

UNLIKELY COMPANIONS? CONTINENTAL PHILOSOPHY FOR EASTERN EUROPEAN EVANGELICAL THEOLOGY

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In recent decades, there has been a broad theological appropriation of continental philosophy in North America and Europe, particularly in areas of postmodern thought. We see this in the work of various theologians and philosophers such as Mark C. Taylor, John D. Caputo, Richard Kearney, Lieven Boeve, Merold Westphal, Stanley J. Grenz, James K. A. Smith, Carl Raschke, B. Keith Putt, J. Aaron Simmons, and Christina M. Gschwandtner among others. This theological interest is also noticed in those called the “new phenomenologists” such as Emmanuel Falque, Michel Henry, Jean-Louis Chrétien, Emmanuel Levinas, Jean-Luc Marion, Paul Ricoeur, and Jean-Yves Lacoste¹ only to name a few leading authors. The new phenomenologists are also associated with what Dominique Janicaud has called the “theological turn” in French phenomenology.² Although Janicaud’s observation was not favorable toward this “turn”, it nevertheless highlights these recent theological directions in continental philosophy of religion.

Recalling Tertullian’s famous phrase, “What does Athens have to do with Jerusalem?” we may ask, “What do recent trends in continental philosophy have to do with Eastern European evangelical thought?” Continental philosophy is often associated with French or German “atheist” philosophers such as Nietzsche, Heidegger, Sartre, Derrida, and Foucault. Eastern and Central European evangelicals find themselves rejoicing in the post-atheistic ideologies in recent decades, while also seeking their own identity as a Protestant minority in the face of a primarily Eastern Orthodox religious context. How could there be any hope for companionship between such apparent divided “theological” sensibilities? As unlikely as these bedfellows may be, contemporary continental philosophy has not become simply a critical opponent, but also a source of inspiration for some local theological projects. In contrast to analytic philosophy with a clear methodological apparatus, continental philosophy engages different methods and dialogue partners, specifically centered in 19th and 20th century Europe. The Orthodox Church has not been favorably disposed toward modern, rational, Western thinking.³ However, continental philosophy often eschews empirical reductionism and

¹ J. Aaron Simmons and Bruce Ellis Benson, *The New Phenomenology: A Philosophical Introduction* (London: Bloomsbury, 2013), “Introduction,” Kindle edition.

² See Dominique Janicaud et al., *Phenomenology and the “Theological Turn”: The French Debate* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2000).

³ Ketevan Rcheulishvili, “Orthodox Theology and Postmodernism: An Attempt to Find Contact,” *International Journal of Orthodox Theology* 11, no. 2 (2020): 131. Rcheulishvili refers to (among others): Vasilios Makrides, “Orthodox Anti-Westernism Today: A Hindrance to European Integration?,” *International Journal for the Study of the Christian Church* 9/3 (2009), 209-224.

radically questions presupposed metaphysical and epistemological paradigms. The landscape of continental philosophy is vast, including reflections on phenomenology, psychoanalysis, existentialism, poststructuralism, and postmodernism. The contributions in this issue reflect this diversity and also raise issues for potential influence for contemporary evangelical theology for a post-Marxist Central and Eastern Europe.

With this in mind, the article by British theologian, Joshua Searle, “Existentialism and Public Theology,” suggests that a theological appropriation of existentialism through the lens of Nikolai Berdyaev offers valuable insights for Christian witness in a post-Soviet context which must “contend against a noxious combination of postmodern nihilism and post-Soviet authoritarianism” (44). Searle analyses and explains the relevance of existentialism in the context of post-Soviet Eastern European society. Certainly, the Christian existential theme of personal freedom is important to navigate among believers faced with the opportunity of “individual voices” in post-Soviet Ukraine.⁴ Searle shifts the attention from general reflections about the main characteristics of existentialism to the social role of evangelical theology in a post-Soviet context. The author shows the implementation of existential approaches to theology that may help clarify the meaning of dignity and freedom.

Emmanuel Levinas’ insights on the significance of the ethical call of the face of the other whom I encounter, and the inability to subsume or master the other within my own purview, are essential when considering contemporary continental philosophy and theological ethics. The ironic strength found in weakness remains a salient theme when considering the nature of God’s revelation apart from overarching metaphysical paradigms. Anna Yampolskaya in her article, “Prophetic Subjectivity in Later Levinas,” considers Levinas through the lens of “prophetic experience” of the other who displays “the glory of the Infinite” which she also calls a “weak form of revelation.” The prophetic inspiration is regarded not simply as one of the phenomena of religious life, the notification of eschatological events, but as an important characteristic of human existence, a way to identify and express responsibility for one’s neighbor in need. Prophecy, indeed, is an answer that involves God into the lives of human beings, because our answer to the Other and for the Other reveals the God who “loves the stranger” (Deut. 10:18). Thus, in prophecy, revelation comes to its “renewal” and is brought again into action. As the author notes, “prophecy reveals God not in any particular events, past or future, but in the very structure of subjectivity as that is responsible for the Other and before the Other. Prophecy brings the subject to light as a witness to the glory of the Infinite” (55).

Anatoliy Denysenko’s contribution, “Walter Benjamin and the Weak Messianic Power,” focuses on this German Jewish philosopher’s notion of “weak messianic force” also in dialogue with Derrida, and Agamben. He focuses on Benjamin’s work, *On the Concept of History* (1940). This theologoumenon of messianism in philosophical thinking is a new phenomenon of historical processes in the 20th century. And the paradox of this concept is its connection with the causes of violence and cruelty that simultaneously started to acquire fresh meanings of hope and future. French philosopher Pierre Bouretz emphasized that versions of messianic utopia were developed as a faithful companion to twentieth-century suffering and terror, and at the same time, were protests against the concept of the irreversible progress of the world and the horrific excesses of immanence. The notion of weakness among the experiences of the oppressed is also considered in view of Christian eschatology. Contra hegemonic

⁴ See Catherine Wanner, “Missionaries of Faith and Culture: Evangelical Encounters in Ukraine,” *Slavic Review* 63, no. 4 (2004): 743.

regimes of power, considering voices and experiences of those oppressed or previously repressed are highly relevant topics for Eastern evangelical believers.

Kseniia Trofymchuk in her article “Ways of Contemporary Theopoetics,” gives a helpful overview of postmodern, post-metaphysical developments using the sensibility of “theopoetics.” She suggests that theopoetics was first a response to the Death-of-God movement of the 1970s, to provide a non-rational, non-scientific, post-propositional approach to discourse about God. Later, with thinkers such as Faber, Keller, Kearney, and Caputo it moved in the direction of Whiteheadian process thought emphasizing a relational God as opposed to the more abstract God of classical theism. Trofymchuk proposes that in view of today’s concerns for the Church, from issues ranging from migration to gender, drawing from the resources of theopoetics may help us humbly probe our own traditions with fresh perspectives, for the sake of ongoing dialogue with the other. Certainly, this is a welcome challenge to our theological perspectives that may be so easily entrenched and stalemated by hegemonic traditionalism.

In his article, “The Phenomenon of Simone Weil as ‘Excess’ and ‘Lack’ in the Symbolic Structure of Philosophical Language: A Personalist Approach,” Andrii Kulyk engages with a leading French philosopher and activist. Like those with theopoetic sensibilities highlighted in Trofymchuk’s essay, Weil also desires to provide a “new orientation toward sacred text in which flesh and blood encounters, rather than propositions about the divine, are revealed.”⁵ Kulyk highlights aspects of Weil’s multidisciplinary impact from critical theory, psychoanalysis, phenomenology, and theology. He indicates her perspective on the absence of God and how God is revealed in this absence. Of course, this discussion is greatly relevant for dialogue vis-a-vis the Eastern Orthodox apophatic tradition. What can be said, should be said, or should not be said about God? Questions such as these are important to pursue for Eastern and Central European evangelicals for building bridges of hospitality with their Orthodox neighbors.⁶

Iryna Horokholinska provides a broad overview of the possibilities of postmodern thought for Christian theology in her article, “Postmodern Theology as a Methodological Resource of Understanding Modern Religiosity: Conceptual, Worldview and Important Social Dimensions.” She consults several postmodern philosophers and theologians mentioned above, among others, to show the breadth of continental philosophical-theological resources available from which to draw in response to post-secularism and the need for robust Christian ethics in the public sphere. Horokholinska develops this thesis from John Milbank. As she aptly puts it in her article: “Christian postmodern theology is a natural outcome of the synergy of secularly provoked Christian discourse in finding ways to affirm its own identity as well as of all previous philosophical discourses to the postmodern” (20).

Finally, Serge Taranov contributes a philosophically reflective essay, “Existentialism and Theology: United Route” suggesting a unity between theology and existential thought. As with Searle’s article noted above, Taranov finds great promise for the “propaedeutic” appropriation of existentialism for theological issues. For Taranov, the essence of this unity is the concept of fundamental intention as an exit from nothingness to a “thirst for being,” as a reminder of finiteness and alienation of human existence, and simultaneously a projection of liberty. Existentialism and theology share one structure of existence, a single stream of thought and life

⁵ A. Rebecca Rozelle-Stone and Lucian Stone, *Simone Weil and Theology* (Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2013), 1.

⁶ Again, see Rcheulishvili, “Orthodox Theology and Postmodernism: An Attempt to Find Contact,” 143-65. In particular, Rcheulishvili looks to Sergei Bulgakov and Georges Florovsky for apophatic insights.

“where the fundamental intention of existence is the infinite path – from death to life, from Nothingness to Being” (142).

It is our hope that the articles in this special issue of *Theological Reflections* will indeed move us to hospitable, careful, theological consideration of the resources of continental philosophy for Eastern and Central European evangelical theology. Perhaps these reflections will wake us from some of our “dogmatic slumbers,” in which we have become ensconced, to see the other or God differently than before, to open our eyes wider before the migrant or those oppressed. As Levinas insisted that we are unable to grasp and master the other before our face, the French philosopher Jean-Luc Marion underlines the impossibility of human beings to comprehend the phenomenon of the divine. In this, Marion stands against modern, “conceptual idolatry,” calling us to “return to God” through the actualization of the communal, sacramental, and contemplative dimensions of being church. We believe the resources, riches, and intersections of continental philosophy may help us in this regard.

Soli Deo Gloria.