Introduction

Religious Experience, Secular Reason and Politics around 1900

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Abstract

The emergence of a scholarly and popular interest in religious experience, spirituality and mysticism around 1900 plays a crucial role in the further transformations in religion in the twentieth century and in contemporary Western and non-Western societies. This volume contains philosophical reflections on the emergence of these new constellations, discourses and practices. The ‘rediscovery’ of the various spiritual and mystical sources and traditions, and the turn towards the individual’s religious experiences, can be situated against the background of a growing critique of global scientific positivism and the rise of secular (atheistic, Marxist) philosophies. The turn to spirituality and mysticism is associated with political projects of anti-imperialist emancipation in for example, India, the Islamic countries, Russia and Latin-America. Through philosophical inquiries into key authors such as Bergson, Blondel, James, Heidegger, Bremond, Weil, Solov’ev, Rodó, Iqbal and Vivekenanda, this volume presents a comprehensive perspective on the fundamental issues and discussions that inspired the turn to spirituality in a modern era of secular reason.

Keywords

philosophy – religious experience – mysticism – spirituality – reason – politics

In the 19th century a radical form of atheism drawing from different sources developed in the Western world. Historicism and the historical criticism of the philosophy of Enlightenment devalued the sacral sources of positive religions whilst Marxism and positivism disqualified religions as overcome figures of the human spirit, a diagnosis which, as it were, was sealed by Nietzsche's dictum regarding the "death of God". Also, in the new human sciences – especially in neuroscience and psychology – religious phenomena were preferred "objects" of criticism. Religious ideas and experiences were no longer argumentatively refuted but "explained" by empirical physiology and psychology. In Europe, as the core element in the battle between the great ideologies, atheism became a significant factor of political power and a mass phenomenon from a sociological perspective. Atheism was thus no longer limited to small intellectual circles.

The spectacular rise of atheist philosophies and reductionist explanatory models in the human sciences triggered numerous countermovements. Besides Joseph de Maistre's conservatism it was Søren Kierkegaard and subsequently other representatives of the *Lebensphilosophie* which inspired new religious-philosophical awakenings. In the vicinity of historicism – from Dilthey up to Troeltsch – there developed a complex debate regarding the epistemological and sociological status of religions. In the domain of the human sciences, theologians got involved in the debates on religious pathologies and "abnormal" experiences as well. The religious discussions of atheist movements were closely tied to societal and political movements respectively, be it the Holy Alliance, *Kulturprotestantismus* or religious renewal movements. Therefore, Europe's intellectual and political life around 1900 was shaped by extremely diverse forms of interconnection and opposition between secular reason, politics and religion.

The religious-philosophical and religious-political debates did not remain limited to Europe but radiated into numerous religions of the world. As soon as the late 18th century intellectuals from Asia, Russia, the Islamic world and South America began receiving modern European philosophies and connecting them to their own traditions of thought. Liberal ideas, motifs from Romanticism and Positivism inspired numerous political reform movements beyond European boundaries. Against this background, the European debates regarding the end and the future of religion also found creative continuations in other world religions. The globalization of philosophy can be illustrated through one example: At the beginning of the 20th century Herbert Spencer and Henri Bergson were not only omnipresent in Western philosophy; rather, from Latin America to the Middle and the Far East their

thought became a worldwide focal point of utterly different interpretations and transformations.

In the “non-European” philosophies around 1900 the relation between secular reason and religion shifted significantly. In the era of imperialism numerous peoples faced the challenge of cultural self-assertion. At the end of the 19th century even China was threatened to be overrun by the imperial powers. For this reason non-European philosophies were caught in a field of extreme tension differing significantly from the ongoing debates within Europe. Whilst the obligation to catch up on modernization triggered the reception of liberal, positivist and later also Marxist philosophies, in numerous world regions the context of resistance against European hegemony aroused an interest for religion. For this reason the religious-philosophical awakenings in India, the Islamic world, but also Russia and Latin America were closely intertwined with anti-imperialist struggles for cultural self-assertion.

The present omnibus volume, which builds on a conference hosted by the research-center “Religion and Transformation in Contemporary European Society” (Vienna) and the Titus Brandsma Institute (Nijmegen) in November 2017 at the University of Vienna, aims to shed light on the global scale of the diverse and far-reaching configurations of reason, politics and religion around 1900 through religious-philosophical studies on selected representative authors. However, the confrontation with religious-philosophical approaches around 1900 does not arise from a merely historical interest, for the awakenings of the turn of the century shaped the debates on secular reason, religion and politics well into the 20th century. Therefore we also accepted articles on authors whose activity is rather to be situated in the middle of the 20th century. Last but not least, the look beyond Europe’s borders sheds light on current debates on religion and politics which can only be adequately understood in the context of global modernity.

In the first article, Arie Molendijk dedicates himself to Ernst Troeltsch’s relation to mysticism which is controversially discussed to this day. Molendijk explores the question of whether Ernst Troeltsch’s philosophy of religion can be described as “mystical” or “spiritualistic” thought. By situating his thinking within the debate of German “protestant” theology on the status of religious and/or mystical experience, he carves out different nuances of Troeltsch’s conception of mysticism. Ultimately, Molendijk replies in the affirmative to the question of whether Troeltsch’s thinking is rooted in the tradition identified as “mystical” by him.

Using the example of the religious-historical and religious-philosophical works of Henri Bremond Herman Westerink describes in his article how

around 1900, amidst modernist tendencies in the Catholic Church and theological reactions to the atheist and positivist tendencies in science and politics, a new discourse on mysticism and spirituality emerges. In this context, one's own tradition is redefined in terms of an intimate relation between dogma and "lived religiosity". The "shift toward spirituality", which was co-initiated by Bremond, shapes research on mysticism and spirituality to this day.

In his article "Am Ende moderner Sicherheit / At the end of modern security" Markus Riedenauer shows how William James opens up the space for religious experiences with respect to naturalist positivism as well as rationalist metaphysics in a new way. Riedenauer uses the postulate of certainty of modern epistemology, which is broken up by James in the name of the pragmatist affirmation of the exuberant richness and diversity of reality, as a hermeneutic key. Against this background James does not only justify religious forms of belief but also addresses the apparent security of atheist and agnostic philosophies.

Inigo Bocken's article "Mystik als Tat? Philosophie und Spiritualität bei Maurice Blondel / Mysticism as Action? Philosophy and Spirituality in Maurice Blondel" examines the political implications of Maurice Blondel's "philosophy of action". As Bocken points out, Blondel opposes on the one hand the rejection of transcendence in secular Enlightenment, on the other hand the dominance of the neo-Thomist *ordo* philosophy. Mysticism plays a significant role in Blondel's philosophy, in which the common bond of thinking and living which eludes the grasp of reason is thematized.

In his article Gerrit Steunebrink turns toward Henri Bergson who, around 1900, counted amongst the most important philosophers of his time. His philosophy of life was received far beyond European borders in the entire world. Steunebrink limits himself to his interpretation of *Les deux sources de la morale et de la religion* (1932), Bergson's late work, in which he defends morality and religion against empiricist psychology on the basis of his theory of intuition. Through the distinction between a closed and an open society, to which corresponds the distinction between a static and a dynamic religion, Bergson connects his psychological reading to sociological and historical-philosophical considerations. The great figures of antiquity like Jesus, Buddha and Socrates, whose thinking arises from a "mystical experience" according to Bergson, open the closed horizon of organic societies onto humanity. In his interpretation, Steunebrink does not only refer to diverse receptions, especially by Karl Popper and Karl Jaspers, but also details Bergson's diagnosis of the times, in the context of which he himself situated his own philosophy of religion. As opposed to Heidegger and Jaspers, Henri Bergson is favourable to modern

technology. With his recourse to mystical experience, Bergson ultimately aims at a new “ensoulment” of the techno-industrial culture by the means of which man has given himself a new body.

In her article on “The Pauline understanding of life in the young Heidegger,” Isabella Guanzini dedicates herself particularly to the lectures from 1920–1921, in which Heidegger discovers the significance of the question of time and the phenomenological understanding of life, topics that are further developed in *Being and Time* (1927) and later works. As Guanzini shows, in the Pauline experience of time as the expectation of the Parousia, which is rooted in faith, Heidegger detects the model for a contemporary thinking on a “broken temporality” and the “facticity of life”. It is not objectifiable, linear-historical development, but memory and expectation which structure the temporality of human existence.

Marc De Kesel’s article “The power to say I. Reflections on the modernity of Simone Weil’s mystical thought” analyses Simone Weil’s turn to religion as an expression of a deep reflection on the question of what it means to be “modern”. Her mysticism is not characterized by a nostalgic longing for a lost tradition but can be understood as a systematic exploration and articulation of the unfathomability of the modern subject in the context of a “secular” era and the rediscovery of religious faith.

In his article, Evert van der Zweerde describes the continuity and basic pattern in the thinking of Vladimir Solov’ev, who can be considered the founder of Russian religious philosophy. Solov’ev’s thinking is characterized by the ideal of a “total vision” of reality into which mystical elements (“sophiology”) as well as ethical, socio-economic and political questions are incorporated. In his thought the tension between religious experience, secular reason and politics finds an expression in the tension between mystical experience and devotion to modern secularized science on the one hand, but also in the tension between his endorsement of the monarchy and Solov’ev’s revolutionary disposition on the other hand.

Hans Schelkshorn’s article focuses on the cultural-political and religious-philosophical debates in South America, where positivism became a state doctrine in the second half of the 19th century. In his essay “Ariel” (1900), openly criticizing the positivist modernization strategy in which the USA served as a civilizing role model, José Enrique Rodó demands a return to the “Latin” roots of South America, more specifically Greek culture and early Christianity. With his secular rehabilitation of religious questions and horizons of meaning, Rodó did not only provoke a youth revolt in South America but also initiated a fundamental cultural-political reorientation. The “birth of Latin America” is thus – following Hans Schelkshorn’s hypothesis – the fruit of a spiritual revolt

which was largely initiated by José Enrique Rodó and carried on by representatives of the philosophy of life (José Vasconcelos, Antonio Caso) who founded Latin American philosophy as well as the theologies and philosophies of liberation in the 20th century.

In his article, Stephan Popp dedicates himself to the thinking of Muhammad Iqbal, who became the spiritual father of Pakistan through his poetry, his religious and philosophical work and his political activity. Despite his intention merely to accomplish a return to the Qur'an, Iqbal deals with numerous schools of modern European philosophy – on the one hand Kant and German Idealism, on the other hand Henri Bergson's philosophy of life – in a creative and critical way. One significant focal point of his thought however is his confrontation with Nietzsche whose criticism of European culture he receives albeit without accepting his answers. Because of his constructive criticism of modernity, Muhammad Iqbal is an important leading figure for liberal Muslims today.

Karl Baier's article "Swami Vivekananda. Reformed Hinduism, nationalism and scientific Yoga" focuses on the most influential representative of Neo-Hinduism. After delineating Vivekananda's biography and the religious-political context, Baier makes a precise analysis of the heterogeneous sources and intentions of Vivekananda's renewal of Hinduism through a creative reinterpretation of the Vedanta teaching. Starting from an inclusivist understanding of religion he thoroughly examines the relations between religion and the Indian nation and particularly Vivekananda's theory of religious experience in the context of his philosophy of yoga, which can be attributed to the paradigm of modern scientific experiential religiosity. Unlike more hagiographical interpretations, Baier carves out the contradictory and also problematic aspects of Vivekananda's thinking, which to this day continues to have an effect on Indian society.

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Biography

Hans Schelkshorn is head of the Department for Christian Philosophy at the University of Vienna. He studied philosophy, catholic theology and classical philology in Vienna and Tübingen (Germany). His main research fields are ethics, philosophy of religion, political philosophy, intercultural philosophy with a focus on Latin American philosophy, and theories of modernity. He is member of the research-center "Religion and Transformation in Contemporary Society" (RaT), co-editor of the journal "Polylog – Zeitschrift für interkulturelles Philosophieren" (www.polylog.net) and president of the Viennese Society of Intercultural Philosophy (WIGIP).

Biography

Herman Westerink is Senior Researcher at the Titus Brandsma Institute, and Associate Professor at the Center for Contemporary European Philosophy, Radboud University Nijmegen, and Extraordinary Professor at the KU Leuven. He has published many books and articles in philosophy of religion, psychology of religion and psychoanalysis. Recently he published *Reformation(en) und Moderne. Philosophisch-theologische Erkundungen* (2017) together with Hans Schelkshorn.

Translated by Natalie Eder