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BOOK PROFILE: *GOD AFTER METAPHYSICS: A THEOLOGICAL AESTHETIC*,
BY JOHN MANOUSSAKIS

A book profile of John Pantaleimon Manoussakis, *God after Metaphysics: A Theological Aesthetic*. Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2007. xiii + 213 pp. \$39.95 (cloth). ISBN: 0253348803.

The stated guiding question of Manoussakis's highly original essay—"How can we think of God *after* metaphysics?"—should not be heard in the cognitive or rationalistic tone that one often associates with these terms. Employing often marginalized resources of the metaphysical tradition and the insights of those who claim to postdate its confines, Manoussakis argues that our thinking of the divine should shift away from the abstract parameters of the knowing subject into the relational and quotidian space of the senses.

In this work, Manoussakis positions himself within the recent French movement of philosophers that combine the phenomenological attentiveness of the continental philosophical tradition with the hermeneutical subtlety of early Christian theologians (Jean-Luc Marion, Michel Henry, Jean-Yves Lacoste, and Jean-Louis Chretien). What is novel about his contribution is not merely the addition of other voices to this growing chorus of theologically oriented phenomenology (he treats and is influenced by the work of Richard Kearney and John Zizioulas), but Manoussakis himself emerges as a thinker with a dulcet and sophisticated voice of his own. Though his text is often quite poetic, *God After Metaphysics* is highly complex and technical, and as the constant parade of citations and untranslated terms and phrases illustrates, it is not intended for the uninitiated.

The book is divided into three parts, with each treating a separate sense: seeing, hearing, and touching. Each part, with the exception of the third, is divided into three chapters that treat "the sentient, the sensible, and the medium of the sensing" (4). Proceeding from subject, to object, to medium, each part serves to invert and radicalize the individual, subject-oriented structure that often characterizes metaphysical thinking. In so doing Manoussakis seeks to overcome the false alternative that seems to accompany contemporary philosophy in which one chooses between an idolatrous speaking about God or an assumption of radial alterity that leads to silence. Manoussakis proposes, instead, a middle path that is charted by the chiasmic incarnational logic of Chalcedon that unites the divine and the human without confusing them.

The first part focuses upon seeing and the epistemological structure often associated with it. Within the structure of the knowing subject, the possibility of the experience of God is caught up in a dual impasse: either one posits a positive experience of God and cuts him down to the size of their concepts, or one extricates him from the boundaries of experience entirely. Manoussakis seeks to overcome this dilemma by changing the very parameters of the debate. In contrast to the subject-oriented intentionality that stands above and apart from objects and reduces them to their classificatory and conceptual terms, Manoussakis, following Marion, emphasizes the excess of intuition that overcomes the subject from without. This excess does not, however, lift up the object above the subject in a reversed dualism, but emphasizes the necessarily relational character of phenomena. Such relationality exceeds the former phenomenological reductions that still maintained the remnants of consciousness (Husserl) or being (Heidegger), with givenness (Marion). Manoussakis seeks to take this line of thought one step farther by lifting up the relationality of phenomena as being excessive not in spite of their particularity, but because of it. In this movement he wants to undertake a fourth reduction that brackets out the functionality of our socially defined roles, for the sake of viewing persons (*prosopon*) in their particular "thisness" (*haecceitas*). Therefore, knowledge is not derived from the perspective of the knowing individual or from the ground of a common essence, but from the embodied space of relationships between particularities.

Following an understanding of the incarnation that manifests not just in an exceptional event in chronological time, but also in the kaiological moment of the communal instant, Manoussakis identifies the experience of God in the epiphany of seeing the ephemeral light through "the least of these." Accordingly, God is no longer reduced to an intentional object, but one comes to have an experience of God insofar as one breaks through the confines of conceptual and social structures. This experience does not begin by supposing the atomic structure of individuals that see; rather, one comes to experience the epiphany of the other person by realizing that one is first seen (an inversion of intentionality) and in relationship (an inversion of ontological categories).

In the second part, Manoussakis treats the sense of hearing and shifts his emphasis to the linguistic parameters that have come to confine God. After the linguistic turn, "God" is seemingly either excluded from the domain of language or is treated merely as one word within it. If one wants to hold on to the former, one is seemingly forced to regard God in silence, and leave him in utter transcendence, or if one reduces God to merely being a signifier, then we are left to the immanence of the linguistic system. In opposition to this, Manoussakis wants to undermine the problem by again shifting away from the knowing—or in this context speaking—subject toward one that is called or spoken to, and that does not employ language as a representing tool, but as part of a song of divine and communal praise. Whereas on the former account God is seen to be a word without a corresponding object, a signifier without a signified, Manoussakis highlights the apophatic position in which God is a signified without a signifier, an uncreated essence that is infinite and incomprehensible. Manoussakis

advocates for an entirely different relation to language, in which its mood shifts (from the indicative into the accusative and the vocative) and its tone changes (from speaking and communication, to music and praise). Thus the speculative concerns of a theology that speaks *about* God is overcome with a hymnology that sings and prays *to* God. In contrast to the knowing subject who might write treatises and intend toward God as an object, Manoussakis lifts up the liturgical practice of a community which is called into being by God through relationship.

The third part focuses on touch. It largely brings together the concerns of the former chapters as the subject object dualism that accompanies the epistemological metaphors of vision is displaced by the immediacy and intimacy of the touch. To touch is always to be touched. Therefore Manoussakis does not need to argue for an inversion of the structure, but merely a changed emphasis of activity. In contrast to thinking of touch in terms of grasping and controlling things, Manoussakis emphasizes a loving caress and the joining of a kiss. Following a line of thought inaugurated by Aristotle, Manoussakis notes that such an understanding of knowledge is already constituted from without, as perception is seen as receptive and knowledge as a matter of affection. Furthermore, touch maintains the particularity of material things, as primacy is not placed upon the abstract realm of theoretical knowledge but upon the concrete space of particular relations. Through this shift of activity the world of objects and instruments is transformed into one of communion and epiphany. This is, again, opened in the logic of the incarnation as the figure of Christ and his corporate body, the Church, takes the trivial—"a meal, a bath, the loving bond between two people"—and transforms it into a mystical and eschatological situation (150).

My objections to Manoussakis's book are numerous. While many of these might mark a philosophical and theological parting of the ways between him and me, such criticisms do not issue from a failure of the book, but seem to instead come from its deeply provocative and fruitful character. Primary among my objections that are most relevant to readers of this journal is Manoussakis's heavy reliance on an overly rigid phenomenology, which seems to lead him to making un-nuanced claims about religion and religious traditions. While this often leads to over-generalized and unfounded statements about "nonwestern" traditions (e.g. 61; 172, 173 no. 72), it is of particular importance in regards to the status of his theological position and his treatment of Christian traditions. The implications of the coupling of phenomenological neutrality and universality with the tone of Christian exclusivism and triumphalism are never quite fleshed out, and seem, to me, to be quite troubling.

I do not, however, want to diminish the achievement of this book. Through its combined ability to revitalize traditional sources and to make everyday phenomena glimmer under its examination, *God after Metaphysics* is sure to provoke both debate and wonder for those interested in continental philosophy of religion.

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