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Between the Human and the Divine: Philosophical and Theological Hermeneutics

Andrzej Wiercinski, Ed.

Toronto: The Hermeneutic Press, 2002; 623 pages.

A voluminous collection of forty-eight essays, written by prominent scholars in philosophy, theology, and religion, celebrates the birth of a new society: the International Institute for Hermeneutics (www.chass.utoronto.ca/iih), based in Canada. The essays gathered together in this collection were presented as conference papers at the first International Congress on Hermeneutics held at St. Bonaventure University, May 5-10, 2002. This volume, Vol. 1 in the Institute's Hermeneutic Series under the direction of Andrzej Wiercinski, pursues the relation between philosophical and theological hermeneutics (1) by tracing the development of philosophical hermeneutics from Schleiermacher to Vattimo, (2) by examining the application and transformation of hermeneutics in theology, and (3) by addressing the future of philosophical and theological hermeneutics. Hence the question of the between is central to this discussion about which Gadamer said in his greeting to the conference participants that opens this collection: "The theme of this congress ... is an invitation to listen to the languages with which we speak ... to hear the resonances and discordances between them, and to hearken to what shows itself in that play of words." This work seriously addresses the question of the between by stepping beyond disciplinary, cultural, linguistic, and religious boundaries. The contributors to this collection come from twelve countries in the Americas and Europe and bring with them their unique horizons of time, place, and language by offering specific interpretations of those traditions to which we all belong. One of the book's explicit intentions is to present a variety of horizons and by bringing together current international debates in philosophical and religious hermeneutics, to open up to language as the infinite source of new possibilities.

Most of the authors pay special attention to Gadamer's and Ricoeur's work while addressing the guiding question of the volume: How can philosophical hermeneutics, being antifoundationalist, form the philosophical source of theology which in its very nature is foundational, since it is founded on revelation? As the deconstruction of the dichotomy between epistemological foundationalism and pessimistic antifoundationalism is central to hermeneutics, all the contributors suggest that we step beyond this metaphysical dichotomy. Revelation and hermeneutical insistence on the primacy of interpretation are not opposed to each other. The hermeneutical orientation in theology is a call for the abandonment of literalism and objectivism in regard to religious truths. Hence we should address a new question: Can these philosophical sources be translated by theological hermeneutics into the language of theology? Since a critical presentation of all the answers to this question exceeds the scope of this review, I shall single out a few essays and focus on the role, purpose, and significance of each part of the volume.

Paying central attention to Gadamer's claim that hermeneutics can be summarized as *verbum interius*, the president of the new society, Andrzej Wiercinski, in his inaugural address interprets the rehabilitation of medieval thinking in philosophical hermeneutics. Tracing the development of the concept of language in Augustine and Thomas, Wiercinski brings to light the reasons that allow Gadamer to insist, contra Heidegger, that the history of Western thought is not merely a history of the forgetfulness of Being, for medieval Trinitarian theology opened up the hermeneutical horizons by stressing the priority of language. The crucial development in hermeneutics is the historical movement from the Platonic concept of

language to the "full integration of incarnation of meaning" in Augustine's conception of the word. This is a movement from exclusively philosophical sources to new discoveries that lie in a rich mixture of philosophical and theological thought. Hence hermeneutics transcends disciplinary limitations; it essentially lies in between. With the help of another nonphilosophical source, Czeslaw Milosz's poetry, Wiercinski convincingly explicates the crucial aspects of philosophical hermeneutics: the power and powerlessness of language, historicity, and linguisticity. The question of the between turns out to be not merely a question of how philosophical themes can ground theological thought, for these themes are already infused with nonphilosophical insights; hermeneutics is a mediation between philosophy and theology.

The book is divided into five parts: "Philosophical Hermeneutics," "Theological Hermeneutics," "Hermeneutic Praxis," "New Prospects in Hermeneutics" and a "Postscript" which deals with the significance of hermeneutics in the academic curriculum and addresses the question of the implications of hermeneutics for pedagogy.

Part One is comprised of two sections: "From Schleiermacher to Vattimo" and "Within the Horizon of Heidegger, Gadamer, and Ricoeur." The essay by Gianni Vattimo defends four points: (1) the existential analytic of Being and Time makes us aware that knowledge is always interpretation; (2) interpretation is the only "fact" of which we can speak; (3) the more one attempts to grasp interpretation in its authenticity, the more it manifests itself in its historical character; and (4) interpretation can only be seen as an interested response to an historically determined situation. Vattimo stresses the third point in particular, which, he argues, uncovers the presuppositions that underlie the conception of the world-in-itself. The metaphysical conception of "natural reality" and "objectivity" is merely "ruinous realism" which produces its corollary: authoritarianism. Vattimo's paradoxical claims that Nietzsche and Heidegger speak from within the biblical tradition, that the claim of the death of God signifies the maturation of the Christian message, and that nihilism constitutes the truth of Christianity are dealt with in greater depth in *After Christianity* (Columbia University Press, 2002). For Vattimo, the hermeneutical approach to Christianity reveals the necessity of abandoning literalism and natural metaphysics and dissolving the Church's claims to objectivity, for the truth of Christianity is the dissolution of the metaphysical idea of truth; the truth of the scriptures is the truth of love, of charity.

In his presentation, Gary Madison outlines the origins, tenets, and implications of philosophical hermeneutics by stressing its phenomenological heritage (hence its opposition to earlier hermeneutics) and its distance from both dogmatic scientism and interpretative anarchism. Claiming to be a universal discipline while at the same time accentuating the finite nature of understanding and the linguisticity and textuality of experience, philosophical hermeneutics rejects both foundationalism in philosophy and fundamentalism in religion and theology. Hermeneutics's persistent claim that understanding is essentially presuppositional is most radically opposed to the search for and return to "fundamentals"- "unvarnished, literal truths"- the characteristic traits of both foundationalism and fundamentalism. In contrast to religious fundamentalism, according to which, if the scriptures do not have a literal truth, there can be no truth in religion, hermeneutics sees the "either/or of relativism and absolutism" as an untenable metaphysical opposition. Paying close attention to the work of Augustine and Thomas, Madison convincingly shows that the medieval tradition itself saw this opposition as "foolish," as Augustine himself said. Madison brings to light a surprising relation of fundamentalism to modern science: although born out of the anxiety that is inherent in our "thrownness" into the technological world, religious fundamentalism is an attempt to "modernize" religion. However, the function of religious myth is not

epistemological but rather existential, and thus "there is absolutely no 'mediation' possible between religion and science" (47). This, however, does not mean that religion is to abandon its claim to truth, for the ultimate implication of hermeneutics is that all being is interpreted being. Here we witness how hermeneutics re-establishes the place of religion in our secular world: supporting interpretive pluralism, hermeneutics provides a powerful means of combating the prejudice that only scientific propositions can lay claim to validity. By uncovering those presuppositions that underlie scientific claims, hermeneutics is capable of bringing a plurality of voices (scientific, religious, aesthetic, existential) into dialogue. When placed in the infinite "conversation that we are," religion speaks to us more clearly than before, for it is dialogue alone that can save us from the danger of limiting ourselves to a single voice.

Graeme Nicholson's essay shows how a Heideggerian conception of truth re-evaluates our relation to religious texts. To speak of the truth of the scriptures does not simply mean that the interpreter's claims should correspond to those of the texts; the interpreter is rather invited to allow what was originally spoken to be disclosed. This does not indicate the inferiority of religious truths with respect to scientific ones, for instance, for truth as *a-letheia* is more fundamental than truth as *homiosis* or correctness. Furthermore, the interpreter cannot suppose that any single act of interpretation is a pre-eminent disclosure; the play of disclosedness and undisclosedness implicates the historical nature of the "self-interpretation of the text" Finally, the self-manifestation of the text cannot be isolated from its historical unconcealment, for its power to reach the hearer and reader and enhance our experience belongs to its own life.

Jean Grondin addresses the question of the proximity between theology and philosophy. According to Grondin, Heidegger was the last major philosopher to be thoroughly familiar with the theological issues. However, the brief "untheo-logical" period in philosophy is coming to an end, which is most clearly discernible in the works of Vattimo and the more recent Derrida. Grondin suggests that the possible causes of the new proximity between theology and philosophy are indebted to the disappearance of the social, political, and ideological agenda of Marxist *vulgata*. The "disappearance" of religion is a very recent phenomenon, limited in time and space, for it constitutes only a limited interlude in the history of Western civilization. This new proximity between philosophy and theology is a call for both continental and analytic philosophers to overcome their provincial attitudes.

If culture, religion, and morality are not in need of support from philosophy, asks Andrzej Bronk, what remains for philosophy to do? The significance of philosophical hermeneutics to theology can be only subsidiary or ancillary, for even though theology is in need of foundations, the latter are first and foremost to be sought not in reason but in revelation. Yet theology is never practiced in a vacuum and is today carried out in a situation of antifundamentalism and antifoundationalism. By showing that the process of understanding theological texts develops from a certain preunderstanding, that there is no understanding that is complete, and that each new understanding brings forth new questions, philosophical hermeneutics is most helpful to the theologian who takes up the challenges of the present and who attempts to influence his or her age. Hermeneutics is helpful to theology in disclosing those presuppositions that influence the way the Christian faith is explained and proclaimed. By stressing the fusion of horizons between the ancient and the present world, hermeneutics can perform an important function in our meditation on the scriptures.

The purpose of the second part of the book is to address the issue of philosophy's place in Jewish, Protestant, and Catholic theology in an age of antifoundationalism and

antifundamentalism. This part of the text falls into two sections: "Various Traditions of Interpretation" and "Transformation Through Reading." The articles are concerned with the future of the interaction between theology and hermeneutics (John Robertson), the relevance and application of an analogico-iconic hermeneutics in theology (Mauricio Beuchot), the hermeneutical interest in original sin (Michael Schulz) and in resurrection (Tomasz Weclawski). Samuel Ajzenstat offers an interpretation of the story of Jacob with the aim of showing how interpretation and text are inseparable, although from the point of view of rabbinic tradition our will and God's will are separable.

The guiding question of the third part of the text is the following: How do the problems and questions arising from the philosophical and theological hermeneutic traditions relate to concrete problems of application in the contemporary postmodern context? The articles are grouped into two sections: "The Postmodern Context" and "The Dynamics of Hermeneutic Applications." Readers interested in the early works of Heidegger will find this part particularly rewarding. The resurrection of medieval philosophy in the passage to postmodern hermeneutics, issues concerning ethical/hermeneutic responsibility in the face of the other, questions concerning the risks and limits of the theological appropriation of hermeneutics, and the relevance of Chinese ontological hermeneutics are the central themes addressed in this part of the book.

The fourth part of the volume addresses the challenges that philosophical and theological hermeneutics face in the immediate future. Special focus is given to those traditions that emerge from feminism. The conceptions of systematic, eschatological, and metaphysical theology are brought into question under the headings of hermeneutics and critical theory.

The International Institute for Hermeneutics continues the conversation between philosophy and theology. It indeed is heartening to see this conversation taking place in North America, where, as Gadamer puts it, "the temptation to forsake the interpretive task in favor of apparently more profitable research can be almost irresistible." One of the leading aims of the Institute is to re-establish the place of thinking in a technological age. Launching an inter-disciplinary and international forum for hermeneutic dialogue, bringing together forty-eight philosophers and theologians from thirty-four universities in twelve countries, this collection indeed creates a dialogue in which we are "far less the leaders than the led." Between the Human and the Divine is a superb introduction to current debates in philosophical and theological hermeneutics. By stressing the fragile historical moment of the beginning, the new society emphasizes the hermeneutical primacy of the question. The volume offers a variety of perspectives into hermeneutical history with the aim of uncovering the relevance of hermeneutics at the beginning of the twenty-first century.