

Book reviews

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Hilary P. B. Bagshaw *Religion in the Thought of Mikhail Bakhtin*. (Farnham: Ashgate, 2013). Pp. xi + 159. £50.00 (Hbk). ISBN 978 1 4094 6240 8.

The influential Russian thinker Mikhail Bakhtin cuts a strange figure in our contemporary landscape, not least because of the overt use of his native Orthodoxy at key places in his thinking. He shows perhaps the Russian penchant for the ‘traditional philosophy’ we more generally associate with Asia, as well as being hugely innovative in his engagement with the act, culture, literature, and questions of social science. Most of the leading western thinkers who are his equal (such as Derrida, Levinas, Ricoeur, or even Heidegger) developed their early philosophical thinking as a critical response to the rise of Husserlian phenomenology and, in the case of Ricoeur and Derrida at least, specifically turned to language in opposition to Husserl’s philosophy of consciousness. Bakhtin, however, comes to language, and to a linguistic philosophy of ‘dialogism’, from other sources, which is the topic of this book.

From the outset, Hilary Bagshaw sets herself the task of reconciling the two schools of thought in Bakhtinian studies, which are divided on the question of the role of religion in his thinking. He unquestionably uses Orthodox sources, but does this qualify his thought as ‘religious’ and to a degree ‘confessional’ or are they simply used impersonally and analytically? Do the key ideas of empathy and intersubjectivity, and the material nature of the sign, in fact come from elsewhere, from sources such as the German philosophical texts that were influential in Russia in the early decades of the twentieth century? Bagshaw extends this questioning into the final section of her book, which takes up and critiques the innovative methodology of Gavin Flood, who in his ‘Beyond Phenomenology’ (1999) argues that Bakhtin offers a dialogical epistemology which can renew critical method in Religious Studies. Ironically, Flood wants to use this Russian thinker to build a strong critique precisely of the phenomenological method of Religious Studies, whose origins lie, through Gerard van de Leeuw, in the thought of Edmund Husserl.

Religious motivations in texts are of course notoriously difficult to ascertain, as distinct from religious themes, and the implications of the presence of such

motivations can also turn out to be imponderable. (Can non-Catholics enjoy the religiously motivated or 'confessional' work of Dante, for instance? The answer to this, one suspects, is 'yes'.) If Bakhtin read Max Scheler and lectured on him during the critical period, and if he read the Jewish philosopher Hermann Cohen and his Jewish protégé Ernst Cassirer, then do these count as 'secular' sources when post-Kantian philosophy in Germany was so deeply and self-confessedly permeated by both Christian and Jewish forms of self-awareness within a rigorously philosophical idiom? These questions of motivation are often best resolved by reference to genres (for whom is the text written?). They become even more difficult for western scholars therefore when distinctively Russian norms of genre are in play, according to which 'theological' or 'devotional' language has to be very tightly linked to liturgy. Appositely, Bagshaw quotes Alexandar Mihailovic to the effect that the use of doctrinal structure or thematics in this kind of context would have been deeply unsettling to Bakhtin's religious contemporaries. This is not at all the world of evangelical 'witnessing' in secular contexts as the expression of religious community.

Wisely Bagshaw aims to find a mediating position in the debate and seeks throughout to be fair to both sides of the argument, setting out both the religiously sounding texts in early sections, and possible parallels in the philosophy of religion texts which were influential in Russia at that time. In chapter 2 she sets out the work of Hermann Cohen and Max Scheler from the perspective of their engagement with religious themes, including the Bakhtinian themes of inter-subjectivity, the unfinalizability of the self, confession and redemption, and divine grace, and she concludes at this point that Bakhtin's instincts are philosophical. But this is not quite philosophy as we have known it in anglophone culture, and in chapter 3 she explores the interpenetration of philosophies of culture, especially that of Ernst Cassirer, with anthropological texts such as Frazer's *Golden Bough*. This includes a very interesting section on the Russian thinker Nikolai Iakovlevich Marr who flourished during much of the Soviet period, developing his 'linguistic palaeontology', which sought to trace the evolution of the major Mediterranean and Middle Eastern languages in terms both of their roots and of the socio-economic elements that formed them. It is easy to forget the extent to which Marxism may have positively influenced Bakhtin's thinking, in principle, despite its many constraints, through this kind of highlighting of language. After all, the early Marx of the Parisian manuscripts writes eloquently of the material nature of the sign: a very unusual theme in modern western philosophy, where generally the concept is favoured as extinguishing the materiality of the sign, with its hopelessly unreliable anchorage in space and time.

Chapters 4 and 5 offer a good summary of Bakhtin's thinking on the novel and on carnival before proceeding to chapter 6 where Bagshaw engages with Flood and his theory of dialogism as a resource for Religious Studies. Flood's thinking is summarized fairly, and Bagshaw admits that she agrees with him when he says

that Bakhtin's work is 'particularly relevant to the study of religion in involving a critical inquiry into utterance and in showing the centrality of narrative in culture'. She draws back, however, from endorsing his new approach as one that can replace or significantly critique phenomenology, primarily on the grounds of James Cox's argument for a 'radical empathy' between the scientific observer and the religious subject. 'Radical empathy' allows the observer to recognize 'the fundamental distinction between the 'self' (the researcher) and 'the other' (the objects of research). The 'distinction' identified here, however, is not Ninian Smart's 'empathetic agnosticism', which urges that we should walk in the moccasins of another, and which allows the researcher to suspend questions of 'truth', simply observing religious phenomena dispassionately. Rather, Cox defines this agnosticism as 'surreptitious theology', agreeing with Fitzgerald that it presupposes an 'insider' approach 'since it supports the idea of the existence of transcendent beings'. According to this view, the researcher has either to 'embrace theology quite transparently or admit that they actually study cultural practices'.

This discussion applies a Bakhtinian 'outsideness' (or positioning of the researcher 'outside' the object of research rather than 'entering into' the object of research) as a key element within 'radical empathy'. Throughout her study Bagshaw has stressed the extent to which 'outsidedness', for Bakhtin, takes place within an interactive dialectic between self and other, which is captured in the sequence 'I for myself; I for the other; the other for me', which Bakhtin himself associates with 'confession'. This presupposes a moment of cognitive *vzhivanie* or 'live-entering', which is entering into the other in their own thought-world, before moving to a position of finalizing the other through being able to see the other in the round in a way that they cannot of course see themselves. This is a subtle and interactive form of cognitive mutuality and is not simply an 'outsideness' which is a standing over and against an unexplored other, as if in judgement, as it were. And clearly this latter view is not what Bagshaw means.

And yet it is less clear *why* 'outsideness' as used here should not mean that. Bagshaw reflects with regret that Schelerian empathetic 'love' is part 'of the discourse of philosophy but not of professional research in any social sciences'. She suggests that Ninian Smart's 'moccasin-walking metaphor suggests warmth, affection and tolerance'. But her use of Cox points to a rejection of the *epoché* and agnosticism that underlie Ninian Smart's 'moccasin-walking metaphor'. The question arises therefore why this is genuinely an objective, *scientific* judgement about another and not actually a personal one. Why is it more than just 'I am right and you are wrong'?

The case that it is more than this turns on the viability of Flood's critique of the inadequacy of the phenomenology of consciousness as the basis of a properly empathetic and so *informed* Religious Studies methodology. It is this critique that underpins his advocacy of a linguistic dialogism in its place. In countering Flood, Bagshaw quotes Cox's view in chapter 6 that in the fifth of the *Cartesian*

Meditations, Husserl posits ‘a genuine intersubjectivity’ and that this allows the establishing of ‘objectivity on the basis of an empathetic rendering of intersubjectivity’ (based on the intuition of objective essences). This seems to suggest that Flood’s critique of phenomenology of consciousness fails because cognitive empathy is already secured by the phenomenology of consciousness, in its distinctively Husserlian–Cartesian form. There is no need for a dialogical empathy, based loosely on Bakhtinian categories, therefore. In fact, ‘outsideness’ should be used in a way that excludes dialogical empathy, for such an empathetic disposition would itself be the renunciation of a properly scientific perspective, the argument goes.

But in making the claims he does, Flood is drawing upon much more than the discussion on methodology within Religious Studies. He is looking beyond the immediate Religious Studies contexts of these epistemological questions and is in fact tracking the philosophical history of precisely this text of Husserl, in which Husserl notoriously asks his reader to consider that we identify that this moving object is alive (and is my wife) on the grounds of a series of inductive and inferential moves with respect to a sequence of sense data.

The history of modern philosophy is the history of the dismantling of the self which Husserl constructs at this point. In 1936, Sartre wrote that Husserl offers ‘an escapist doctrine which . . . turns our attention from the real problems’. In 1952, Paul Ricoeur referred to Husserl’s self as ‘a chimera’ and later described it as being ‘as abstract and empty as it is invincible’. It is this all-controlling Husserlian self that Derrida disrupts through the coining of the French term *différance* in an early article on Husserl that institutes deconstruction as a philosophical method (1967). Heidegger understands his own magisterial *Being and Time* (1927) to be a refutation of the disembodied self of Husserlian phenomenology. From 1929 to 1930, Levinas was positive about Husserl (translating the *Cartesian Meditations* into French), but his mature work is a powerful dismantling of the disembodied, fictional, monological self of Husserlian phenomenology, which he takes as the starting point for his infinitely relational self. From a social scientific perspective, an authoritative ethnographer such as Johannes Fabian points to the pitfalls of exploitation of the other at the moment that we cease to be coeval with him or her, or in living dialogue with him or her, just as he points to the legal rights of the ethnic other who in becoming an object to the researcher may in fact find that he or she is misrepresented in the integrity of his or her own ‘local’ life. Indeed, even the new advances in the neuroscience of human social cognition today see an interactively dialogical self at the most fundamental level of our biology.

Inevitably, we are left wondering whether the term ‘radical empathy’ may not in fact itself be misleading if it is applied to a situation in which one human being makes another the object of research which, while according to the principles of self-reflexivity, nevertheless presupposes an understanding of the self that both philosophy and science would seem to have long since left behind.

Many readers will find much of value in Hilary Bagshaw's interesting book, which shows a real appreciation of Bakhtin's thought. It is carefully composed throughout and draws together a wide range of sources. The student of Bakhtin requires a diversity of approaches to draw close to him, and this book will be a contribution to the field.

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Sarah Coakley *God, Sexuality and the Self: An Essay 'On the Trinity'*.
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What is the connection between the doctrine of the Trinity and desire – between one of the deepest mysteries of Christian doctrine and the erotic forces that shape human existence? This is the central question of *God, Sexuality and the Self*, the first of four planned volumes comprising Sarah Coakley's new systematic theology. It is an intriguing, difficult question, and Coakley's response to it offers a compelling vision not only for theology, but also – though less explicitly – for the philosophy of religion.

The book's thesis, like its theme, is rich and complex. However, it is given a clear structure by the methodology developed for the project as a whole. Coakley calls her method *théologie totale*, after *l'histoire totale* in which the Annales School sought to disclose all levels of historical culture. In her first chapter Coakley sets out her commitment to 'an exploration of the many mediums and levels at which theological truth may be engaged . . . an attempt to do justice to every level, and type, of religious apprehension and its appropriate mode of expression' (p. 48). Applying this multidisciplinary method to the doctrine of the Trinity involves analysing the relationship between feminist theory, sociology, and theology (chapter 2); examining the historical development of doctrine in the early church, with a particular focus on views of prayer and the Spirit (chapter 3); documenting fieldwork at an Anglican charismatic church in the late 1980s (chapter 4); interpreting trinitarian images in iconography (chapter 5); comparing Augustine and Gregory of Nyssa on gender, desire, prayer, and the Trinity (chapter 6); and, finally, engaging with Dionysus the Areopagite to reflect on 'divine desire' and divine naming (chapter 7). This eclectic approach facilitates an intensive focus on Coakley's theme: how the 'messy entanglements' (pp. 59, 340) of sexual desire and the desire for God, and of the secular and spiritual realms, themselves become