciplinatis*" presents a model for an interdisciplinary philosophy of religion based on the work of Jacques Rancière's radical pedagogy and method concerning the practice of knowledge (philosophy) and the practice of religious communities that "would situate itself in the unstable place between these two forms of sense" (176). Christina Gschwandtner's "Overwhelming Abundance and Everyday Liturgical Practices: For a Less Excessive Phenomenology of Religious Experience" argues that phenomenology is less suited to examining the limit cases of ascetics and saints and more useful for exploring the everyday ways in which people are Christian. It is important to mark here, though it runs through nearly the whole volume, that the assumption behind "religious experience" is precisely that it is "Christian experience." Thus Gschwandtner's is both a condemnation of those philosophies that make (the Christian) religion seem the purview of extraordinary human beings and a defense of the extraordinary power of (Christian) liturgy. This is counterbalanced by Noëlle Vahanian's "Countercurrents: Theology and the Future of Continental Philosophy of Religion," which argues for a kind of excessive relation between theology and philosophy where the two can never be separated but where "the future of Continental philosophy of religion is most certainly not theology as it is proclaimed in most of today's seminaries" (197). Vahanian's work is always remarkable for the way it sets out the terms and limits of the discussion and this essay is unsurprisingly excellent in that regard.

⁵ Philip Goodchild, *Capitalism and Religion: The Price of Piety* (New York, Routledge, 2002).

⁶ Philip Goodchild, *Theology of Money* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2009).

She is unflinching in her advocacy for a radicalized hybrid form of philosophy/theology that “thinks the limit” (198) rather than a projected everyday.

It is undeniably strange to find Catherine Malabou included in a volume about the future of Continental philosophy of religion and the editors recognize that and say so explicitly. Her work has been taken up in Continental philosophy because of her philosophical deployment of the idea of plasticity largely as it emerges from brain science. This notion of plasticity may refer both to an explosive energy as well as to the ability of matter to create in a self-formative way and Malabou has used it to read back through the history of philosophy against the very idea of a transcendent notion of time in favor of an immanent unfolding of time. In her essay, “The Future of Derrida,” she explicitly argues against the messianic form of time found in Levinas and certain readings of Derrida. This unleashes the power of deconstruction since in this immanence there is simply no transcendent “elsewhere” that ethics may come from, thus religion and religious ideas like justice are not undeconstructable but may be exploded or transformed immanently as outlined by her materialist philosophy. Randall Johnson casts this plasticity as a way to understand the emergence of a “creaturely praxis of care” (224) in his “On Reading—Catherine Malabou.” This focus on materialism runs throughout the volume, beginning with Caputo claiming that it is a common philosophical position between his own transformed Derridean philosophy, to Malabou’s very different materialist reading of Derrida, and onward to Žižek: “Derrida, Žižek, Malabou, and I [Caputo] are all ‘materialists’ in the sense that we do not think there are two worlds, one in space and time, the other transcending space and time” (24). Jeffrey W. Robbins picks up this thread in his “Necessity as Virtue: On Religious Materialism from Feuerbach to Žižek,” tracing how the former materialist critiques of religion have given way to a non-reductive materialism that is able to engage with religion beyond its reduction to belief as practices concerned with “revolutionizing the world” (238). John Thibdeau’s “Plasticity in the Contemporary Islamic Subject” marks the first engagement with a religious tradition other than Christianity and it does so through the mode of this broadly materialist framework driven by the concept of plasticity. The upshot is a mutual supporting of the theses of Malabou and various metaphysical positions concerning the subject made by important anthropologists of Islam (Saba Mahmood, Charles Hirschkind, and Talal Asad). One is struck, however, by the fact that the relationship is one way. The Muslims studied are simply studied, they do not reciprocally impact any of our thoughts concerning plasticity. One could just as easily slip in the material construction of selfhood found amongst England’s miners or American football fans or any other group of people that could be subject to neuroscientific analysis. Lenart Škof’s “From Cosmology to the First Ethical Gesture: Schelling with Irigaray” also engages with a non-Western tradition, namely Indian philosophy (which is arguably already enacting the refusal of a strict philosophy/theology split). The essay performs an interesting interweaving of the philosophy of nature with ethics, rejecting the assumption one often finds that they are radically separated. Irving Goh’s contribution, “Prolegomenon to Thinking the Reject for the Future of Continental Philosophy of Religion,” offers the figure of the reject as a replacement for the former philosophical obsession with the subject. While this opens to the clear ethical standing with what is lowly and despised amongst human societies, Goh connects the reject ultimately to an animality that is more rejected than even the human reject. Finally, Clayton Crockett’s “Entropy” attempts to do with the concept of entropy what Malabou has done with plasticity, reading this scientific concept philosophically and using it as a tool for reading the history of philosophy.

Finally, the positive evaluation of the volume before moving to what I hope will be a productive critical inquiry. As a text that both looks back upon the history of Continental philosophy of religion and engages with new forms of Continental philosophy to bring that history into the future, *The Future of Continental Philosophy of Religion* succeeds. While there is something strikingly arbitrary about the overarching sections running throughout the book, this says more about the various ways that history is proliferating across multiple conceptual terrains from the real, the question of liberation, the question of money, the question of energy, the question of matter, as well as the traditional terrains of philosophy of religion like the nature of God's existence or inexistence, the nature of faith and reason, and so on. Students of Continental philosophy of religion will find in this volume contributions that continue the discourse in ways that are productive for more Continental philosophy of religion.

Looking Back at a Future of Continental Philosophy of Religion

As philosophy always does, let's begin again (and I will simply flag the obligatory "back to the future" joke) and surface something of the structure of a Continental philosophy of religion concerned with its own future. I said at the end of the previous section that *The Future of Continental Philosophy of Religion* continues the discourse. Here I want to suggest that it is this continuation, this looking to the future, that emerges as the problem of Continental philosophy of religion but that it emerges precisely as a looking backwards. The volume spends a lot of time looking to the past, recognizing a future in some sense determined by the major figures that created the field: Caputo and Westphal as the American sponsors of the French Jacques Derrida and Paul Ricœur and developers of their own distinctive philosophies, but also the usually neglected Philip Goodchild whose work on Gilles Deleuze was important in the 1990s, but whose own development of philosophy of religion used Deleuzian tools without making any claims about a kind of religious kernel within Deleuze's work. What is the point of this backward look in a book ostensibly on the *future* of Continental philosophy? Well, clearly future philosophers of religion—and I am not convinced there are anything but future philosophers of religion just as I am not yet convinced there are any at all—bear no duty to be the gravediggers of their forefathers (and, sadly, in this case it is all male forefathers presented, though we could discuss a certain Continental philosophy of religion that develops in a specifically feminist direction as in the work of the late Edith Wyschogrod, Catherine Keller, or others). If the future of Continental philosophy of religion is to take up what is powerful within Continental philosophy it must continue to attend to the history of philosophy, so attending to its own past should be part of that process. As Edward F. Mooney writes, "We know our futures from our adopted pasts" (59). At the same time this backwards glance is something like Lot's wife, stopping the reader dead in her tracks as Continental philosophy of religion becomes a matter of certain forms of God-talk, which of course means certain forms of theology. B. Keith Putt's paean to the disputes and shared commitments of John Caputo and Merold Westphal is perhaps the most unambiguous in this regard. Despite the unfortunate deployment of "rabbinic" to describe their work (pulling from Derrida's distinction between the rabbi and the poet, one returning to the original text and the other seeking to create new texts), both Caputo and Westphal are concerned with a certain kind of theology that is ultimately determined by Christian practices and theories. For Caputo he engages with that material in

a heterodox manner, while Westphal is more explicitly and straightforwardly Christian (as is evidenced by the responses from Westphal and Caputo at the end of Putt's chapter).

Caputo's chapter, which precedes Putt's, is a more extended version of the thoughts we find in his response to Putt, which takes the general shape of his current project and applies it specifically to some of Putt's concerns. But there he affirms the "two types" of Continental philosophy he explores in more depth in his own contribution, which is in turn an extract from his recent *The Insistence of God: A Theology of Perhaps*.⁷ His thinking here does not make any quantum leaps from his earlier works on religion, but he does put that work in dialogue with some avant-garde work in Continental philosophy and we find him praising (quantum) physics as "the new metaphysics" (22). The avant-garde he engages with takes the name "speculative realism" throughout the volume (and something flagged up in the editors' introduction as distinctive about the volume), but he focuses that engagement on the work of Ray Brassier and his explicitly and aggressively nihilistic philosophy in *Nihil Unbound: Enlightenment and Extinction*.⁸ Caputo's willingness and, indeed, desire to engage with this work speaks to something often not seen in well-established intellectuals. Caputo certainly has no careerist reasons for engaging with this material and I suspect that he opens himself up to snide criticisms from others in his generation of Continental philosophers who will wonder why he would waste his time engaging with Brassier or, as he does elsewhere, other "angry young philosophers" seeking to overturn established readings and methods in the field. But Caputo manifests a real philosophical spirit in responding to these younger critics who would, it seems, love to be the ones who not only bury Derrida and Heidegger, but deface or destroy their gravestones a few weeks after the interment. And Caputo's response to Brassier's nihilism, while presented in largely truncated form here, strikes me as absolutely correct. Brassier remains too Christian, specifically "too Augustinian" (28), in his submitting all meaning to the ends of a thing. For Brassier claims that philosophy needs to think under the sign of extinction; since all things will pass in cosmic time, there is no reason to valorize human life as we are "being-nothing." Caputo reads this as a kind of grace, a freedom from a certain deterministic sense of meaning and recasts it along with Meister Eckhart as a "being-for-nothing" as a kind of "nihilism of grace" that is the good news of a "religion without religion."

This strikes me as a good ethical response to the rather gloomy metaphysics that (contemporary) cosmology presents and a fine rejoinder to Brassier's early quasi-religious project. But, in this section of the review focused as it is on the framing of Continental philosophy of religion, it is Caputo's sketching of two different types of Continental philosophy of religion that interests me most. He claims that there are two ways of doing philosophy of religion in a specifically Continental mode, which would reject the ahistorical and noncritical mode we find in analytic philosophy. These two ways are marked as Kantian or Hegelian. The Kantian approach to limiting reason in order to make room for faith is rejected by Caputo as ultimately creating a blind and toothless form of thought in postmodernism: "The Kantian path in postmodernism is an abridgment that reduces it to apologetics" (21). On the other hand his own advocacy of a religion without religion emerges from the radical path of Hegel, which begins with the death of God as a critical form of religion that is able to tarry with religious faith in a way that ultimately brings out the

⁷ John D. Caputo, *The Insistence of God: A Theology of Perhaps* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2013).

⁸ Ray Brassier, *Nihil Unbound: Enlightenment and Extinction* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2007).

previously mentioned “grace of nihilism” or “nihilism of grace.” There is something undeniably seductive about the way Caputo deploys nihilism in this way and something that is ultimately very Christian, as it was in Hegel. For the death of God is both the breaking of the borders that protect faith from knowledge and that distinguish knowledge from faith, as well as a kind of good news; i.e., we are freed from being-for-something, indeed we are freed from the social determinations of being that religion plays its part in. But is this really the two options open to Continental philosophy of religion: between a particular pious Protestant German and another less pious but no less Protestant German? Might there be alternative genealogies that promise a different future beyond the (European) secular liberal nation-state that both Kant and Hegel situated religious life and philosophical speculation within? I take it as given that this is problematic as soon as it is remembered that other communities exist within those states and that these non-Christian and non-post-Christian communities are marked in this way as non-European, as “not from around here” and thereby placed under suspicion. Is a post-colonial or critical Continental philosophy of religion that might think under the condition of the immigrant or the stranger impossible? And might it be impossible not in some Derridean sense, but truly and utterly impossible as in it will never happen, not even as a perhaps, because for it to be possible it would require the destruction of the philosophy-religion dyad itself?

I will return to this possibility later, but first it is important to turn to another aspect of the books that Caputo’s engagement with speculative realism opens up. At times the contributors ascribe far too much consistency to this identifier, ranging from the editors’ introduction to Caputo’s contribution and most clearly with Leon Niemoczynski’s essay where he describes it as a “‘spirit’ of speculative philosophy” (104) suggesting that it can name a certain “turning” in Continental philosophy. Speculative realism does not mark in any meaningful way any particular form of thinking. Steven Shakespeare’s definition is far better in his discussion of “what is real and what is absolute” when he writes, “Of course, these debates have been intensified by ‘speculative realism,’ a phrase that functions as an umbrella term covering a number of thinkers who reject the dominant form taken by Continental philosophy since Kant” (81). For many of these authors, again Shakespeare’s insightful and often cuttingly funny contribution excluded, speculative realism represents a way forward for Continental philosophy of religion outside the pitfalls of what we might term mainstream Continental philosophy, with its assumed suspicion regarding the sciences and preference for poetry. Speculative realism is supposed to mark a renewed engagement with the sciences in a particularly realist mode and thus it should offer something new for philosophy of religion or at least a challenge which philosophers of religion may creatively respond to (as Caputo did in his contribution). But what is striking about the direct engagements with speculative realism is how pedestrian—how *familiar*—it all is when it comes to questions of religion. Niemoczynski’s essay is most illustrative in this respect, as he traces an isomorphism between Caputo’s “weak theology,” Richard Kearny’s “anatheism,” and Meillassoux’s “divinology,” which claims that God (or any god at all!) does not currently exist, but may come to exist or come to be in the future and so there may be an attendant science that speculates on that possible emergence from the hyper-chaos [*surchaos*] of the universe of absolute contingency. There is little difference in terms of outcomes between the philosophies of Caputo, Kearney, or Meillassoux, as described accurately and succinctly by Niemoczynski: “Despite Meillassoux’s admonition of the religious turn in Continental philosophy and its corresponding fideism (faith in an unknown God who is capable of being described only through some form of phenomenological description), the truth of the matter is that by way of a *metaphysics of contingency* Meillassoux has opened the way also for the

possible appearance of a being powerful enough to inaugurate a new World where justice reigns, and where the injustices of the past have been reconciled” (103).

I want here to stop for a moment and mark the exclusionary notion of “Continental” in this future, specifically through the exclusion of the (often dark or even coded “black”) Muslim and the Islamic tradition in a book which claims to be about the future and yet performs a certain Western hope, a hope with bipartisan support: the erasure of the Muslim from the West, let’s drive the Moors out yet again. As touched on above we find only one essay that engages in any way with Islam, the contribution by John Thibdeau, and while it is an interesting folding together of anthropology with contemporary Continental philosophy there is nothing distinctive or particularly productive about the choice of Islam in that chapter. So even when the tradition is included, it is in an anemic form. Highlighting this exclusion is not a matter of scoring cheap points by directing the reader’s attention to the clear lack of diversity in Continental philosophy generally and Continental philosophy of religion specifically. That lack of diversity is undeniable on a purely empirical basis.⁹ But neither is it a matter of appealing for a more “multicultural” approach to Continental philosophy of religion. Such appeals are all too often veiled forms of the same Western imperialism and one may find various European leaders alternating between condemning multiculturalism and extolling multicultural virtues based on whatever the political exigencies are at the time.¹⁰ Instead it has to do more with a kind of victimology and a rejection of theodicy (justification of suffering), even those theodicies that persist after the death of God like Brassier’s sense that suffering is resolved in the great extinction to come (whispering his own *Viens! Viens!* to the cosmic catastrophe) as some kind of “naturdicy.” It has to do with something Shakespeare gets at when he writes, “I find myself in some sympathy with Meillassoux’s starting point, which is the acknowledgement of tragic deaths, of suffering and dying that seem unjust and unredeemed. At least wounded bodies are getting on the stage now” (84). But ultimately for Shakespeare and for myself there is something ethically and theoretically unsatisfying about the response that comes from the standard philosophy of religion, even a future version of that philosophy which someone like Meillassoux represents. After all, if the summary by Niemoczynski quoted already is correct, and I think there is strong textual reasons to hold that it is, then is there not something sickening about the notion of a God who comes to be in the midst of this horror and either reverses time erasing all the being-for-nothing experiences of *our* past, all of *our* grace, or stands before us more impotently than the God of the Old Testament standing before Job in the whirlwind, declaring innocence because this God too cannot give an answer to the question, “Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth? Tell me, if you have understanding. Who determined the measurements—surely you know!” (Job 38:4-5 NRSV). Or does this God

⁹ I found it somewhat bewildering and not a little depressing that the difference between Caputo’s and Malabou’s reading of Derrida is held up as a defining moment of diversity within Continental philosophy of religion by the editors in their introduction: “We must stress this point of difference in order to accentuate the diversity and contestation that exists within Continental philosophy of religion” (13).

¹⁰ There are many sources we could point to, many of which the readers of this journal will likely be familiar, but less familiar and important arguments with regard to this phenomenon as it plays out with regard to race and secularism are: Jared Sexton, *Amalgamation Schemes: Antiblackness and the Critique of Multiracialism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008); Mayanthi L. Fernando, *The Republic Unsettled: Muslim French and the Contradictions of Secularism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2014); and Tomoko Masuzawa, *The Invention of World Religions: Or, How European Universalism Was Preserved in the Language of Pluralism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005).

too play a sick joke on us, after all the arguments over Its inexistence or existence, it responds to the loss of children and others with new children, new forms of the general equivalent we are supposed to be satisfied with? What is this discourse in the light of the mass incarceration and minimal genocide of black Americans, a people who are denied even this kinship and which no radical contingency promises to restore? Or in the light of the battle between actual death cults of state-sanctioned and directed drone murder versus the attempt to build the impossible state of an Islamic State bereft of an Islamic identity not mediated by Western ideas and politics, losing any sense of the tradition's beauty with every beheading and every failed politico-aesthetic attempt to turn the historical Muhammad and his community's form of life into a modern (European) nation-state?¹¹

Perhaps we need something like a grand politics to answer such a question. A form of politics that is not Schmittian in the usual sense of marking the distinction between friend and enemy, but a grand politics that instead emerges out of a singular leveling, a unilateral turning upside down of every form of philosophy or perhaps just a simply turning away. Philip Goodchild writes in his strikingly powerful piece,

Grand politics is conceived here as a war of spirits: one of the stranger transpositions of valley and mountain enacted here is to wrest politics from its foundations in material interests so as to suspend it from the sky of a cosmic battle of spirits, of perspectives and evaluation; the intrinsic replaces the extrinsic. Materialism and idealism alike are inverted: instead of seeing things in terms of their participation in reality or the good, one sees things in terms of their evaluations of what is real or good. Such an apocalyptic statement appeals to no ground or evidence: one cannot really ask whether it is true or relevant, *for it claims that all previous foundations were lies*. It is only meaningful if it discloses something —a spirit, a way of seeing, a perspective of evaluation. (135-136, emphasis mine)

Out of this grand politics Goodchild forges a kind of generic post-secular philosophy of political religion and one that is bold in its apocalyptic declarations, far bolder than speculative realists are about the arche-fossil or the coming heat death, as he glosses Kierkegaard's writing on the need for a kind of divine governance of the martyr to overthrow tyrants: "Here is a strange and unrealistic prophecy of the overcoming of force, not by reason or by consensus, but by sacrifice; politics becomes theological, based on respect for martyrs, while piety becomes political, a means of ruling the attention of the masses" (136). Is there a certain elision of this victim or martyr, of those who our political ontology pushes to the extreme as that which differentiates the normal citizen from the abnormal threat-being like the Muslim in contemporary European and American political discourse, is there an elision of this in the ways in which Continental philosophy of religion has thought itself to be focused on the excessive? Always, focusing on the singular, as

¹¹ I say "actual death cults" because in the polemics traded back and forth between various camps associated with the umbrella term "speculative realism," Graham Harman once accused those associated with Ray Brassier's nihilistic philosophy and those eliminativist philosophers he advocated for of being a "neurology death cult" that sacrificed a nuanced and non-reductive account of human personhood to the eliminativist explanation that arises out of the neurophilosophy of Thomas Metzinger and Paul and Patricia Churchland. See his blog post dated December 3, 2009, "The Current State of Things": <<https://doctorzamalek2.wordpress.com/2009/12/03/the-current-state-of-things/>>.

Gschwandtner writes, “the contemporary conversation seems to think religious experience almost exclusively in the singular. The Mystic. The Ascetic. The Saint. The Fool for Christ. The Lover. Apparently, religious experience is only for outstanding individuals who are alone in their dark night of terror or bathed in the dazzling sunshine of bliss” (183). Certainly there is much here that strikes me as wrong or at the very least misguided in her contribution. For example, if the future of Continental philosophy of religion is even more quietest than I think, it has very little to offer humanity and certainly Gschwandtner is at the very least lacking sophistication to cast the “suicide bomber” as a religious extremist of “saturated phenomenon” (though I enjoy the way this allows me to imagine the Islamophobic, or at least Islamo-ignorant, Marion squirm at the thought).¹² To say nothing of the way in which somehow the lives of Dorothy Day or Martin Luther King, Jr. are presented by Gschwandtner as lacking this same extremity in their actions, which strikes me as a fantastic whitewashing of their actions and views. But, to a certain extent I agree with Gschwandtner, there is something misdirected in the attention that Continental philosophy of religion gives to these singular, extreme cases. But, contrary to Gschwandtner’s intentions, this perhaps reveals something about the way in which Continental philosophy avoids the figure of the Muslim. The Muslim is a figure who is far from singular in terms of the lived reality of Muslims, but is singular within the terms of the West’s political ontology and singular in the sense that the Muslim is cast out, and in being thus cast bestows identity on those within.¹³ Contrary to Gschwandtner’s question about how we might “tone down’ the excess in the phenomenology of religious experience” (185), the proper response strikes me as is to shift attention. Tone down for what? For whose sensibilities? For Christian liturgy as “the work of the people”, but precisely what people other than Christians? And how can this turn to liturgy really claim to provide “an alternative to the secular liturgy of consumerism and pollution, of economic systems that desacralize and destroy” (190) in light of the historical research that ties in early Christian liturgy to the development of that very same secular liturgy? Vahanian’s contribution to the volume is nearly an explicit refutation of Gschwandtner’s and she argues that we must “think the limit” rather than this projected

¹² Marion has very recently written a startling reactionary piece in the wake of the Charlie Hebdo murders. There he opens with the claim, “France is at war; we can no longer doubt that this is the case.” See Jean-Luc Marion, “After the ‘Charlie Hebdo’ Massacre: Islam Must Open Itself to Critique,” January 29, 2015, published on the *Sightings* blog of The Martyr Martin Center for the Advanced Study of Religion: <<https://divinity.uchicago.edu/sightings/after-charlie-hebdo-massacre-islam-must-open-itself-critique-jean-luc-marion>>. It is clear that there is nothing particular advanced about Marion’s understanding of the politics of the radicalized underclass in France, nor of the very different form of Islam practiced by *takfiri* jihadists. See Daniel J. Schultz’s criticisms in the *Religion Dispatches* article, “French Theologian Urges Islam to Self-Critique, Fails to Notice Log in Own Eye,” February 9, 2015: <<http://religiondispatches.org/french-theologian-urges-islam-to-self-critique-fails-to-notice-log-in-own-eye/>>.

¹³ Medhi Belhaj Kacem wrote about this in the light of the riots in the Parisian suburbs in 2005. His argument is that in Europe the Muslim has become the exception that grounds the law, both political law and the economic law of class difference. In terms of how the Muslim is cast within this structure (to say nothing of their lived reality), he contends that they take the contemporary form of pariah: “The pariah is at once captured and delivered, locked within its exclusion and banished by inclusion” (Medhi Belhaj Kacem, *La psychose française. Les banlieues: le ban de la République* [Paris: Gallimard, 2006], 18). The reality of the pariah is manifested clearly in the collusion of the institutional Left with the establishment Right of Europe regarding these “places of the ban” (Belhaj Kacem makes a clever play on the name of the suburban ghettos of France, *les banlieues*, as *les banlieux*) as *problems* to be neutralized (and both speak in this language if with differing degrees of violence) while also referring to them as what negatively grounds their existence as government.

everyday. While she does not explicitly say it, it could be that “the limit” is precisely the everyday for whole swaths of humanity, to say nothing of other creatures, but more importantly there is something in radical theology (not philosophy) that speaks to an excess of the limit: “Thinking is theological, because it holds the promise of the other” (204).

Thinking along with Vahanian I am struck by the realization that the form of this other is important. I suspect that Vahanian takes the other here to be an other beyond other people, that is the other beyond the limits of life and death. Yet, what if we actualized this other? Not the fetishized other that some philosophers hold before them as if they were performing their suffering for the enjoyment of the philosopher, but a kind of actualized other that marked our own otherness from ourselves. The deracinated nature of the victim is a promise of something beyond life and death which is far more challenging for philosophy of religion to think, to perform in the now, than the theopoetics of a dead God or a God to come. In the last section of this review we will turn to making explicit what has been implicit in this tracing and surfacing.

No Future: On a Mutated Continental Philosophy of Religion

For the last time, let’s go back to the beginning. This time not the beginning of a review, but the beginning of the volume itself where the editors situate the theme of the volume as a theme within Continental philosophy of religion, but also a theme about the possibility of change and so, presumably, of redemption or achievement: “by posing the question of Continental philosophy of religion, we are posing not only the possibility of a different future than the specific conception of the future that has heretofore been determinative, but also the possibility of overlapping futures, and thus, an alternative conception of time—not only a future structured by *différance*, but a plurality of temporalities that make genuine change and difference possible” (1). But this formulation reveals something about the underlying logic of any of these temporalities—there is a decision in favor of “change” and “possibility.” It might seem strange to bring attention to this decision as conceptions of “change” and “possibility” are in some sense other names for what Continental philosophy and its neighboring fields assumes as normatively good. And I certainly do not mean to suggest a kind of moralism that requires one choose either this “genuine change” or stasis. But we must recognize that there is an underlying structure to this plurality and that plurality itself is not that structure, but genuine change. This decision may lead to other decisions, a kind of continuation of Hegel’s progressive philosophy of religion that hierarchalized the various religious traditions in terms of their suitability for becoming philosophy. We know that every other religion aside from Protestant Christianity does not bode well there. What I hope to sketch out in this final section is a kind of refusal of that decision, along the lines of François Laruelle’s non-philosophy; but, furthermore, one that finds expression in a kind of gnostic refusal or disengagement as summarized by Mulla Sadra when he writes, “Hence, being a knower hinges on disengagement. So, the gnostic who gazes at things through the light of inspiration sees the high and the low at once, and he witnesses the past and the future all at once, with a gauge that he finds from his own world in his essence.”¹⁴ If there is

¹⁴ Mullā Ṣadrā, *The Elixir of the Gnostics*, trans. William C. Chittick (Provo, Utah: Brigham Young University Press, 2003), 3.5.

no decision, no engagement, then there is no future and no past since they require distance or a kind of transcendence from one another to take on their identity.

And it is here we return to Caputo's two kinds of Continental philosophy of religion: the Kantian or the Hegelian. In the longer exploration of this typology contained in Chapter 5 of his *The Insistence of God*, he shows that this is not an unsubtle dualism, but that there may be a kind of dialectic between these two forms. And undoubtedly such a dialectic may produce interesting local effects, but they will be local to the Protestant Christian tradition produced and productive of the fields created by that Protestant Liberal tradition, *of which philosophy of religion is one*. On this genealogical point regarding the emergence of philosophy of religion, it is important that future Continental philosophers of religion foster more productive engagements with standard forms of religious studies. Continental philosophy often prides itself on a strong understanding of the history of its own development, especially in terms of the limiting power of philosophy over religion, but little understanding of, or at least little attention to, the way the very category of religion developed.¹⁵ I am not suggesting that philosophy is unduly theologized, but that Christianity and philosophy form a dyadic identity: the religion-philosophy circuit is a Christian-philosophy circuit. So what is needed is a proliferation of these distinctions of types. Why, for example, and remaining within the history of European philosophy, not turn to Spinoza as a certain kind of inauguration of philosophy of religion that does not fall neatly into either the Kantian scheme of limiting reason to make room for faith nor the Hegelian scheme of engaging with religious material to bring out—to perform a conversion to—the rational kernel. If we were to summarize Spinoza there is a certain kind of philosophizing against the future there. There is nothing to do but to know and to know is to know the now, not the future (at least in his third kind of knowledge). While there appears to be a striking similarity between Hegel and Spinoza on the methodology of philosophizing with religious material, there is an important minimal difference found in their different temporalities.

This doesn't quite get us to a different framework. While Spinoza was certainly productive of wildly different forms of philosophy that could impact upon Continental philosophy of religion from Deleuze to Adorno, there is still something about looking to the past for the future that strikes me as a particularly philosophical move in the sense that it hinges upon transcendence and achievement against the now. This is certainly one form that Continental philosophy may take and it may be productive of something. The editors of *The Future of Continental Philosophy of Religion* point to an introduction to another volume, *After the Postsecular and the Postmodern: New Essays in Continental Philosophy of Religion*, which attempts to sketch out what Continental philosophy of religion might look like after the postsecular and the postmodern (perhaps a vision of the future, though I will deny it). In that introduction, written by Daniel Whistler and myself, we argued that there had been a "theologization" of Continental philosophy of religion that lost some of the power of someone like Spinoza. Paradigmatic of this theologization is the work of Radical Orthodoxy, perhaps the most obvious form of colonial thought organizing raiding parties of the philosophical world, but

¹⁵ The classic text here is Talal Asad, "The Construction of Religion as an Anthropological Concept" in *Genealogies of Religion: Disciplines and Reasons in Christianity and Islam* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1993), 27-54, but see also Arvind-Pal S. Mandair, "Chapter 6 "Decolonizing Postsecular Theory," in *Religion and the Specter of the West: Sikhism, India, Postcoloniality, and the Politics of Translation* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2013). Of philosophers of religion Philip Goodchild remains an outlier on this point as evidenced by his "Introduction" in *Difference in Philosophy of Religion* (Hants: Ashgate, 2003).

there is a certain sense that the postmodern apologetics of the theological turn in French phenomenology and Caputo's earlier Kantian phase of deconstructive theology also were marked by it. The editors, however, make a mistake when they give a simple unitary summary of the goal of *After the Postsecular and the Postmodern*: "Their volume of collected essays on Continental philosophy of religion is then set up as an attempt to liberate philosophy of religion from this 'theologization of philosophy'" (4). In truth, Whistler and I sketched out two different forms of doing Continental philosophy of religion now: liberation and auto-mutation. This second path is crucial for thinking how Continental philosophy may mutate into something perhaps neither Continental (Christian) nor philosophical, but all the more theoretically powerful for it.¹⁶

One way to do this is to begin and engage seriously with other religious traditions in ways that we saw Spinoza, Kant, Hegel and their progeny do with regard to Christian theology. While there is always an attempt by the philosopher to keep ahold of the reins and make sure that this engagement stays "safe" or on the terms of philosophy, their thought is undeniably changed by the religious material they work with. Such mutations will necessarily require a different form though. Engagement with Islam, as readers of this journal are likely interested in, cannot simply follow the lines of postmodern philosophy. There is relatively little that is postmodern about contemporary Islamic discourse and in some ways many of the medieval sources of Islamic *kalam* already played out the modern/postmodern debate between the Mu'tazilites and Ash'arites, admittedly doing so without the Christian death of God (though perhaps understanding the God traced by the Qur'an and Islamic *kalam* would make such a relative notion of "death" superfluous). Undeniably interesting philosophical/theological or general theoretical insights can be mined from engagement with that tradition. However, Islamic modernism is not marked in the same way as European modernism, but develops under European colonialism which deactivates ways that *kalam* may have functioned within the social network of "Islamic modernity" or the time of colonialism. What remains powerful and largely untapped in a philosophical or theoretical way is Islamic *fiqh* (though again anthropologists appear to be doing clandestine philosophy in ways that do perform this engagement and mutation).¹⁷

There may be a more radical way of breaking the religion-philosophy or Christian-philosophy dyad. François Laruelle provides a model for us here in his refusal to choose or decide on one philosophy over the other. So, the choice between materialism and idealism is a false choice and the cheerleading of one over the other is ultimately a way into mass philosophical hallucination and delusion. Of course Laruelle is not the only source of this kind of refusal of choice. We already saw something like it within Mulla Sadra's own thought and we could trace it in many others. What Laruelle offers us here is an easier shift from

¹⁶ See Anthony Paul Smith and Daniel Whistler, "What Is Continental Philosophy of Religion Now?" in *After the Postsecular and the Postmodern: New Essays in Continental Philosophy of Religion* (Newcastle-upon-Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Press, 2010), 1-24. Available online: <<http://www.scribd.com/doc/32287542/Editors-Intro>>.

¹⁷ My views on this have been shaped in large part in conversation with Basit Iqbal of the University of California, Berkeley. Regarding clandestine philosophy of *fiqh* see Hussein Ali Agrama, *Questioning Secularism: Islam, Sovereignty, and the Rule of Law in Modern Egypt* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012). And, though not an anthropologist, the often troubling but compelling work of Wael Hallaq is interesting on this score. See Wael B. Hallaq, *The Impossible State: Islam, Politics, and Modernity's Moral Predicament* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2014). This work marks a kind of reversal of the kind of way Continental philosophy of religion functions and perhaps has a closer analogue in Radical Orthodoxy's bringing together of Christian theology and contemporary philosophy, though with important differences.

standard Continental philosophy to something else, a non-philosophy in his terms, but perhaps just a generic form of human theory or theory-fiction works as well to mark it. It is an easier shift because it shares similar traits that undermine themselves. For in his refusal to choose we are then open to the generic. A true generic beyond the European hallucination of a universalism that still contains predicates like “secular” or even “rational” (since true genericity would require leaving these particularist markers behind). Here we return to the concern Shakespeare brought up about bringing in real victims to thought as well as to Goodchild’s provocation that we should have a sovereignty of martyrs. For Laruelle argues in his *General Theory of Victims* (2012 in French and forthcoming in 2015 in English translation) that the position of the victim is a subject position that remains so deracinated as to be a kind of manifestation or clone of this truly generic human.¹⁸ Laruelle goes on to argue that a thinker must place herself under the condition of the victim, think not for the victim or aim to create simple pity for the victim, but allow theory itself to be determined by the victim. For Laruelle this is not a condescending position, it is not paternal with regard to the victim, for victims are insurrectionary in their refusal to be simply “other” and in the impossibility of their death as everyday is the day of resurrection in his victimology. This allows for us to see something that I think might offer an important practice for Continental philosophy of religion, undercutting many of the ways it may be captured in ways it does not desire. What would it mean to place one’s thought under the Palestinian? Or under the history of Black Islam, often ignored by philosophers and even derided by other scholars of religion as “merely” syncretic or lacking in sophistication? These lived subject positions are created by the Christian-philosophy dyad, might the way they are lived out by actual human beings break it? Might the way they mutate these materials not be a model for theory generally?

I do not know if it should take the name philosophy of religion, but thinking must place itself under the sign of the victim and think from there if it is to avoid becoming captivated by its own privilege. Why—when confronted by that the single catastrophe this world is—should thought spend its time giving attention to the trials of doubt and faith of largely Christian postmoderns? Attend to suffering, attend to the martyrs, and we suddenly have a different field upon which thought may do something without any hope of the future and only the whylessness of the now.¹⁹ Attention without redemption, but perhaps this is the grace and miracle of a lover’s gaze within which there is no need for the future. Though if it comes, so be it.

Anthony Paul Smith
Assistant Professor of Religion
La Salle University

¹⁸ See François Laruelle, *General Theory of Victims*, trans. Jessie Hock and Alex Dubilet (Cambridge: Polity, 2015).

¹⁹ Such whylessness may be developed in dialogue with Meister Eckhart and I am thinking of the way that Barber expands and deepens Laruelle’s non-philosophy through this category. See Daniel Colucciello Barber, “Whylessness: The Universe Deaf and Blind” in *Dark Nights of the Universe* (Miami: [Name], 2013), 21-44. Such whylessness may be generic, though, as it is also present in the mystical thought of al-Hallaj.

© 2015: Anthony Paul Smith

Authors retain the rights to their review articles, which are published by *SCTIW Review* with their permission. Any use of these materials other than educational must provide proper citation to the author and *SCTIW Review*.

Citation Information

Smith, Anthony Paul, *Will the Future Ever Come? – Practices of Continental Philosophy of Religion: A Review Essay of The Future of Continental Philosophy of Religion*, *SCTIW Review*, March 12, 2015.
<http://sctiw.org/sctiwreviewarchives/archives/460>.

ISSN: 2374-9288