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Book Review: Frederiek Depoortere, *Christ in Postmodern Philosophy*, T&T Clarke, London, 2008.

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Christ in Postmodern Philosophy. By Frederiek Depoortere. Pp. Vii, 159, T&T Clarke, 2008.

The Leuven scholar, Frederiek Depoortere, has written a fascinating account of three contemporary postmodern thinkers, Gianni Vattimo, René Girard and Slavoj Žižek, and their attempts to do Christology. Depoortere writes in a very lucid fashion given the difficulty of his studies. The book critically reflects how these three unique philosophical approaches to Christology radically enforce a postmodern, even secular, outlook upon the Incarnation, Paschal Mystery and the Trinity. Immediately, the postmodern turn suggests a priority of cultural studies, politics, ideology, psychology and sociology over theology. For example rather than having a Trinity of Father, Son and Holy Spirit, Žižek seems to invoke Hegel the Father, Lacan the Son and Marx the Spirit. Vattimo too suppresses the heart of the Christian mysteries by suggesting that the event of the incarnation brings God's transcendence to an end to herald the awakening of a secular caritas. And Girard, although upholding Christianity's unique transcendent origin, takes up his postmodern brush to paint the Hebrew God as a divine phenomenon contaminated by violence. Together, all three share the perspective and danger of supercessionism in a way that seems to bring the spectre of Marcion back to theology. Žižek is perhaps the most haunting as he works hard to construct the mystery of Christ with pillars of ideology and history (Hegel), psychoanalysis (Lacan) and political economy (Marx); these three spectres even demonize Levinas' philosophy as a 'vacuous Otherness'. Depoortere also leads the reader to encounter Vattimo's wrenching of Christology as a Freudian/Lacanian 'objet petit a' hell of frightful profanities. Could this then seem to reflect a disturbing trend in some forms of postmodern

philosophy of hatred towards God and a despising of humankind in general? Or perhaps, does this represent the postmodern tendency towards exploring theology through a secular path?

Where philosophical attempts to do Christology appear more ideological and secular, are we not then witnessing a ‘horror movie or story’ rather than encountering a genuine search for the Word of God? Depoortere has done a good job to bring out these thinkers and to criticize their ability to do Christology. His work shows that postmodern thinkers such as Vattimo and Žižek are allergic, for example, to Jewish or Christian ‘postmodern’ philosophies like Levinas’ ethical metaphysics. This is significant as it highlights a preference to reduce theology to competing self-interests, that is, their desire in effect to replace theology with sociological or psychoanalytical constructs, for example. Levinas himself was wary that onto-theology could fall into the contamination of the self-interest of being-in-general. In view of this Levinasian caution, the Christian theologian is called to reflect to what extent Žižek and Vattimo fall into the contamination of onto-theology by allowing their thematisations and representations of experience to mature into self-interest rather than otherness. These are harsh criticisms, but coming from a Levinasian and Judeo-Christian stance, some words of ‘thinking otherwise’ need to be made. Accordingly, the language of faith helps to safeguard the Christian mysteries. This is not to stop ongoing research, searching and dialogue, but to argue for an ethical and prayerful sense to approach the mysteries of the faith.

In contrast to Vattimo and Žižek, Girard’s Christology uses the lens of violence. Given his understanding of the origins of human culture in terms of imitation and of killing the scapegoat as a means to put an end to the ‘mimetic crisis,’ it is not surprising that Girard will rationalise

Christ as the divine victim 'untainted by violence' who is now ready to give a sermon unto a violent humanity. In a way, Girard seems to wrench some of the drama of Holy Saturday unto the Crucifixion. What then does Girard's theology herald for today? It teaches us that Christ's death has signified the tragedy of our world – its violent foundations. However, violence itself need not necessarily lead to despair. Girard's Christology significantly allows the theologian to take seriously the notion of human violence and of God's response to it in Salvation History, from Creation to the Paschal Mystery, and even to the Parousia. Jesus the Christ teaches humanity the tragedy of its true vocation: expiation for others. However we interpret this, it is fraught with danger. If expiation for others takes on a primary cultural, social, political or secular foundation, it may well spell the end of theological sense. Theology needs, as it were, the fence of both faith and reason, or prayer and ethics, so that it does not fall into totality and reduction.

Furthermore, the concept of violence is especially significant for theologians themselves. It is a warning that theology too can be subject to the violence of thematisations, personal experience, and the objectivity of proofs and facts. The theologian is faced with the mystery of Being and how far humanity may discover its own being in relation to divine Being. The word, 'relation,' is crucial as it denotes the possibility for a Trinitarian language and praxis to eventuate in spite of the temptation to fall into the violence of onto-theological language. Vattimo, Žižek and even Girard together with their tendency towards Judaism and the Hebrew Bible evidence the danger and violence of an ontological and postmodern Christology.

Particularly Vattimo and Žižek seem to negate the importance of the ethical relation of otherness. Vattimo, for example, is correct to point out that postmodern thinkers like Levinas and Derrida

who invoke the ethical relation also stress ‘negative experiences’ such as powerlessness, despair, tragedy and unknowability. However, according to Depoortere, Vattimo characterises these experiences as ‘apocalyptic’. This seems to suggest how far Vattimo is willing to misread Levinas and Derrida. Looking at Levinas’ ethical metaphysics, it does not reduce the future to the present (apocalypticism), but rather reflects on past and present encounters to hope for a messianic era (an end to political oppression and economic violence) and a future world of what “no ear has perceived ... no eye has seen” (Isa. 64:4). Levinas’ writings testify that he had tasted an ancient vintage maturing since the days of creation, namely the language of faith, ethics and prayer. In contrast, Vattimo and Žižek indicate a preference for a postmodern vintage that seems to distrust the language of faith for a developed secular construct. If the Incarnation for Vattimo and Žižek means the death of God’s transcendence, are they not then testifying to a fundamental rupture in theology: the reduction of its essence to secularisation? In practical terms such thinking can initiate the destruction of Christian belief. Depoortere has critically engaged all three postmodern philosophers to challenge the reader to move out of his or her theological nest, and learn that divisive approaches to Christian theology are not just something we have heard about in Church history, but are happening today in our own backyard, so to speak.