Letting the Finite Vanish: Hegel, Tillich, and Caputo on the Ontological Philosophy of Religion

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In general, Kant's critique of metaphysics still holds up, especially for religious metaphysics. Most metaphysical arguments rest on indemonstrable assumptions. The cosmological argument for the existence of God assumes that matter is created, and that an outside force must cause it to come into existence. However, if we assume that matter is eternal, then no such unmoved mover is necessary and we may argue for atheism. For every theistic argument, there is an equally convincing (or unconvincing) atheistic one. This situation does not necessarily debunk the truth of either position, but it has produced, as Jean-François Lyotard suggests, a "postmodern condition" defined by incredulity toward metanarratives. In other words, metaphysics has lost its appeal; apologetic arguments no longer sway us.

I argue that the ontological philosophy of religion (in the Tillichian sense) is an interesting and productive avenue for current philosophy of religion in that it does not rely on the sort of metaphysical argumentation that so often ends in stalemate – though this does not preclude religious truth claims. Rather, we must reimagine religious truth and work at understanding the status of our confessions in the context of a hermeneutic phenomenology. We must recognize that interpretation goes all the way down, and that our faith is not assured in any modernist metaphysical sense. Drawing primarily from Paul Tillich and Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, I will examine the ontological methodology as it is employed in the current debate surrounding religion with or without religion.[1] As philosophy of religion becomes more oriented toward phenomenology, our metaphysical beliefs will gain more existential traction.

The Two Types of Philosophy of Religion

In "The Two Types of Philosophy of Religion," Tillich lays out two modes of approaching God: (1) ontological philosophy of religion and (2) cosmological philosophy of religion. Tillich characterizes the distinction between the two

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[1] This concept of "religion without religion" is addressed below in section 2.

approaches as the difference between *overcoming estrangement* versus *meeting a stranger.* In the first instance, we find something from which we have never been apart; we simply need it brought to our attention. "In the first way man discovers *himself* when he discovers God; he discovers something that is identical with himself although it transcends him infinitely, something from which he is estranged, but from which he never has been and never can be separated."[2] Tillich here highlights humankind's immediate and transcendental awareness of the divine as inextricably caught up in Being. In recognizing that existence is situated in the divine, humanity can overcome estrangement. In the second instance, we search for something unknown that exists apart from us, some object "over yonder" as Hegel put it.

> In the second way man meets a *stranger* when he meets God. The meeting is accidental. Essentially they do not belong to each other. They may become friends on a tentative and conjectural basis. But there is no certainty about the stranger man has met. He may disappear, and only *probable* statements can be made about his nature.[3]

This notion of God is qualitatively different from the first in that God is cut off from Being-as-such, and becomes just one being among others. These two methodologies, "ontological" in the first instance and "cosmological" in the second, represent distinct types of philosophy of religion. The essential task of the philosopher of religion is to characterize the relationship between the two absolutes: Being and God.

Tillich describes the ontological methodology as "the Augustinian solution." *Deus*, God, and *esse*, Being, coincide in *veritas*, truth. This idea of truth is presupposed any time we ask a question. Even if we deny truth itself, we must do so in the name of truth. When Augustine identifies God with truth, he makes God into the presupposition of the question of God. In order to inquire about the existence of God or the nature of God, we must presuppose that God *is*, in some sense, as the condition for the possibility of all being, all knowledge, and all discourse. "This is the ontological solution to the problem of the philosophy of religion. God can never be reached if he is the *object* of a question, and not its basis."[4] *Deus est esse*, God is Being.

This "Augustinian Solution," then, is countered by "The Thomistic Dissolution." This methodology does away with Augustine's key insight and

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[2] Paul Tillich, *Theology of Culture*, (New York: Oxford University Press 1978), 10.
[3] Ibid., 10.
[4] Ibid., 13.

instead turns to a sense-based epistemology that requires the mediation of argumentative rationality. Instead of an immediate knowledge of God, as in the ontological approach, Aquinas relies on observing the "effects" of God in order to demonstrate what God is. Tillich observes:

> Aquinas cuts the nerve of the ontological approach. Man is excluded from the *primum esse* and the *prima veritas*. It is impossible for him to adhere to the uncreated truth. For the principles, the *trascendentalia*, are *not* the presence of the divine in us, they are *not* the "uncreated light" through which we see everything, but they are the created structure of our mind. It is obvious that in this way the immediate knowledge of the Absolute is destroyed. *Sapientia*, the knowledge of the principles, is qualitatively not different from *scientia*.[5]

So, for Tillich, Aquinas seeks to prove God as the highest being on the basis of observing the *cosmos*. "This is the final outcome of the Thomistic *dis*solution to the Augustinian *solution*. The question of the two Ultimates is answered in such a way that the religious Absolute has become a singular being of overwhelming power, while the philosophical Absolute is formalized into a given structure of reality in which everything is contingent and individual."[6] In divorcing the concepts of God and Being, the cosmological methodology makes God an unreachable and unknowable stranger.[7]

A sketch of Hegel's distinction between Reason and understanding will here deepen our analysis of Tillich and provide a context for current debates concerning the practice of philosophy of religion. Here I turn to Hegel's *Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion*. Hegel's distinction between Reason [*Vernunft*] and understanding [*Verstand*] is roughly parallel to Tillich's division between the ontological and cosmological philosophies of religion. Critical of the metaphysical proofs of God's existence (the existence of an unknowable stranger, in Tillich's

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[5] Ibid., 17.

[6] Ibid., 19.

[7] I want to be careful to add that Tillich gives us a brief and uncharitable read of St. Thomas. This is partly due to his attempt to make two neat, compartmentalized approaches to the philosophy of religion in such a short essay. In order to create such a stark divide between the two approaches in an economic way, he needs Augustine to play the hero and Aquinas to play the villain. However, as Caputo points out in *Heidegger and Aquinas*, Thomas has a negative theology at the core of the *Summa*. Nonetheless, Tillich's characterization of the cosmological approach to the philosophy of religion is not altogether wrong. Many neo-scholastics and Thomists have bought into this scheme completely. Even worse, many protestant apologists have issued textbook cosmological arguments in Aquinas' name. So, while I do want to give St. Thomas some kind of break, I certainly do not want to excuse the entire Thomistic tradition.

terminology), Hegel points out the absurdity of trying to prove the infinite God as if God were an object among objects. The result of the proofs for God's existence is that God becomes something less than God:

> In the proofs it is argued that, because the finite is, for that reason the infinite is, too. What is expressed here, therefore, is that the finite is; this is the point of departure, the foundation. From this arises the objection against these proofs that they are said to make the finite into the foundation for the being of God. The finite is an abiding point of departure, and in this procedure the being of God is mediated through the being of the finite … For the understanding there are, in the mediation, two actual beings: on this side there is a world and over yonder there is God, and the knowledge of the world is the foundation of the being of God.[8]

This, it seems, is his summation of the cosmological methodology. Hegel points out that, for the cosmological philosophers, the rational way to God is through deducing the infinite from the finite. Yet the methodology self-destructs in that it makes God into a finite being "over yonder," alongside the world, because it supposes that the world itself has its own, self-contained, autonomous being. This is how the understanding [*Verstand*] works. It deals in positive, measurable, atomic concepts which all rest on the same plane. You have the world, and you have God – "over yonder" – the object.

Alternatively, Hegel suggests that we understand finitude only as a limit, and not as pointing toward being. As he says, "the finite element has no truth, and reason [*Vernunft*] is precisely the insight that the finite is only a limit." Here he sets up the secondary and derivative nature of the merely finite. Finitude is merely a visible demarcation, a rendering intelligible of invisible infinity. The next sentence contains the magic of Hegel's approach: "But inasmuch as we know something as a limit, we are already beyond it."[9] This knowledge of limitation, this Reason [*Vernunft*], is precisely the direction toward the knowledge of God.

To know the finite *as* finitude is to become aware of the underlying infinity, to open one's self up to it, to become exposed dialectically. One could say that Hegel's approach is not so much an attempt to grasp God as it is an attempt to understand ourselves as always already grasped by God. Hegelian philosophy of religion, then, understands through Reason [*Vernunft*] the underlying infinity that is the unity of all finitude. It might be close to something like pantheism or

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[8] Hegel, *Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion*, (Berkeley: University of California Press 1988), 171-172. I supplied the German parenthetical.
[9] Hegel, 173.

panentheism if taken metaphysically. If taken onto-phenomenologically, however, as in the vein of Heidegger, this sort of underlying infinity can be seen as Being itself, that unintelligible principle by which existing things are themselves intelligible. In the metaphysical interpretation, Hegel is telling us something about the world itself. In the onto-phenomenological interpretation, Hegel is giving us a phenomenological methodology for reaching awareness of God through *Vernunft* as the condition for our own existence. It is this methodological insight that Tillich notices in "The Two Types of Philosophy of Religion."[10]

The distinction between ontological and cosmological philosophy of religion is clear, then. In the ontological approach to philosophy of religion, we overcome estrangement to realize the depth of the existence that we experience every day. God is Being, intuitively grasped as the ineffable condition for the possibility of all existence and knowledge. In the cosmological approach, we search for a stranger, an elusive object that is unlike anything with which we are familiar. God is only one being alongside many, although it happens that God is incredibly powerful. Further, we are not immediately acquainted with God. In the ontological approach, God is already present. In the cosmological approach, God is hiding among other objects in the world. The ontological approach is immediate, finding God beneath the self and overcoming estrangement from the ground of our being. The cosmological approach is mediated, using argument and observation to search for God the stranger.

Reframing the Problem: Post-Kantian and Post-Hegelian Philosophy of Religion

The distinctions discussed above are valuable in sorting out the contemporary debates in continental philosophy of religion. There is some sort of radicalism inherent in all postmodern thought, usually in the form of an admission of the historical nature of reason and situation of the human person. Often seen as *the* contemporary radical theologian, John Caputo argues for religion *without* religion,

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[10] Here I should note a difference between Tillich's and Kant's use of the term "ontological." The original nomenclature for the "ontological argument" comes from Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason*. For Kant, the term "ontological" means precisely that the existence of a supreme cause is concluded from *a priori* conceptions alone. There is a move from concepts to Deity, highest being. (See Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason* [Rutland: Charles E. Tuttle Co. 1991] 346.) This is, of course, very different from Tillich's intention in employing the word "ontological." For Tillich, in an ontological approach "man discovers *himself* when he discovers God; he discovers something that is identical with himself although it transcends him infinitely, something from which he is estranged, but from which he never has been and never can be separated," (Tillich, 10).

a content-less religious form of life, religiousness as such. This religion without religion, informed by Derrida and deconstruction, seeks to do away with religious determinacy in order to remain open to the event of God. There is an essential question that needs to be asked: is Caputo actually advocating a negation of particular metaphysical claims, or is he offering a hermeneutic-phenomenological description of religiosity? This is a point of intense debate in the continental philosophy of religion.

J. Aaron Simmons and Stephen Minister edited a compilation of essays questioning the necessity of religion without religion, entitled *Reexamining Deconstruction and Determinate Religion: Toward a Religion* with *Religion*. The concluding paragraph in Westphal's penultimate chapter of the compilation sums up the thrust of the argument:

> It seems to me that the option of religion without religion is just that, an option, a choice, a decision— as risky as the option of religion with (some particular) religion. For postmodern and deconstructive analyses, the limits of human insight and language simply do not require that our religion, if it be that, be without religion. Our theories do not make our choices for us, nor do they provide the kind of guarantees we would like. That is what modernity failed to understand.[11]

Here, Westphal seems to buy into the undecidability of the truth of particular religious traditions, and counts religion without religion as one more option, one more choice which we make. This choice is an either/or for Westphal. Either you go along with Derrida and Caputo or you buy into the creeds of a particular tradition. This either/or is characteristic of *Verstand*, but I want to suspend our either/or judgments for the moment in order to recognize the underlying unity. To see the limits of the understanding as precisely that, as limits, and to let the understanding vanish, for however short a time, in order to properly orient our understanding within Hegelian *Vernunft*.

Simmons and Minister opted to give Caputo the last word in their volume. His essay, entitled "On Not Settling for an Abridged Edition of Postmodernism: Radical Hermeneutics as Radical Theology," addresses the division between post-Kantian and post-Hegelian philosophy of religion. The post-Kantian strain represents most of the contributors to the volume, including Westphal, while Caputo claims that his project is post-Hegelian. He states:

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[11] Merold Westphal, "Conversations on Religion With or Without Religion," in *Deconstruction and Determinate Religion Reexamined,* eds. J. Aaron Simmons and Stephen Minister (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 2012), 270.

The overarching difference between the other contributors and me can be seen as a debate between a postmodernism that descends from Kant and a postmodernism that descends from Hegel … I think that it is a strategy they have come up with for limiting the exposure of Christian faith to postmodern analysis and that postmodernism interprets Christianity more holistically and comprehensively by treating religion as an historical form of life … the result of my analysis is to make it a good deal more *un*safe than theirs. They start out by asking, "How is faith possible in the postmodern situation?" I begin by asking, "What is the human condition?," to which faith like everything else is irrecusably subject . . . . The Kantian model results in an apologetics, not a classical-modern version but an updated postmodern one . . . . The Hegelian model, however, does not issue in apologetics but in a theology of the event that feels around for the underlying experiences to which concrete religious traditions give form and figure, nomination and actualization.[12]

The post-Kantian model of philosophy of religion only deals in atomic facts, in *Verstand*, which, at its worst, renders a rather flat model of religion-as-beliefs, and epistemology as the only field for philosophy of religion. For Caputo, post-Kantian philosophy of religion deals with delimiting knowledge in order to make room for faith. The post-Hegelian route that Caputo takes, however, utilizes *Vernunft* to get at the event, the underlying we-know-not-what past the limit of understanding, the infinite, that which nothing greater can be thought. Of course, we do not get at it directly or positively, but only by letting *Verstand* fall in an act of negation. This is the idea of religion *without* religion: the position and negation of religion to let the infinite *stuff* of religion loose.

In my estimation, religion without religion functions well as phenomenology of religion, calling into question the finality of determinate creeds without completely abandoning them. Westphal's essential mistake, then, is to make these two positions, creedal religion and deconstructed religion, mutually exclusive, to make an "either/or" out of a "both/and." Christianity, for example, stands in contrast to a simple negation like atheism. If both positions make exclusive truth claims, then there really is an either/or present and there really is a decision to be made. But this either/or rests on *Verstand*. Religion without religion does not

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[12] John Caputo, "On Not Settling for an Abridged Edition of Postmodernism: Radical Hermeneutics as Radical Theology," in *Deconstruction and Determinate Religion Reexamined* eds. J. Aaron Simmons and Stephen Minister (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press 2012), 271-272.

dispose of Christianity, but pushes beyond the edges of the finite in order to get at the infinite *stuff* of Christianity. This deeper probing into religion, on the edges of infinity, does not invalidate or do away with religion *necessarily*. Rather it deepens and accounts for the determinate position. There is no either/or between deconstructive religion without religion on the one hand, and determinate religion on the other. Religion without religion functions at a different, onto-phenomenological level. This makes it qualitatively distinct from the belief systems and dogmatic structures of determinate religion. There can be no either/or.

Conclusion: Toward a Post-Hegelian, Ontological Philosophy of Religion with Religion

The task of the religious individual is to overcome estrangement, requiring a *Vernunft* which is present in the recognition of a limit as a limit. Ontological philosophers of religion will use this post-Hegelian ontological philosophy to describe the religious experience in a hermeneutic phenomenology. This description will deepen and enliven our religious confessions. In our pursuit of religious truth, we will begin to seek the event harbored in the name of God that sustains us, which lies underneath the name of God itself. We will employ *Vernunft* in order to give depth to our *Verstand*; we will work out our doctrine for the sake of our ultimate concern. Philosophers of religion will not treat doctrine apart from inward existential deepening, the two go hand in hand. In meeting God as that which is immanent yet infinitely transcendent of us, we will work out our understandings to facilitate this event. The event harbored in the name of God will prevent dogmatic confession from becoming an end in itself, but will nonetheless bring new life to our *Verstand*. Like Kierkegaard, ontological philosophers will delve into the religious infinite in order to return to the universal with a deeper awareness of just what it is we are doing here. In letting the finite vanish, we can expose our confessions to that which we are confessing: the ineffable, infinite Wholly Other.

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