

The Ends of Religious Community: Challenging Continental Philosophy of Religion (II)

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There are many reasons to critique any so-called “post-secular age,” in which religion is said to have returned in replenished force. Despite the empirically observed world-wide growth of religious sentiments and communities, Western societies today are all but more religious in any traditional sense of the term. Although statistical analyses in Western Europe, for example, chart a slight uptick of 1) positive attitudes towards “religion,” 2) individuals self-identifying as “religious,” and 3) their regaining trust in religious institutions, in contrast *attendance of* religious services and active participation in religious *communities* are at an all-time low. In other words, a major change has taken place from the “religions” that have gone before us: today one has the option of “believing without belonging,” that is, of choosing a religion, being spiritual, or believing in a higher power, yet not taking part in a *religious community*. At least in the West, a major aspect of the so-called “return of the religious” revolves around new spiritual imaginaries and related commodities that frequently get generated by purely individualist social ontologies.

One movement that has proclaimed repeatedly over the last 30 years the “return of religion” is *Continental Philosophy of Religion* (CPOR). As is well known, CPOR, which has marked the essential need for a critical departure from the two different but inter-related strands of traditional “philosophical theology” and “analytic philosophy of religion,” sought radically to reshape philosophy in order to overcome the encumbrances of the onto-theological constitution of metaphysics. In this sense, CPOR was interpreted as the rightful heir to what Hegel's “Lectures on Philosophy of Religion” sought to fashion for the field—a kind of synthetic, non-contradictory unity between religion and reason, one that would of course do without the constraints of both an “absolute knowledge” and any onto-theological concept of God.

More recently, thinkers associated with CPOR have fallen under criticism, whether from materialists and realists who find it far too abstract from lived reality, or from discourse theorists who think its re-appropriation of the “specters of religion” after the “Death of God” still remains far too theological. However, in critiquing CPOR for simply relegating “God” onto a monolithic plane of

pure opacity, heterology, or undecidability, such criticisms frequently remain dependent upon precisely the onto-theo-logical presuppositions they claim to overcome. In its emphasis upon deconstruction and through its insistence upon non-sovereignty, powerlessness, vulnerability, dissemination, and even plurality of “Gods,” CPOR has sought to tell us “a completely different story.” (Derrida) This is a story that does not aim at theologizing philosophy per se, but rather at deconstructing our all too well known binary habits of confronting and conceptualizing religion dogmatically. In its attentiveness to the often-eclipsed intertwining of theism and atheism, faith and reason, “the religious” and “the secular,” possibility and impossibility, etc., CPOR has triggered basic insights into their paradoxical but unavoidable complicity, thus breaching new pathways for the study of religion.

At the risk of oversimplification, its aim was to bring about a thinking of “religion without religion,” i.e. without the dogmatic traditions of religion burdening the re-theorization of what returns “in/under the name” of religion today. The kind of religion that CPOR attempts to think thus is not the univocal caricature of a distant metaphysical God that materialists so ferociously attack. It rather is the empirically dispersed, contingently affected, philosophically dethroned, and theologically disconcerting limit-phenomena of religion that implicitly are embedded in those various “life forms” that take up a liberating “quest for transcendence” but do so beyond the confines of dogmatic protection and secular censorship. Yet no matter how promising this idea of a “religion without religion”—or related conceptions like “anatheism,” “theo-poetics,” or “radical hermeneutics,” etc.—may be, CPOR may be responsible for inadvertently birthing (with its focus on the “experience of the impossible”) a “religion” trapped in *the without*; hovering in the abstract space of subjectivism, personalism, and privacy. It is in this specific sense that, as our subtitle suggests, CPOR is in need of being challenged and this shall be done, this is our proposal, in regard of the philosophical problem of community.

Yet this may, perhaps be not only a problem relevant to CPOR, but of much more general impact. Since although it seems that the at-times oppressive taboo of self-identifying as religious or spiritual has been lifted in the name of good, humanistic tolerance, it may be that religion instead begins to amount to an abstract personalism; an option of *conscientiousness* that does not require *conscience* or action within the historically derived framework of a community. One way of interpreting this change is to propose, quite bluntly, that we are a long way from being truly post-secular. And indeed, in lacking *sociological* evidence in the West, the “return of religion” may be but a *philosophical artifact* or *theological phantasm* that gave the sense of religion's return, but at the expense of essential elements of religion as such. This is because religion, as it could be argued, fundamentally

relies on *community* for its social expression, historical continuation, and solidification of the "social bond". This may indicate—at least in the West, as one hastily must add—the fading out or even the *end of religious community*. For at what point might religion's being quarantined to mere opinion (or feeling, etc.) still allow it to "function" when it gets relegated to being but a "private option," a subjective spiritual exercise, or an existential flashpoint of conversion? At the very least, consequently, the "return of religion" in the precise context of *community, its im/possibility, and promise/threat* appears to be in need of much closer analysis.

This seems to be all the more true as the expressions of "political modernity" have rendered the very concept of community inherently in need of further specification, calling for a comprehensive reassessment of its philosophical threats and potentials. This amounts to an undertaking that only recently has become a topic of interest in social and political philosophy. Concepts like "un-avowable community" (Blanchot), "inoperative community" (Nancy) or "coming community" (Derrida/Agamben), to mention just a few, clearly testify to this desideratum. Strangely enough, however, this recent discussion often has overlooked the role of religion—and esp. the "return of religion"—in regard to the recurring question of the (ethical, juridical, etc.) foundations of community. This serves as a reminder that in our post-foundational age we frequently disacknowledge the "Permanence of the Theological-Political" (Lefort). This is the case despite the discontents of an unfinished modernity and the irresolvable shadow that the return of unprecedented forms of religion casts upon it.

In contrast to what has been addressed thus far, Muslim communities often stand-out as examples of a strong and—as it may seem currently—even intensifying notion of religious identity and the tight communal bonds it establishes. This rising of religious communities "like a Phoenix from the Ashes" (Kippenberg) in and against the "maelstrom of globalization" (Appadurai) is not only true for traditional Islamic countries. It may indeed also be noticed for Muslim communities in Western countries where they frequently are cited as direct counter-evidences to the assumption of a growing secularization and the proclaimed end of religious community. Both phenomena, the fading out of the idea of religious community as well as its overt and mighty reaffirmation, of course have immediate political and societal impact. What would be the *ends* of a society without (public) religion, and is it even thinkable? Or does the "secular society" necessarily call for a "replenishment" of its goals and ends by a substitute kind of "religious teleology"? Is it not exactly this tendency that can be found today, e.g., in the salvific potential assigned to the hard sciences, or in the "unconditional" nature that the very idea of "human rights" embody? And how, in contrast, can "secular society" it-

self authentically deal with radicalized notions of religious community that openly contradict the assumed unconditionality of some of its secular truth claims? If, as Margalit puts it, "one cannot compromise over the holy without compromising it," this aporia also is part and parcel of the kind of "disengaged reason" (Taylor) that secular societies not only endorse but also frequently render sacrosanct when threatened or challenged.

It also is crucial to detect religious systems of knowledge that can help confront productively the "*general* logic of auto-immunity" (Derrida) that structures both "the secular" and "the religious" as bodies of knowledge. "Auto-immunity" characterizes a system's turning against itself for reasons of "purification." When a given community is in danger of coming to an "end", one reaction is to reassert its "ends" by tightening and radicalizing them. In this sense, modern individualism does not render auto-immunity impossible – quite the opposite: auto-immune reactions could be the necessary and inevitable companion of individualism and its weakening of communities. What we consequently need is a reassessment and recalibration of *the ends of religious community* and their irreducible meaning for societies *today*, that is, for societies that seek to understand themselves in *both* post-secular and post-metaphysical terms. Probing the intellectual and practical challenges, potentials, and limits of this unthought "simultaneity of the impossible" (Merleau-Ponty) is a major task of thinking today. That it will not leave unaffected our traditional conceptions of philosophy, theology, and their related ideas of living-together under the spell of the unconditional, whatever it might be, makes it an all the more pressing, yet inherently contested task.

With this conference, we wish to consider the diversity of "ends" (from motives, telic purposes, and finalities, but also auto-telic meanings) of religion in the specific context of re-framing "community" today; that is, of productively thinking through its manifest aporias. We welcome contributions that deal with the intersections of religion and the institution of community as it might be developed from a variety of related theoretical backgrounds such as phenomenology, hermeneutics, political theology, deconstruction, or cultural theory. Contributions might consider, but should by no means be limited to analyses of the following thematic axes, which we believe are germane to the question of the so-called "return of religion" and its proximity to the question of community:

- *Creating novel conceptual tools*: how are we to move beyond the traditional dichotomy of myth and Enlightenment that has hampered the occidental philosophical and theological understanding of religion so enormously? What kind of enriched and refined conceptual devices are offered by CPOR to overcome this and other related binaries? What could, for instance, a "New Enlightenment" and a revised conception of "reason" that takes seriously the "truth of religion/s" look like in its community-instituting power? To what extent might a truly "reflective faith" save the intelligibility of religion without sacrificing it at the threshold of rationality and understanding? Or how could, finally, the phenomenological paradigm of "intertwining" (Merleau-Ponty) be brought to bear on this problematic, and thereby help confront the concrete unfolding and articulation of religion's two incommensurable yet inseparable sources?
- *Freedom, Alterity, and Hospitality*: does the present crisis of identity and the conjuration of threatening alterities go hand-in-hand with the self-denial and idealism of impossible standards that are part and parcel of being "religious," with a so-called "unconditional hospitality" being a major case in point? Or is the age-old but frequently ridiculed idea of *hospitality* fit to impeach creatively the original sin of political theory, that is, "the conflation of freedom and sovereignty" (Arendt)? To what extent, however, would that require a triangulation of its basic ambiguity with more realist concepts such as solidarity, compromise, or *phronesis*? And how might novel conceptions of community factor into these concerns?
- *Transcendence, Culture, Politics*: since Aristotle at the latest, the possibility of the political has been tied to a transcendent principle escaping the economy of everydayness. As of today, shifting imaginaries of transcendence have led not only to novel practices of personal self-transcendence, but also to frequently unprecedented *liturgies of making transcendence together* that often are evidenced in the spectacular resurgence of "political theologies" in the wake of globalization and its discontents. To assess philosophically the diversity and creativity, but also genuine adversity of such practices that force the "unsocial sociability" of religion back into the "public square," is a major task to be met.
- *Religion, Community, and the Problem of Autoimmunity*: in CPOR, Derrida often is considered to be one of the thinkers to have helped lift the veil on religion beyond its being merely a culturally constituted phenomenon, and his notion of the autoimmunity of religion (in its returning) often is

taken for granted. While it indeed seems to be quite clear in what sense religion exemplifies the so-called "general structure of autoimmunity," it is far from being intelligible how this relates to the question of community and its im/possibility. If a tendency to immunize itself is part and parcel of every constitution of a community, does the affective collapse of communities today (as a consequence, e.g., of liberalism, proceduralism, etc.) necessarily entail an autoimmune reaction upon themselves, as it seems to be the case in the globalatinized "return of religion" (that is, in the novel and "strange alliance" of religion's two poles)? Does the predicted end of religious community necessarily lead to a radicalization of the ends attributed to such communities, possibly to the extent of driving them into an autoimmune suicide (fundamentalism, theocracy); or might this perhaps also open an unprecedented possibility of "protecting itself against its self-protection by destroying its own immune system" (Derrida)?

- *Religion and Violence*: how do we respond to the closely related challenges of/to religion today, especially when we consider the vexed quandary of so-called "religious violence", its assumed irrationality, and our political "crises of representation" that are part and parcel of the vicious circle of violence and counter-violence? How may we overcome an all too one-sidedly explanatory "hunt for causation" that revolves around an essentialist explication of the inherently contingent correlation between religion and violence? What may philosophy in particular add to this vexed discussion that has been relegated frequently to other disciplines, first and foremost sociology, psychology, and political theory?
- *Post-secular Philosophy*: What kind of role might CPOR play *today* in such a context, in its own seeming misdiagnosis of a "return of religion" within the oft-repeated and triumphant post-secular hypothesis cherished by many? Is there in fact a coming post-secular community which can avoid the relapse into the "general logic of autoimmunity"? Upon which potentials would it thrive in its attempt to confront the "bond of separation" that so delicately conjoins faith and reason in both an unthinkable as well as irreducible intrigue?