

Overall, I cannot stress enough the importance of Clark and Winslett's work. A work like theirs is long overdue. It should prove to be a lasting and necessary resource for all of those interested in studies related to the philosophies of China and sinology more generally.

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Robyn Horner and Claude Romano (eds), *The Experience of Atheism: Phenomenology, Metaphysics and Religion*

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This volume is a creative result of the project 'Atheism and Christianity: Moving Past Polemic' (2017–2019), led by the Institute for Religion and Critical Inquiry (IRCI) at the Australian Catholic University (ACU). Instead of approaching atheism simply as a collection of philosophical arguments against the existence of God, the authors in this volume – an international group of scholars following in the tradition of French phenomenology and cognate schools of thought – delve into atheism as a lived experience. In their opening chapter the editors introduce two varieties of atheism to the reader: (i) 'literalist atheism', or the theoretical denial that any deities exist; and (ii) atheism as a 'loss of God'. This second variety is an experiential variant of unbelief which has been often called 'practical atheism', where God is felt to be absent in a personal sense (as in the crucifixion in the Gospels) or as a cultural event (Nietzsche's apocalyptic pronouncement that 'God is Dead').

The first part of the book introduces the 'experience of atheism', the absence of God as a lived reality. The late Jean-Luc Nancy, in the second chapter, paints a grim picture of modern atheism, describing it as spiritually arid. He expands upon a quotation from a Jean-Christophe Bailly novel, *Adieu: Essai sur la mort des dieux* (1993), stating that 'atheism has not found a way to irrigate its own desert' (19). Jeffrey Bloechl explores a particular type of atheism where an individual desires to believe in God but cannot. He delineates four forms of disbelief with different affects attached: (i) an 'atheism of refusal', a zealous and critical answer to religion that aims to create an alternative to faith, and (ii) an 'atheism of loss' which denies the existence of God through the recognition of human suffering. He further classifies (iii) the 'atheism of closure', a form of belief where non-believers no longer treat the problem of theism as a live issue, and (iv) 'frustrated atheism', where an individual is given the opportunity to have faith in God, and hopes to believe, but is somehow unable to. The fourth chapter, by Christiane Malabou, turns to anarchist thought, where repeated attempts have been made since the nineteenth century to topple the

idea of God as a master (or metaphysical substitutes for this notion) in the name of radical freedom from domination: hence the French anarchist motto, 'No Gods, No Masters' (35). But Malabou suggests that similar deconstructive approaches among modern philosophers since then (e.g. the Christian anarchist Jacques Ellul) have not dispensed with the idea of a unifying and powerful principle over all reality, and are not therefore atheistic: rather these thinkers introduce a bizarre, self-effacing higher power that does not wield any literal power. This is followed by the fifth chapter by Quentin Meillassoux, who offers a new reading for the famed atheism of the French symbolist poet Mallarmé. One of the letters penned by Mallarmé to a friend in 1866 is often taken by commentators to express in apocalyptic terms the 'Death of God', but in view of Mallarmé's works and his historical background Meillassoux offers a different interpretation. In this letter of spiritual crisis, Mallarmé proclaims that humans are only 'empty matter' and in the same breath he denies the existence of both God and the soul: we are left only with 'nothingness' (*le néant*). Yet although he no longer regarded religious experience as a genuine indicator of divine power, Mallarmé realized that religiosity nonetheless furnished a powerful fiction which had the capacity to elevate people from their ordinary world and indeed provided them with a fundamental motivation to persist in life; his poetry was designed to stimulate this sense of desire for the transcendent (a desire that was specifically stirred by its absence). The sixth chapter, by Christopher Watkin, examines the thought of the late French philosopher Michel Serres, and his paradoxical stance on atheism. Sympathetic to Serres's thought, Watkin commences with the assertion that 'there is no experience of pure atheism' (61), namely that atheists must always have at least a modicum of religious (and indeed theistic) experience in their daily life. Watkin proceeds to outline the theology of Serres, a cultural Christian who claimed that he was an atheist 'three-quarters of the time' and that every personal and cultural experience could be 'translated' as a religious or secular depending on the mode of interpretation that one adopts. For example, Serres suggests that the fatal space shuttle *Challenger* disaster of 1986 can be construed as a scientific error, but can also be interpreted as a modern form of human sacrifice: both approaches are equally valid and none should take precedence as the ultimate account of the experience; they irreducibly overlap.

The next three chapters examine the experience of atheism from a theistic point of view. The strongest contribution here is the chapter by Richard Kearney, who presents his variety of theism as 'anatheism', glossed as 'after God'. Kearney advocates a philosophical and open-minded mode of theism which reflects the awareness that the old religious conceptions of the divine have disintegrated, but remains open to salvaging a sense of the divine after the 'Death of God', the 'remaindered God to come' (79). Kearney's stance is not presented as the product of dialectical progress, a view that supersedes theism and atheism as a synthesis that is superior to the ideas that came before it: rather it is a response to belief that has always been historically available, namely the moment when an individual is faced with new possibilities and embraces doubt and mystery: 'anatheist faith is about something lost that is found again' (81), 'a genuine second naiveté after the loss of one's first naiveté' (85). This is followed by the chapter by Emmanuel Falque, who draws a parallel between the atheistic discourse of climate change and Christian eschatology, pointing out that both present an 'end times' for humanity at large. Falque suggests that the idea of Christian apocalypse is fundamentally intertwined with three concepts: revelation (as an 'unveiling of the truth'), the realization of the end times, and conversion to Christ. If scripture suggests that God is present even at the very end, Falque suggests that this parallel could be informative in our present climate crisis, which requires its own 'conversion' in the face of end times.

The final five chapters explore different phenomenological treatments of religious experience. The chapter by Philippe Cabestan presents a critical account of Sartre and Heidegger, who both presented divergent interpretations on the 'Death of God', the cultural and experiential demise of God that Nietzsche's modern prophet famously announced in the marketplace. Cabestan argues that Sartre neglected treating this historical event with the attention it deserves, but merely relegated it to other elements in his evolving thought. The chapter by Tamsin Jones presents religious experience as a phenomenon comparable to trauma in several respects, and she also discusses the reliability of religious experience as an indicator for the existence of God. Jones first turns to the question of causation in religious experience with a literary example: if Scrooge sees the phantom of Marley, does the ghost of the clerk have a fundamental reality of his own or is he merely a misperception from natural causes? Phenomenologists often suspend judgement on questions of this kind, critically examining the ghost only as it *appears* to the subject Scrooge. An adherent of 'radical empiricism' in the treatment of religious experience (a Jamesian school of thought which grants reality and explanatory value to experiences of any variety), Orsi suggests that religious experience manifests itself in material and publicly observable phenomena – emotive displays, rites, behaviours – but it cannot be ruled out that religious experience itself points to a higher power. The chapter by Patrick Masterson argues for a complementary approach between metaphysics and phenomenology which does not suspend judgement on the nature of external reality and its causal relationship with religious experience. The chapter by Christina M. Gschwandtner presents a critique of the phenomenological theology of Jean-Luc Marion, in a methodical discussion. She introduces a key problem in his theology: Marion argues that religious experience serves as universally accessible foundation for the belief in God, but how can he account for atheists who do not appear to have revelatory religious experiences (or interpret these experiences non-theologically)? As Benoist asked Marion, 'what will you say to me if I say to you that where you see God, I see nothing?' (166). Arguing that Marion cannot provide a satisfactory answer for the atheist who cannot experience God, Gschwandtner concludes her critique with the observation that Marion presents God as an invisible, anti-phenomenal being which cannot be perceived even in his gifts, leading her to conclude that in his theology, which at least purports to be a phenomenology of religion, 'the divine . . . cannot be phenomenalized at all' (180). The final chapter, by Jean-Luc Marion himself, presents the case against the alignment of modern metaphysics with theology, a trend that he argues became fully fledged in late scholastic philosophy and persists today in the modern study of religion. By presenting God as an entity posited in an abstract system, Marion argues that contemporary philosophers present God in an idolatrous manner, subordinating divine power to mere categories of human making: we are left with a perverse 'science of God' (185). As an alternative, Marion sketches a theological stance which abandons metaphysics and its categories for an unconditional 'love' for God, an experiential stance of reverential submission where is God is thought to be beyond all rational and logical limitations.

Next, some brief comments. The editors' two arguments against theoretical atheism are probably too brief and undeveloped to be persuasive (5–7), and a few chapters could have been written with greater clarity (e.g. chapter 9). In general, the Greek terminology can introduce confusion in a couple of chapters, attributable in part to the intellectual tradition of Derrida and his cavalier approach to manipulating the forms and meanings of Greek words. An argument for this approach is that free-for-all wordplay can fuel inventive associations between concepts, but in my view the result is too often rhetorical and reliant on mistakes that the intended audience may not recognize as purely didactic fictions. Kearney's chapter shows the limits to this approach in his linguistic explanation for 'anatheism' (79–81). I disagree that it is helpful to say that

the *ana-* prefix can serve as both a privative (*a-theos*) and a preposition (*ana-theos*) at the same time (80), when this is morphologically incorrect and the point could have been conveyed through some other colourful rhetorical example. For a close lexical reading Kearney's 'broad' translation of 'anatheism' as 'after God' should also probably be avoided, since the prefix *ana-* cannot be felicitously translated as 'after'. Aside from these methodological issues there are oversights in the biblical Greek in Falque's discussion. For example, οὐρανὸν καινόν is incorrectly transliterated as *kainon octopus* (97, from autocorrect?) and ὁ γὰρ καιρὸς ἐγγύς as *o gar kairos eggus* (101); read instead *ho gar kairos engus*. Falque also appears to misread γέγονεν at Rev. 16:27 as an imperative (97) when the verb is in the perfect indicative (= 'it has come to pass, happened') and does not differ with γέγονα in mood and aspect (as is written at *ibid.*). There are also errors in the Latin citations in Marion's concluding chapter. For instance, in the 1856 Suarez text quoted *vel* should read *aut*, *theologis* should read *theologicis*, and *nimirum* should read *nimum* (184); in the 1968 Clauberg text read *&/et* for 'and', and *praemitemus* for *praetermitemus* (186 n. 8); Book I should be cited instead of Book II for Aquinas's *Contra Gentiles* (197 n. 37).

The Experience of Atheism introduces the reader to a multitude of novel philosophical approaches to modern unbelief with overall success. Although some chapters in the volume could have been written more carefully with an eye for clarity and the use of linguistic argument, the contributions are generally good and provide a useful map to navigate the wide array of discussions that continue to develop in this field. It is a short read, but there is an abundance of content for reflection and every reader will find something of benefit in order to understand their own personal relation to religious (or non-religious) experience.

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