

PH8121: RECENT CONTINENTAL PHILOSOPHY

Special Topic: Issues in Continental Philosophy of Religion

Instructor: **Professor John Caruana**

COURSE DESCRIPTION

One of the more intriguing developments in contemporary continental philosophy is the renewed interest in religion. Virtually every major contemporary continental thinker has engaged with some issue or problem relating to religion. At first sight, this development seems surprising. The first three quarters of the 20th century were marked by a general suspicion and aversion to religion. Just a few decades ago, continental philosophers were more likely to be occupied with aesthetic or political questions than with religious issues. That changed dramatically in the final quarter of the last century: there is now a growing recognition that religion has and continues to play, for better or for worse, a major role in politics, culture, our understanding of subjectivity, indeed, even philosophy itself.

Before undertaking to examine some current issues in continental philosophy of religion, we will discuss the limitations of some of the most influential critiques of religion in the modern era. While partly justified in their criticism, many of the modern theories of religion are also highly reductive. Using the work of John Caputo and Charles Taylor we will see how certain preconceptions concerning religion held by Enlightenment philosophers – and, no doubt, in our own day – have been responsible for distorting our understanding of religion. The respective critiques of Marx, Nietzsche and Freud have also played a significant role in discouraging philosophers from appreciating the complexity of religion. These earlier critical assessments are almost all unanimous in regarding religions as synonymous with superstition, the product of infantile psychology, or a reactionary ideology. Despite the articulation of more nuanced views on religion (Søren Kierkegaard, Karl Jaspers, for example), the Enlightenment, Marxist, Nietzschean, and Freudian critiques of religion went virtually unchallenged by most European philosophers until quite recently.

After this reassessment of religion, we turn to the question of the ‘death of God’ – one of the central topics of contemporary European philosophy of religion. As we will discover, there is no univocal interpretation of the meaning of the death of God. For some, this ‘death’ marks the end of both religion and metaphysics. Yet, for others, like the French philosopher, Jean-Luc Marion, the death of God opens the way to a deeper and more original understanding of the divine. In an effort to make sense of the ‘death of God,’ we will trace its formulation in both theology, as well as the philosophies of Hegel and Nietzsche. That will set the stage for our analysis of one of the most important terms of Heidegger’s later thought: ‘ontotheology.’ Post-Heideggerian thought has been preoccupied with disengaging philosophy from its ontotheological underpinnings – that is the coupling of metaphysics with theology. Mindful of the importance of the death-of-God and ontotheological critiques, some continental philosophers have attempted to rethink the categories of God and transcendence. Two of the most important voices associated with this effort are Emmanuel Levinas and Marion. We will also discuss the work of Jacques Derrida, who plays an equally important role in reconceptualizing the question of God and transcendence – even as he describes himself as someone who ‘rightly pass[es] for an atheist.’ By contrast, some philosophers have responded to the challenges of both the ‘death of God’ and Heidegger’s criticisms of ontotheology by either bracketing or rejecting entirely the concept of transcendence. In this vein, we conclude the seminar with a discussion of the radical engagements of two of the leading Marxist

philosophers alive today: Alain Badiou and Slavoj Zizek. In their respective contributions to the debates surrounding religion, both of these thinkers find in Saint Paul the necessary resources for thinking our way out of what they describe as the dead-end of postmodern relativism.

REQUIREMENTS

Essay Proposal: 10%

Essay: 50%

Seminar Presentation: 25%

Participation: 15%

TEXTS

J. Caputo, *Philosophy and Theology*

M. Heidegger, *Identity and Difference*

A. Badiou, *Saint Paul: The Foundation of Universalism*

Other readings will be made available either through a course pack or Blackboard

Week	TOPIC	READINGS
1	Introduction	-----
2	Post-secularism? Part I	John Caputo, <i>Philosophy and Theology</i>
3	Post-secularism? Part II	Charles Taylor, "The Future of the Religious Past," in <i>Religion: Beyond a Concept</i> , ed. H. de Vries OR "Immanent Frame" in <i>A Secular Age</i>
4	Death of God - Part I	Hegel, '1827 Lecture on the Philosophy of Religion' Nietzsche, Selections
5	Death of God - Part II	Jean-Luc Marion, "The Collapse of the Idols and Confrontation with the Divine: Nietzsche," in <i>The Idol and Distance</i>
6	Heidegger and Ontotheology	Heidegger, <i>Identity and Difference</i>
7	Levinas	E. Levinas, "The Trace of the Other"
8	Levinas	Emmanuel Levinas, "God and Philosophy," in <i>Basic Philosophical Writings</i>
9	Derrida	J. Derrida, "How to Avoid Speaking: Denials" in <i>The Postmodern God</i> , ed. G. Ward

10	Derrida and Marion –The Gift Debate	J.L. Marion, “In the Name: How to Avoid Speaking of ‘Negative Theology’” in <i>God, the Gift, and Postmodernism</i> , eds. J. Caputo, M. Scanlon
11	Badiou , The ‘Event’ and Saint Paul	Alain Badiou, <i>Saint Paul</i>
12	Zizek on Belief	Zizek, “Paul and the Truth Event”