European Society for Philosophy of Religion Conference 'Transforming Religion'

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The 20th biennial European Society for Philosophy of Religion conference took place in the period 28-31 August 2014 in Münster (Germany). Its theme 'Transforming Religion' and its four different sessions attracted a diversity of papers, both from those for whom philosophy (thinking) precedes, underpins and informs scientific thinking and from those for whom scientific theories are paradigmatic for all other disciplines. In the latter case, it was sometimes difficult to discern the critical and, to some extent, independent thinking, which, arguably, characterises philosophy. What now follows is a review of the main papers and a few short papers (which have been submitted to the conference organisers). Jörg Dierken (Halle-Wittenberg) and Simo Knuuttila (Helsinki) opened the first session, in which the question of whether we can speak of the 'evolution' (development) of religion was addressed. Steve Fuller (Warwick) and Taede Smedes (Nijmegen) were invited to consider whether religion can and should be understood from an evolutionary perspective. What are the implications if we do? Niels Henrik Gregersen (Copenhagen) and Klaus Müller (Münster) offered us accounts of panentheism in the third session. Panentheism, it appeared, can be considered as an alternative conception of God in light of the evolution theory. Finally, the relation between religion and societal progress was the subject into which Daphne Hampson (St. Andrews) and Walter van Herck (Antwerp) delved.

It is quite fitting that a conference on religion and transformation (or evolution) should include some reflection on the nature of 'religion' and the end of 'evolution' or progress. This is the task (among others) that Jörg Dierken sets himself in his presentation. To the question of whether we can speak of 'progress' when it comes to religion, he replies cautiously in the affirmative. Caution is warranted for several reasons. What is, indeed, progress? In retrospect, the various totalitarian systems, based on thoroughly secular ideas, cannot be reckoned as progress. The very idea of progress has therefore suffered serious blows. However, as Dierken notes, it has not been totally discredited. It has regained legitimacy in the fight against ageing and ecological degeneration. Today, the end (*telos*) of progress is not necessarily growth. Conservation may be higher up the agenda. Yet, the progress that (ecological or bodily) conservation requires is still largely conceived as material (technological, economic and medical). But clearly, such a conception of progress is not suitable for measuring the transformation of religion. Religion, Dierken, emphasises, has to be conceived in a non-functionalist fashion. This means that it is not to be considered as an answer to a question or some need.

Dierken, instead, sees religion as that which holds together dualities such as salvation/the finitude and brokenness of human life, faith/doubt, individual autonomy/community, subjective moods/rituals. He thereby presumes a religion that includes the idea of transcendence and the corresponding striving for universality, which are allegedly both absent in animism and tribal cults. Dierken, in fact, suggests that the development of transcendence and the corresponding claim to universality – the so-called 'axial age' – may be perceived as progress in the history of religion. The striving for transcendence and universality enables transformation and salvation (however diversely understood), which are in principle within the reach of all those involved. Yet, progress in the case of religion, Dierken emphasises, cannot be at the expense, or in spite, of individual (subjective) histories and judgements. He is thereby not advocating subjectivism, but correcting the absolutism that is inherent in conceptions of progress that bracket off individual histories and experiences as if they were subordinate to (or necessary sacrifices for) greater ends.

It is possible, according to Dierken, to judge, to apply qualitative distinctions (good/bad, better or higher) to religion or faith. A few 'criteria' for judging the progress in religion, which he mentions, include internal consistency, the degree of self-reflection, the declining use of violence or coercion, the (religious) recognition of ambivalence and difference, and the distinction between religious and political motives. However, the possibility of judging a religion and religious developments also means that a particular religion can present itself as better, higher, or the perfection of other religions. Such self-perception is, of course, problematic if it goes hand in hand with forced conversion. Less extremely, it stands in tension with pluralism. But the latter cannot imply the suspension of judgement. Dierken therefore proposes a 'hermeneutic of religion', which is a 'hermeneutic of differences' in the context of competing religions (which Dierken refers to as 'individual totalities') that claim universality. But just as importantly, he stresses the importance of constantly re-examining our taken-for-granted ideas of progress.

Similarly to Dierken, Simo Knuuttila takes the tendency to ask 'why religion' to task and emphasises the need to understand religions on their own terms without giving up critical thinking (of course). But this is as far as the resemblance goes. While ambivalence and tensions are key features in Dierken's analysis, immutability and harmonious juxtaposition stick out in Knuuttila's account of religion. Distancing himself from the cognitive science of religion's conceptualisation of religion (defined as the belief in supernatural beings) as a by-product of cognitive functions, Knuuttila understands religion as embodying a revealed unchanging order of meaning in a constantly changing world. This 'immutability' of religion can refer to some sort of absolute immutability, as in the case of those who regard the holy books as written by God himself without human intervention. But it can also refer to the immutability of the divine message or of the relationship between humans and God. In the latter case, there is a change, but it is one that pertains to the interpretation of revelation. Re-interpretation is necessary in new historical situations in order to maintain the sameness of the kerygmatic content, which is itself independent of particular historical contexts. Knuuttila thereby distinguishes

between 'non-temporal institutions' – which correspond to the kerygmatic content or the conceived relationship between God and humans – and 'culturally dependent secondary aspects', which include languages, for instance. He points to a dualism that is involved in living both as a spiritual being in an unchanging order and as a material being in the temporal world. It is significant that Knuuttila wants to capture this condition by his notion of the 'double life', thereby asserting that it is possible to live both as a scientific materialist and a spiritual, religious person. He does not try to relate the two by, for instance, considering the possibilities of the transfiguration of the mundane by transcendence and of the mundane containing transcendence.

While Dierken and Knuuttila presume Christianity and its continuation, Daphne Hampson advocates between post and Christianity. She argues that the precondition for progress, for a 'just and enlightened society' is the end of the Abrahamic religions, including Christianity. The Christian message of the love of one's neighbour and its practice, Hampson admits, has supported much development in Western societies. But such contribution is outweighed by the long and often gory history of Christian patriarchalism or sexism and colonialism/imperialism. In fact, Hampson notes, charity itself can be oppressive. She is thereby repeating, in a less sophisticated fashion, Nietzsche's critique of Christian benevolence. But even more fundamentally, patriarchalism, sexism, nay, fascism belongs to the nature of Christianity. This means that however much transformation it may have undergone, it cannot go beyond its own essence, which is that of a 'historical religion'. In other words, Christianity (like the other Abrahamic religions) is dependent on one particular event in the past (the life, death and resurrection of Jesus). According to Hampson, this means that it is connected with that past, which somehow constitutes its limit. This argument (which is, of course, an old one) makes one wonder whether she is unaware of the metaphor of Christianity as leaven for society.

Even more surprising is Hampson's claim that the conception of God as 'moving between us and being within us' has been developed by feminists (though she also credits Schleiermacher with it). She thereby overlooks the fact that such an understanding of God is to be found in Augustine, but even more importantly, is presumed by many Christians living an authentic religious life, in which *metanoia* (of individual persons and relationships) can take place precisely because God is in and between us (*ubi caritas et amor deus ibi est*). The spirituality that Hampson is advocating can hardly be called post-Christian since it has always been part and parcel of the Christian legacy (see also Klaus Müller's paper), alongside the many strands of Christian thought and practices. However, it is quite true that it has had a hard time as soon as theology started 'to become like other disciplines' (which is the dream of Hampson). Given the hegemony of positivism (in different disguises) in the academic world, we may hope that that wish of hers is not fulfilled. A genuine post-Christian theology or philosophy has to involve a critical re-evaluation of current epistemological assumptions, which are in some way or another tied up with particular Christian theologies. There is still a long (and difficult) way to go if one wishes to discard the Christian legacy and all that which rests on it. And it may

perhaps be wondered whether the equality of human dignity to which Hampson is committed will survive without its roots.

'Evolution' of religion there is, according to Walter van Herck, but it is not a development to be applauded. Drawing on the works of the French social scientist Olivier Roy, he points to the 'exculturation' of religion, which is captured by the term 'pure religion'. He therefore accepts Roy's use of and distinction between the two entities 'culture' and 'religion' (even if he advocates their non-separation). In fact, Van Herck seems to agree with Roy's thesis that the exculturation of religion is the root of religious fundamentalism (violence), but also of charismatic forms of religion. Long gone are the days of 'acculturation' or 'inculturation'. Exculturation, however, also applies to secular society ('culture') itself. Indeed, Van Herck sees the transition to 'pure religion' as part of what he calls our 'postmodern condition'. He therefore seems to deplore a state of cultural amnesia, which is expressed in illiteracy in history, morality, art, symbols, literature, music and rituals. Quoting Roy, he explains that secularisation has given religion the autonomy to 'reformulate itself in a secularized space', to become 'pure religion'. It took me a while to realise that this observation is, in fact, a criticism.

At first, I thought (mistakenly) that Van Herck was referring to the argument that secularisation has finally rendered to Christianity its proper place, which is to be transcendence, empowering spirit and not an ally of political power. Such conclusion seemed to be warranted since Van Herck refers to Rousseau's observation that the reason why there were no 'religious' wars in ancient times was (obviously) because politics and religion were not separated. Christianity brought about the desacralisation of politics, but soon enough started to borrow the secular arm. The centuries-long alliance between Christian churches and State power is generally conceived as a distortion of Christianity by theologians and Christian philosophers. I therefore thought that both Roy and Van Herck referred to the end of that insalubrious relationship. But I got the wrong end of the stick. Van Herck does not wish to argue along these lines. So, what is he then saying? It is clear that he is highly critical of the marketization of religion and religious experience. He therefore does not think highly of attempts to 'dress' Christianity in order to appeal to contemporaries. Marketization, he points out, entails the 'formatting' of religions – and hence their homogenisation. One may, however, wonder whether the old form of religion is an alternative at all (I am not suggesting that there are only two alternatives).

Van Herck, indeed, distinguishes between an 'old' type of religion in which culture and religion are related and the more recent form of 'pure religion'. (He thereby does not seem to differentiate between the pre-Christian and Christian religions in ancient times and therefore does not take into account the desacralisation of the political that I mentioned above). He emphasises how religion, including conversion, was a collective and not personal choice as it is today. It is unclear whether conversion here refers to the conversion of the religious extremist or of the faithful since he notes that 'self-conversion' is incited by books, films and internet. In the latter case, that would be an inadequate understanding of religious life. Similarly, when he holds that it is a form of self-delusion for religions (based on

revelation) and their adherents to believe that they can be independent of 'culture', it is unclear whether he means that a religion is necessarily material (bodily) – which is indubitable – or whether he is denying that there are religious standards/values/norms that stand in tension with 'worldly' (or current) standards/values/norms. For instance, the religious virtue of mercy and forgiveness may be preferred to the dominant 'cultural' ideal of meritocracy and retaliation. Voluntary poverty may be preferred to a culture of affluence. Such confusion could perhaps have been avoided if the umbrella term 'culture' were not presented as some kind of arbiter of religion. On a side note, I wonder whether Roy's conceptual framework does justice to Van Herck's intuitions.

The evolutionary theory (or any other scientific theory), Niels Henrik Gregersen warns, does not *necessarily* have implications for philosophy and theology. The latter two disciplines distinguish themselves from the natural sciences both methodologically and in their different aspirations. Hence, Gregersen explains that since the concept of God bears on the question of ultimate reality, it cannot be the object of the biological sciences. Besides, scientific theories themselves, he reminds us, are not brute facts, but involve theoretical (philosophical) thinking. At the same time, Gregersen is committed to the ideal of relating (as philosopher or theologian) to the natural sciences. Hence, he seems to think that the philosopher/theologian has to speak a language that makes comparison/confrontation of truth claims possible. (Whether this is possible or desirable given the conflicting premises and languages is a different matter). Quite similarly to Knuuttila, he deems it possible to 'believe in a timeless personal deity' and to be 'an uncompromising Darwinian in biology' simultaneously.

Gregersen himself has sympathy (to some extent) for the neo-Darwinian position because the latter allegedly does not presume necessary progress, but instead sees progress as some kind of 'by-product'. His aim is to develop (theologically and philosophically) a richer or fuller account of evolution. Along this line, Lady Fortuna becomes the servant of God. Hence, while the idea of self-organisation is often propounded as a substitute for the idea of a divine designer, Gregersen points to the incorrect assumptions underlying such opposition (God as an 'external agent'). God and the world (or for that matter, nature/matter), he holds, are not to be seen as rivals. Instead, God is in and behind natural processes and 'works' in and through his creatures. Hence, the 'self-productivity' of creation is a manifestation, rather than the denial, of God. Gregersen's Christian 'panentheism' rests on the premise that the finite (immanence) can 'contain' the infinite (transcendence) – not exhaustively of course, and vice versa.

Klaus Müller elaborates on panentheism, which he considers as the response to the 'crisis of classical theism', but perhaps even more importantly, as the way to restore the intellectual probity of Christian faith and thought, and the credibility of Christianity. More than (or, contrary to) Gregersen and Knuuttila, Müller sees the problem of a 'structural schizophrenia between religion and the rest of life'. Hence, instead of some kind of 'double life', he argues not only for an intellectually honest philosophy of religion, but also for a reform of the natural sciences so that the latter include, from the very outset, the non-empirical or that which goes beyond

the senses. The reasons for Müller's defence of the 'panentheistic turn' (despite the fact that the idea of panentheism is not specifically modern) are related to this quest for intellectual honesty (truth). If God is all so that nothing else exists outside him, then for a non-God reality to exist, the latter has to exist 'within God'. Panentheism, he claims, can address the question of cosmology and of creation in the light of our present knowledge of the universe; it can help us rethink the spirituality of matter; and, it takes the problem of evil and suffering seriously. Panentheism, as Müller explains, means 'pan en theo' ('everything in God'). The 'in' is interpreted substantially so that the created 'unfolds a feedback onto God'. The creator is not unaffected by creation. But Müller's panentheism is no Hegelian panentheism since God does not become through (though is affected by) human history. The term 'dipolarity' captures the idea that God is unalterable and at the same time 'dependent' on his creation. Such 'dependence' is most aptly expressed in the reciprocity of the love relationship between God and living beings. God wants to be loved.

The contrast between Müller's proposition and Steve Fuller's narrative is quite pronounced. The latter is clearly dependent on a type of classical theism and Hegelianism. The love of God is therefore conspicuously absent. According to Fuller, religion is a remnant of the ancient world, and consists primarily in certain beliefs and social practices, or what he calls 'carrots and sticks'. As he himself admits, he is more interested in the nature of God than in that of religion. This conceptual framework of his does not really allow for the idea of the 'evolution of religion', in the sense of the transformation of religion in such a way that religion still is after its transformation. Instead, progress, for Fuller, is the dissolution of religion ('a quest for meaning', for instance) into the Christian conception of God. Religion or faith gives way to 'epistemic progress'. It is significant that Fuller draws a parallel between his argument and Hegel's thought. Hence, the Christianity that he defends is one devoid of dogmas, rituals and churches. What matters is the Christian conception of God as an intelligent creative deity in whose 'virtues' humans 'univocally' partake.

Fuller avows his indebtedness to the Scotist legacy, despite the fact that Scotus' emphasis on loving God and his Christology are absent in the former's discourse and paper. Progress, as far as Fuller is concerned, refers to the improvement of 'deep human cognitive processes' and such progress could not have taken place without the Christian conception of God (as he conceives it). In this sense, evolution (the progress of science) and Christianity (in Fuller's sense) are closely related. There is, of course, no reason why such progress should have any limit or should confine itself to the *homo sapiens*. Hence, he suggests that it is possible for (future?) animals, machines and cyborgs to possess the capacities that purportedly bring us closer to the mind of the Christian deity. My own paper ('theosis contra transhumanism') contests this conception of Christianity and of the Christian God. But disagreements are, arguably, a sign of academic vitality. More relevantly, I believe that Fuller's position constitutes an invitation to philosophers to overcome their shyness to talk about God (in a way that befits the subject matter) and to forgo their frequent recourse to a 'safe' sociology of religion.

Taede A. Smedes does not find the endeavours to solve 'the evolutionary problem of religion' (namely, the fact that religion does not seem to serve survival) very convincing. A solution has been to conceive religion as promoting morality and human cooperation, and as deterring cheating or selfishness. This is the moralistic conception of religion that Fuller also presumes (and scorns) when he refers to its 'carrots and sticks'. Smedes, similarly, expresses his discontent with such an approach. Furthermore, religion as a biological adaptation, he argues, still does not explain why people worship God(s). So we need a different story, which, according to Smedes, can be provided by the cognitive science of religion (CSR). The research done by the latter would suggest that religion (or the receptivity to religion), rather than being (merely) an adaptation, is a 'by-product' of 'ordinary operation of human minds in natural ordinary environments'. Along this line, it is as 'natural' as 'walking, taking, chewing'. Smedes realises that theologians and philosophers tend to be less enthusiastic about the CSR since research results have been used to support the utterly unoriginal complaint about religion being an illusion, irrational, and so on. Indeed, a 'by-product' might as well be some nasty 'side-effect'. Smedes, on the contrary, believes that the data of CSR can counter the 'indoctrination thesis' propounded by the so-called New Atheists.

Smedes emphasises that the findings of the CSR in and of themselves do not constitute any claim about the (un)truth of religions/religious claims and beliefs. According to him, 'the CSR describes the way our being human *configures* the way we think and talk about God', nothing more, nothing less (I am still trying to puzzle out who or what exactly configures these mental and linguistic habits). The CSR apparently also supports our anthropomorphic religious language (we cannot help being humans), which is a good thing, according to Smedes, as long as we combine it with apophatic theology/philosophy. Finally, Smedes has recourse to the social and subjective dimensions involved in the interpretation of revelation and (potentially) religious phenomena in order to explain the puzzle of religious diversity in light of religion being purportedly a 'maturationally natural cognition'. It is unclear to me what the CSR adds to Smedes' approach to revelation, especially since he emphasises that discernment or perception is an embodied activity (and hence not purely 'cognitive').

The short papers, as it is to be expected, were as varied as the main papers. Damiano Bondi's presentation consists in a critical appraisal of the Gaia theory. The latter (w)holistic approach to life, with its emphasis on some kind of symbiosis, is propounded as a credible rival to the (neo)-Darwinian paradigm. According to Bondi, the attempts to merge these two approaches fail because they are based on conflicting premises. But he is also critical of the Gaia theory, especially of its anti-humanism and its aura of sacredness. To hearken to James Lovelock – the one who has reportedly revived the idea of the Earth as a quasi-sacred community of living beings and things – would entail that we have to give up our human responsibility towards the eco-system. As Bondi implies, it would be a dangerous complacency to believe that the harm done by humans will be 'naturally' solved if we *choose* to live like other animals.

Marco Damonte defends a version of natural theology that does not suffer from its rationalistic predecessors. Such theology, because of its philosophical dimensions, could enable genuine (interreligious) dialogues. After a brief overview of natural theology in Aristotle, the Stoics, Plotinus, Augustine and Calvin, Damonte reflects on contemporary endeavours to revive natural theology. Indeed, in modern times, natural theology has been discredited in the eyes of Christians (Barth, for instance). Damonte argues that they, in fact, resisted distorted versions of natural theology. Most natural theologies that prevailed in the modern (Enlightenment) era were based on the new epistemological assumptions that also underlined the modern natural sciences. The idea of a *logos* (Christian or pagan) permeating creation (matter) was gone, giving rise to the dualism between subject (human mind) and object (nature or world). It is in this (rationalistic) climate that the notion of 'pure nature' arose. Recent forms of natural theology take (human) nature as their point of departure. However, that human nature is no longer rationalistically defined. And, the belief in brute natural facts has also been relinquished. Nicholas Wolterstorff, whom Damonte mentions as one of the contemporary proponents of natural theology, explicitly defends the *imago dei* as an understanding of human nature. Alister McGrath is known for his emphasis on the discernment and interpretation of phenomena. Natural theology, Damonte argues, is necessary for a mature religious life and is the precondition for a (philosophical) theology/ philosophy (of religion).

Leland Harper takes to task an updated version of deism, which he discerns in the works of Nancey Murphy and Thomas Tracy. Epistemic deism (which he distinguishes from 'metaphysical deism') allows for God's intervention in the 'natural world', in an invisible way, without our being able to discern it. Hence, personal relationships with God, miracles and responses to prayer are excluded. There is still some 'causal closure', as Harper calls it. (His choice of language would suggest that he himself wishes to remain within the deistic/naturalistic framework). God therefore acts on the quasi-invisible micro-or subatomic- level. Harper sees Murphy's and Tracy's accounts of God's intervention (I wonder why he eschews the word 'presence'?) in the world as alternatives to classical theistic models. However, he points out contradictions and flaws in these accounts. These confirm his view that epistemic deism is only a weak form of deism, which cannot help us address pressing questions in philosophy/religion.

How can we counter both scientistic and religious authoritarianism, and how can we distinguish between true and untrue religious beliefs? By endorsing a 'pragmatic naturalism', Ana Honnacker claims. Such naturalism is non-reductionist and anti-supernaturalist. Honnacker thereby subscribes to the humanism of William James, his 'radical empiricism' and his pragmatist conception of truth. This means that various forms of human experience are taken seriously. Conversely, all that which is not grounded in human experience is excluded. (This view does not seem to reckon with the fact that 'experience' is not a constant, but is itself dependent on many factors). True are those religious beliefs that work or have survived. However, if it is true that only that which is useful has survived, it is unclear why we still have to discern and condemn 'superfluous and empty hypotheses'. Chance

or necessity does not seem to have done a good job of getting rid of the garbage. Ironically enough, the 'pragmatist's razor' – along with assertions that 'some images of God or Gods just don't work anymore' – smacks of the authoritarianism that Honnacker's naturalism claims to overcome.

Sabrina Hoppe considers a German phenomenon called 'public theology' (a term coined in the 1970s, according to her), which allegedly has Dietrich Bonhoeffer as role model. 'Public theology' raises the question regarding the 'right' relationship between church (religion) and politics. While Hoppe herself positively appraises such engagement of Protestant churches with public issues, she also points to more critical voices that see such 'interference' as a sign that churches perceive themselves as more than civil society associations. Churches, Hoppe notes, do consider themselves as part of civil society, but are also aware of their duties towards society. Their vocation, as they conceive it, is to keep the conscience of society awake (think of Bonhoeffer) – and hence to be the motor of change – and to be the voice of the voiceless (following liberation theology). Public theology, unlike a civil religion, Hoppe emphasises, can provide individuals with different ('broader') perspectives of life, as long as its representatives genuinely value individual persons 'as reasonable and responsible for their personal life choices'.

Hoppe's appreciation of public theology presumes an assessment of the current state of German society (which is also that of most European societies). Peter Jonkers explicitly characterises the latter as a world of seekers, who are genuinely seeking orientation and ways to live truthful lives. Christian churches, or even more specifically, the Roman Catholic Church, he believes, can respond to this new challenge by restoring its tradition of wisdom. But this implies, according to Jonkers, that it has to give up Neo-Thomism, which used to be the official theology/philosophy of the Church. Neo-Thomism, he points out, served its purpose in the battle or dialogue with positivism (whose heydays were the 19th and 20th centuries). Our new age, he argues, demands a new theology or new way of being Church. Doctrinal dogmatism is an inadequate response. Though Jonkers does not imply that positivism is dead, he sees more urgent issues (like the existential struggle of so many). But not unimportantly, he perceives Neo-Thomism as inherently (and hence not just in relation to the new challenges) problematic. Two main reasons that he mentions are, namely, that it does not do justice to the apophatic tradition and the God that it presumes/promotes is not suitable for personal piety or communal worship. Paul Ricoeur's philosophical approach to the bible, according to Jonkers, is a good example of an attempt to recover the notion and practice of (Christian) wisdom from religious texts/traditions.

Friederike Rass, similarly, starts with the contemporary condition, which she characterises as being existentially 'homeless' (a term that she borrows from Gunnar Hindrichs). Yet, such a condition is not necessarily to be deplored, or so she seems to say. Indeed, according to her, this lack of meaning or this unfulfilled need for self-transcendence makes contemporaries receptive to the Christian dimension in Western culture. That 'Christian dimension' is, according to her, the 'non-foundational structure' of Christianity. For this view she is indebted to

contemporary philosophers (such as John Caputo, Jean-Luc Nancy and Gianni Vattimo) who do not identify themselves as religious and yet ponder on the 'event' in religion (Christianity in particular). Rass believes that this approach is 'very promising' because it counters both relativism and dogmatism. Along this line, the Incarnation is re-interpreted as the 'negation of any metaphysical or positive understanding of God'. What does all this imply for Christian churches? Rass emphasises that it is not the task of churches to provide contemporaries with meanings, or to fulfil existential needs. Though she does not tell us in so many words, it seems reasonable to conclude that she supports the end of (confessional) churches. The question that may be (and should be) raised is whether her anthropological presuppositions are correct, that is, whether her proposition does not, in fact, abandon contemporaries to their despair.

While Rass expresses her appreciation of what is commonly dubbed as 'postmodern' philosophy, Sergio Sorrentino points to the nihilism and relativism that such thinking generally entails. Instead, he invites us to reflect on the question regarding the nature of religion (in this case, Christianity). Such reflection, he argues, is necessary in order to be able to speak coherently about 'progress' in religion. Defining and inseparable features of Christianity include, for him, the faithful (the individual), the 'instituted formation' (community) and the eschatological (prophetic) dimension. He thereby rejects the 'ethical' understanding of Christianity. The latter is not primarily a morality. Religion/Christianity is a constitutive part of the human world, is capable of transforming the latter and itself insofar as it is able to confront contemporary challenges. These, according to Sorrentino, include relativism, the widespread belief that human existence and the world are essentially meaningless, religious fundamentalism (which he sees as a 'regressive' response to the aforementioned condition), and pluralism.

An incurably Christian culture is the subject of Renée Reitsma's paper. The 'death of God' may, among other things, refer to the end of belief in a particular God, but it does not mean the end of Christianity. Going back to Nietzsche, especially his thinking about suffering, guilt and sin, Reitsma points to the tenacity of guilt (and hence sin) in secular culture. It is intriguing that she has recourse to this particular dimension of Christianity to illustrate the presence of the religious in the secular. Today, we are saddled with blame and guilt without the hope of redemption. (It is noteworthy that Reitsma points to the 'feeling of indebtedness towards the world', which she considers as a burden). Implicit in her paper is the unarticulated aspiration for a radical change, for a genuine post-Christianity (whereby Christianity is interpreted in the moralistic fashion). Nietzsche's devastating criticism of Christianity is well-known. Much has been written on this matter (including Nietzsche's 'indebtedness' to German Lutheran theology). Hopefully, Reitsma's dissertation will include both a critical appraisal of Nietzsche's thought (yes, Christianity has been the source of a morbid obsession with suffering and sin. But no, it is not merely a moral or doctrinal system) and a more systematic approach to the perennial questions of human responsibility and blame.

Drawing on the works of the biochemist/theologian Arthur Peacocke, Oliver Li defends 'strong emergence' as a way to respond to the 'body-mind problem' (how can the mind, being 'independent and ontologically different' from the body, affect the latter without breaking the laws of nature?). Li wants to explain how mental properties have 'causal influence' on the body by recasting the conception of causation. Such alternative is provided by the emergence theory, according to which emergent properties (mental properties in this case) emerge from 'lower' properties and yet cannot be 'reduced' to them. In other words, there is no linear causal relationship between these lower level properties and that which 'contains' them. Li gives the example of the patterns in ice crystals, which, he emphasises, cannot be deduced from the physical laws governing water. The same holds for the human capacity for music, which cannot simply be inferred from the working of neurons. This line of thinking, Li argues, can also help us to understand divine action in the (physical) world, whereby God is analogous to the mind, and the world to the body. The limits of anthropomorphism, of the language of the natural sciences and the absence of apophatic thinking are manifested in Li's struggle to explain that though 'God's experience increase[s]', it does not mean that God is finite, that though it is possible to add something to the infinite (God), this does not change the fact that it is still infinite, and in his conclusion that 'God's knowledge changes but does not increase'.

As Normunds Titans himself acknowledges, his presentation is an unrestrained 'exercise in imagination', containing what philosophers would generally consider as science fiction. He therefore proposes what he calls some kind of 'astrotheology', whereby the current state of knowledge in astronomy informs his philosophical/theological thinking. According to Titans, people who are versed in astrophysics and molecular biology find it difficult to accept the classical conception of God – transcendent and personal. What if, Titans asks, there are 'ancient beings in the biological universe, who have developed faculties of cognition and perception that go far beyond our five senses and minds… Wouldn't we perceive them as gods'? (Strangely enough, this reminds me of *Euthyphro*). Titans replies in the affirmative. In the end, he claims, there is no difference between the belief in UFOs and the belief in God. In both cases, 'there is no evidence, only belief'. Faith is because of our limited knowledge, he asserts. This is a crude conception of faith and God, to say the least, which is unlikely to resonate either with Christians who actively live a religious life or with (self) critical philosophers. Titans' discourse raises the question of whether it is possible to speak intelligibly about God and religion without any personal engagement with them.

Humility seems to have made a comeback in the German context. Or so Katharina Opalka says. But the renaissance in a secular context (football and finances) of what may seem at first sight to be a religious virtue, she warns, should not be uncritically applauded. 'Even' the CEOs of giant financial enterprises have pointed to the need for 'collective humility'. The line between humility and humiliation, Opalka notes, is quite thin. But even more significantly, she wonders whether humility can be conjured up at will, or less crudely, whether it is 'within our power', that is, whether it can become a permanent part of our character.

It is interesting that she considers humility in a way similar to the one in which Christian educators used to consider faith (the one who has faith does not know/ cannot say that s(he) has faith). So the one who is humble cannot say that s(he) is humble. Humility, for Opalka, is an exemplary case for her study of virtues from a Christian perspective. She concludes that we have to go beyond the Aristotelian virtue ethics if we wish to understand the nature of virtues. The Aristotelian approach to humility, she argues, would make the latter a mean between power and powerlessness (or, would be a virtue to deal with imbalances of power) or a personal trait. Though such an approach resists a utilitarian/functional approach to humility (virtues), according to Opalka, it cannot capture the idea that genuine humility 'transcends and transforms power structures', and therefore cannot be a matter of sheer choice. The relationship between power/omnipotence, as she points out, is much more complex than an antagonistic one.

Atle Søvik deals with a matter that is rarely addressed in philosophy and even in theology, (for many good reasons), namely, ascertaining who will be saved at the end of time. Contesting Jan-Olav Henriksen's claim that all living beings will be saved, he himself propounds an argument that is based on the distinction between conscious (and responsible) beings – typically human beings – and non-conscious beings. God, Søvik claims, cannot 'restore the life' of all living beings that have ever lived because the 'atoms' of lower beings 'have already been reused by other animals'. More plausible to him is the idea that God can only continue the 'stream of consciousness' of those who possessed such consciousness. But not all human beings will be saved, he emphasises; only those who have 'chosen' God/ salvation. Søvik makes an exception for those individuals with impaired brains, dead-born children, but also pets that humans love. Animals and other beings who were privileged enough to share a relationship with those who are eligible for salvation may also make it to eternal life. It is noteworthy that Søvik seems to believe that only those created in the image of God will be 'saved', given the fact that both Jewish and Christian texts refer to a new redeemed creation. But even more fundamentally, in Søvik's discourse, the idea of gratuity is totally absent. So is the silence on matters that we cannot possibly know on the basis of our human (mortal) knowledge and imagination.

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