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Review of Andrzej Wierciński, *Hermeneutics between Philosophy and Theology: The Imperative to Think the Incommensurable* (Berlin: LIT Verlag, 2010). 386 pgs.

In the introduction to his latest book, Andrzej Wierciński states his purpose as one of navigating “two islands of mutual misunderstanding,” namely “scientism and utilitarian consumerism” and “pockets of religious sub-cultures, fundamentalist Christianity, radical Islam, etc.”¹ In other words, Wierciński will address extreme forms of the secular and the religious in order to explore the possibility of dialogue between divergent positions concerning faith and reason. As the book unfolds, these forces of the contemporary world are quickly abandoned as scaffolding for Wierciński’s true project: exploring the possibility of *conversation* between philosophy and theology conducted through hermeneutics. In Wierciński’s words, hermeneutics represents a “path of mediation,”² an art and science of interpretation that maps out and inhabits what Hans-Georg Gadamer called the “in-between.”³ As this mysterious *in-between*, hermeneutics is “a polarity of familiarity and strangeness”⁴ which attempts to move forward in its historical understanding, arguing for a “hermeneutic belonging-together” of seemingly disparate, even oppositional, points of view and interpretations.⁵ Thus throughout Wierciński’s investigation, philosophy and theology are understood as different and in some ways oppositional disciplines, as secularism and religion are similarly opposed. Wierciński’s aim is to see in what ways philosophy and theology are autonomous and in what ways they, in fact, depend on, and therefore *need* one another.

Hermeneutics bridges the gap between philosophy and theology through its unique attention to the historical dimension of both disciplines. It disrupts and counters the notion that “reason alone” has access to truth, which Wierciński regards as a falsehood inherited from the Enlightenment. He qualifies it as “the impossible ideal of a reason operating free of its history.”⁶ To overcome this unachievable ideal, hermeneutics is employed in order to allow the histories of reason (philosophy) and of revelation (theology) to speak for themselves, but also to see if they might speak in concert with one another. Wierciński undertakes this

¹ Wierciński, *Hermeneutics between Philosophy and Theology*, 10.

² *Ibid.*, 10.

³ *Ibid.*, 10.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 10-11.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 11.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 15.

task primarily through close readings of selected texts by two theologians and two philosophers; the former being Pope John Paul II and John Milbank, and the latter being Martin Heidegger and Paul Ricoeur (in the order Wierciński presents them). Peppered throughout the text, particularly the chapters on Heidegger and Ricoeur, are occasional references to Karl Barth and Gadamer, among others. Given the wealth of texts and thinkers who address the relation between philosophy and theology, Wierciński has elected to undertake a very complex and unwieldy history. He explains his reading selections as “determined by the influence of the problematic on the crafting or reception of the text. In this debate, the problematic revolves around a recurring question of primacy: do we privilege reason over an alleged Revelation, or, conversely, a divine Revelation over reason?”⁷ Although each of the four thinkers appears to fit conveniently in either philosophy or theology, Wierciński shows how each one maintains an ambiguous and sometimes strained relation to the other, as if each thinker straddles both disciplines. For this reason, they are of interest; they exemplify the question concerning the authority of reason or revelation when interpreting philosophical and theological texts.

The hermeneutic notion which guides the investigation is summarized in the following passage: “Philosophy and theology are not simply static disciplines in need of logical connection; they are dynamic historical disciplines that are animated by the specific and very individual philosophers and theologians who practice them.”⁸ Hermeneutics is neither philosophy nor theology *per se*, but a continuous event dwelling *in-between* the two; it is, therefore, capable of addressing both the philosophical and theological without affirming the authority of one over and above the other. So long as hermeneutics is faithfully engaged, it can orient itself according to the concepts and language of both disciplines, flirting with the possibility of their commensurability.

In his examination of John Paul II’s contribution to the discussion, Wierciński focuses on the encyclical letter *Fides et Ratio* published in 1999.⁹ The encyclical defends the position that reason must be made subservient to faith, recalling the medieval idea of *ancilla theologiae*, or philosophy as the handmaiden of theology. This is because reason is capable of realizing truth only in a formal sense. The position is summed up as follows: “Human reason by its nature is in the service of truth, and, when assisted by faith, can rise to contemplate truth.”¹⁰ In effect, Philosophy is limited in its search for truth, so long as it denies what theology has to offer—the *truth of Revelation, as revealed in the person of Jesus Christ*.¹¹ The assertion is not based in blind faith, without recourse to evidentiary corroboration; rather it calls for verification *in faith*; this is how philosophy must justify its truth. The gap between philosophy and theology is thus characterized as “the wisdom of words versus the Word of

⁷ Ibid., 14.

⁸ Ibid., 16.

⁹ Ibid., 18.

¹⁰ Ibid., 21.

¹¹ Ibid., 21.

Wisdom;”¹² the former relies on the latter for its claim to epistemological validity. Without theology and faith, philosophy is fundamentally limited in its capacity to reveal and speak truth. Ultimately, the coming of Christ saves reason from its own weakness,¹³ elevating it beyond “the finite nature of human thought.”¹⁴ Theology calls upon philosophy for assistance in formulating what is revealed within the bounds of faith. In this respect, philosophy assists in the overcoming of ignorance and sin, but always within the framework of faith. This tempers reason’s claim to absolute truth and prevents it from becoming an idol of worship.

John Milbank takes a slightly more polemical stance than that of John Paul II, arguing that the modern world emphasizes the power of reason to the extent of worship, ultimately leading to nihilism. In contrast to Modernity’s nihilism, Christianity affirms and safeguards that which lies beyond “secular” reason.¹⁵ For Milbank, the strict distinction between philosophy and theology has its origins in the thought of John Duns Scotus, thus considered a turning point in the shared history of the two disciplines. Milbank interprets Scotus’ metaphysics as a corruption of ontology, as its understanding of the difference between philosophy and theology implies the subordination of God to a general category of Being.¹⁶ Milbank argues that this reduction is an effect of Scotus’ definition of the finite and the infinite as “two intrinsic modes of Being.”¹⁷ Thus the finite and the infinite are subsumed under the category of Being, rendering God only a particular kind or degree of Being. In order to correct this view, Milbank constructs what he calls “Radical Orthodoxy,” contending that all thinking, regardless of the science, is a form of theology or anti-theology and must, therefore, be justified and defended within *theological* discourse.¹⁸ As such, theology holds sway over ontology, which Milbank argues is necessary in order to reaffirm God’s dominion over metaphysical and ontological categories.

Milbank’s brand of orthodoxy rejects natural theology, and affirms “the ancient philosophical traditions which understood that ‘philosophy itself . . . can be rooted in a rational reflection upon religious commitments.’”¹⁹ At the same time, he is critical of fideism; reason must be allowed space within theology.²⁰ This is one parallel between Milbank and John Paul II, as they encourage the interplay of faith and reason and of tradition and interpretation.²¹ This kind of interaction does not prescribe the absolute elimination of metaphysics; rather, it

¹² Ibid., 22

¹³ Ibid., 22.

¹⁴ Ibid., 19.

¹⁵ Ibid., 45.

¹⁶ Ibid., 50.

¹⁷ Ibid., 51.

¹⁸ Ibid., 54-55.

¹⁹ Ibid., 64.

²⁰ Ibid., 64.

²¹ Ibid., 64-65.

seeks a new and different metaphysics (a hidden ontology) that can only emerge from out of theology, and specifically, it would seem, out of Christianity.²²

The new metaphysics recognizes that Being does not subsume God within it; God cannot be reduced to a “category of being,” as Scotus implies. Being must be made subservient to God and studied through theology.²³ According to Wierciński, Milbank qualifies Being as “created gift” and God as “uncreated givenness”²⁴ and argues that the whole matter rests on understanding “the crucial intellectual issue of our time,” namely “the spectre of possibilism.”²⁵ For Milbank, Christianity must overcome the metaphysical penchant for regarding the possible as higher than the actual, a view famously affirmed by Heidegger in *Sein und Zeit*. In this respect, theology, and Christianity with it, becomes an interpretive task or way of life committed to the affirmation and celebration of actuality as the gift of God. God’s givenness, understood as *Energieia*, a Greek term borrowed from St Paul and translated as *actus* in Latin, is the energetic and giving power which supplies Being and beings; consequently, the created order is a gift.²⁶ Behind this order is the givenness or *the act of giving* itself, which, according to Milbank, cannot be categorized as Being. Being is the gift, but the giver is something else entirely. Milbank’s notion of gift offers a rethinking of realism within theology, grounded in the incarnation of Christ and a radical understanding of divine immanence in matter. The emphasis on actuality evokes the incarnate (made flesh) and conceives of incarnation as the offering of the possibility of a new metaphysics centred on the intimate bond of flesh and spirit.²⁷

Milbank’s theology is nicely summarized in the following passage quoted by Wierciński: “The aim ‘is not to ‘represent’ . . . externality, but just to join in its occurrence, not to know, but to intervene, originate.”²⁸ Incarnation leads us into the world where the call is one of participation in Creation. This impetus is signified by the concept of *methexis*, which denotes God’s involvement and participation in the life and actions of His Creation. Given that the human being is created in the likeness of God, *methexis* also signifies the former’s participation in Creation, epistemological or otherwise. Hermeneutics is thus an instantiation of *methexis*.

Following his interpretation of Milbank, Wierciński switches to his selected philosophers. He first presents an engaging, even passionate, reading of Heidegger’s complicated lifelong relationship to theology. This chapter is the centre of the book; it is the most polished and, not accidentally, the most engaging. In this respect, the chapter was the most successful in eliciting the

²² Ibid., 69-77.

²³ Ibid., 65.

²⁴ Ibid., 68.

²⁵ Ibid., 66.

²⁶ Ibid., 69.

²⁷ Ibid., 81.

²⁸ Ibid., 71.

“slow and meditative reading”²⁹ Wierciński intended. It is partly Heidegger’s turbulent personal and academic history with theology that makes the chapter so interesting, and Wierciński’s semi-biographical approach opens the reader to this reality. The interpretation spans Heidegger’s early reading of Luther, followed by a presentation of the Marburg lectures on the phenomenology of religious life, delivered between 1919 and 1921, and ends with a consideration of the early and later editions of *Phänomenologie und Theologie*, published in 1927 and 1970 respectively.³⁰ As Wierciński understands the early Heidegger, the latter’s intent is to uncover novel ways of addressing the reality of religious consciousness and experience outside of an overtly metaphysical discourse.³¹ He qualifies Heidegger’s phenomenological breakthrough in the following way: “I am hidden from myself if the effect of historical experience in all its potency is not rendered manifest.”³² The possibility of uncovering “historical experience” motivates Heidegger’s self-professed *Destruktion* of the history of Western philosophy. The beginning of this lifelong task is primarily taken up with interpretations of religious texts and religious experience as manifested in early Christianity, and grows from Heidegger’s extensive reading of Luther. Building in part on S.J. McGrath’s work on the early Heidegger, Wierciński argues that Heidegger’s reading of Luther leads to the insight that “Godforsakenness” is the unique feature of the early Christians’ experience of truth. Godforsakenness is the essence of primitive Christianity; it means *life-without-God*.³³ The experience of being without God fosters an “eschatological consciousness” at the heart of Christianity and motivates the early Christians to orient themselves futurally, specifically to Christ’s Second Coming. From the Christians’ consciousness of and temporal projection towards the Second Coming, Heidegger recovers “what was forgotten by the entire Western tradition, but was grasped by early Christianity: facticity and temporality.”³⁴ Christian ecstatic experience, according to Heidegger, is defined by these two concepts.

For the most part, Wierciński follows Heidegger’s reading with little disagreement. Contention arises, however, when Heidegger opposes theology on the grounds that it turned away from “factic experience,” the ecstatic projecting-forth to the Second Coming of Christ.³⁵ The turn away from facticity is accomplished when Christianity appropriates the Greek philosophical tradition. Christianity as facticity thus becomes theology, saturated with Platonic and Aristotelian metaphysics and ontology, which leads Christianity out of the world and away from its unique experience of the essence of consciousness and life. From this point on, Heidegger develops what he calls a philosophical “atheism,” necessary in order to avoid the pitfalls of theology, including talk about God.

²⁹ Ibid., 17.

³⁰ Ibid., 168.

³¹ Ibid., 156.

³² Ibid., 111.

³³ Ibid., 124.

³⁴ Ibid., 119.

³⁵ Ibid., 155.

Heidegger strips the concepts of facticity and temporality of their religious origins and makes them the essential aspects of human existence, religious or otherwise. Furthermore, he concludes that “faith is the mortal enemy of the form of existence essential to philosophy.”³⁶ The notion of Christian philosophy is dismissed as a contradiction and characterized as a “square-circle.”³⁷ This represents a pivotal stage in Heidegger’s radical reinterpretation of phenomenology, and a decisive moment in his formulation of the question of the meaning / truth of Being as the question *that calls for thinking*.

Despite Heidegger’s best efforts, Wierciński exposes a problematic at the heart of his attack against theology based in Heidegger’s overzealous concern for philosophical purity. Wherever conceptual borrowing or cross-pollination occurs, Heidegger identifies the standpoint as an instance of foreign influence, instead of productive syncretism or eclecticism. Wierciński calls the problem a “mutual contamination of philosophy by theology, and theology by philosophy.”³⁸ For Heidegger, this contamination is unacceptable. In the early 1920s, Heidegger still saw a place for theology, albeit increasingly separated from philosophy; in only a matter of years, the gap becomes unbridgeable. The difficulty with this imperative, as Wierciński articulates, is that the possibility of an authentic retrieval of primordial Christianity is “not an option for us.”³⁹ For this reason, Wierciński is not dissuaded by Heidegger’s exclusion of theology from philosophy; rather he asks whether Heidegger’s phenomenology of religious life actually offers a “challenging opportunity and impetus for theology.”⁴⁰

After Heidegger, Wierciński undertakes a reading of Paul Ricoeur, protestant by birth and later by confession. In the wake of Heidegger’s atheism, Ricoeur challenges the conditions under which philosophy and theology can speak with one another by proposing an *agnostic* approach to philosophy. Ricoeur’s Christianity thus becomes one practised, as Wierciński writes, “in the mode of a philosopher.”⁴¹ His position reopens the possibility of philosophical theology and overturns Heidegger’s dictum that theology must be extracted from philosophy so that the latter may reopen the question of the meaning/truth of Being without the contamination caused by ontotheology. For some, the distinction between philosophical atheism and agnosticism may be impotent but it actually represents a fundamental shift for hermeneutics, as it reopens the lines of communication between philosophy and theology. The intent is to maintain philosophy’s autonomy without overlooking how theology and religion intermingle and complement the philosophical. This is based, according to Wierciński, in Ricoeur’s notion that Christianity should be read and understood as “a plurality of confessions,”⁴² rather than a single orthodoxy or dogma.

³⁶ Ibid., 169.

³⁷ Ibid., 170.

³⁸ Ibid., 165.

³⁹ Ibid., 319.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 156.

⁴¹ Ibid., 275.

⁴² Ibid., 284.

Plurality recognizes the limits of science and scientific discourse. For even hermeneutics, at least as understood by Ricoeur, cannot grasp the full and true nature of faith: “faith eludes hermeneutics.”⁴³ For both Ricoeur and Wierciński, the elusiveness of faith is not a frustration for interpretation, but a call to attend to its mystery. Wierciński writes, “The audacity of truth and the obedience to the Truth are the essential requirements for a philosopher and a theologian respectively. It is openness to the disclosure of truth that allows a human being to be addressed by the unconcealment in the happening of truth.”⁴⁴ This is an appeal to the “arrogance” of philosophy, its tendency to separate itself from other sciences in its drive to know; but it is also an appeal to the humility of faith, which recognizes that the limit of knowing extends outside of reason, understanding that there is an aspect of law and life that cannot be mediated through reason alone.

Beyond his close readings of John Paul II, Milbank, Heidegger and Ricoeur, Wierciński’s book is concerned with defending a place for Christianity (theology) vis-à-vis philosophy and, perhaps more bluntly, secular reason. Towards the beginning of the book, Wierciński recalls Tertullian’s distinction between Athens and Jerusalem, representative of the difference between philosophy and theology.⁴⁵ Wierciński does not affirm or dismiss the antinomy, but lets it hang in the air, expanding throughout the text. The reference acknowledges the historical nature of the conversation, but also complicates Wierciński’s hermeneutic, particularly as he does not at any point address its cogency and reliability. This raises the question of whether the notions of Athens and Jerusalem are helpful in understanding philosophy and theology’s relation to one another, or, conversely, whether the distinction skews the matter at hand. Assuming the merits of the distinction, the question of how to situate the Christian tradition in the conversation between philosophy and theology must be made explicit; for is Christianity not the volatile admixture of Athens and Jerusalem?

It is a fair conclusion that for Wierciński Christianity has a unique role to play in the discussion between philosophy and theology. This is not meant as a criticism or dismissal of the book; rather it represents an opportunity to reflect on the role, politically and scientifically, that Christianity has played over the last 15 to 20 centuries vis-à-vis the histories of reason and revelation. If there is one striking problem with this approach, it is that it does not include voices from other religious traditions, thinking especially of Jewish and Muslim thinkers. In this regard, there is much work to be done to bridge the gap between philosophy and theology but also to foster ecumenism within the disciplines themselves. This criticism is not unique to Wierciński’s book and despite this limitation the book provides a tremendous contribution and makes plainly clear that Heidegger’s is not the only history of philosophy and theology. The book is a compelling

⁴³ Ibid., 284.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 286.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 10.

example of how a dialogue between the disciplines of philosophy and theology can be carried out, with mutual awe and respect for the offering of participation and truth made by both. Perhaps only hermeneutics could appreciate this insight given its inexhaustible care for the depths of history and nuances of language of both disciplines. The book demonstrates convincingly that philosophy and theology's relationship is far from closed; and perhaps also that they are dependent on one another in a way that even they cannot fully recognize, so long as they attempt to understand their relation independently of the other.

In the end, Wierciński offers a profound example of how to read *between* philosophy and theology. In an age of hyper-specialization and academic isolationism, a reading as open and receptive as Wierciński's is welcome and provocative, in the best sense of the word. The practice of hermeneutics provides more than just an interpretation; it is also an act of hope.⁴⁶ This idea is expressed in the following passage from the book's conclusion: "The space opened up between philosophy and theology, a space created by the incommensurability of the two, is an invitation to hermeneutics. What happens in the no-man's land between philosophy and theology is, and can only be, hermeneutics."⁴⁷ Wierciński's characterization of hermeneutics as a "no-man's land" is appropriate, as its territory remains *always* to be discovered, and can only be explored through active engagement with the historical work of philosophy and theology. Hermeneutics cannot be reduced to methodology; it is, as Wierciński offers, a way of hope, self-understanding and transcendence in what can often be a harsh and strict dialogue between scientific disciplines or religious traditions. In this respect, he has shown how hermeneutics offers dialogue where we might prefer to think conversation is impossible.

J.A.F. Marshall

⁴⁶ Ibid., 320.

⁴⁷ Ibid., 318.