Religion's Persistence: A Response to Diane Enns

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Abstract

Responding to Diane Enns's paper published in the same issue, the author expresses deep sympathy for many of the arguments Enns makes but offers a counterpoint on the issue of the persistence of religious language, which is suggested to be deeply embedded in the fabric of contemporary ethical and political life.

I want to thank Kyle Gingerich Hiebert for inviting me to reply to Diane Enns's paper. Diane is both a friend and a colleague of mine. As long as I've known her, I have admired her deeply reflective and personalized mode of doing philosophy and the beautiful prose she uses to express that thought. Her impassioned writing style is the antithesis of that mode of dry abstraction, which, unfortunately, remains dominant in our discipline.

Diane's heartfelt testimony poignantly and powerfully conveys her experiences about faith and religious community. Her testimony, and others like it, need to be heard by those who remain attached to their faith traditions. We must be completely open to receiving the first-hand accounts of those who feel their religious inheritance has aggrieved them. Religious traditions must be prepared to listen to the criticisms of both current and former members. Such testimonies offer an intimate understanding of the potential and actual harms associated with these traditions.

Unfortunately, Diane's story is all too common. There are, sadly, untold numbers of individuals across different Christian sects who have had hurtful, even traumatic experiences at the hands of their religious communities. The problem, of course, is not unique to Mennonites. My faith tradition, Catholicism, is associated with a terrible legacy of abuse and injustice, particularly toward children and women. Regrettably, the typical response has been to bury one's head in the sand at the sound of any new disclosure. Perhaps those in a position to take responsibility for the perpetrated harms

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hope that the bad press and the scathing testimonies will disappear in due time. But that is not likely to happen. Nietzsche taught us over a century ago that secrecy is one of the hallmarks of religious life. Historically, that ability to cultivate secrecy may have allowed certain Christian communities to evade persecution by other dominant groups. But over time, that same capacity served as a cover for injustices and immoral practices that originated within the community itself. Secrecy can just as quickly become a breeding ground for moral evasion, the protection of abusers, and the silencing of the victim's call for justice. If we truly believe the words that a wise soul expressed almost two thousand years ago, namely, that the truth shall set us free, then we are obliged to acknowledge not only the positive goods that religion has made possible but also its shameful past, that long history in which various faith communities have betrayed the core values of their teachings.

As far as Diane's witness of her personal history goes, I have nothing to add except my sympathy and solidarity. The same, I might add, applies to her witness as a woman working in philosophy. For those of us familiar with the goings-on of professional philosophy, it is hard to dispute Diane's frustration with its conspicuous masculinist tendencies. That masculine imprint shows up among other places in the way that argumentation and logic-chopping are held up as privileged modes of disciplinary presentation. It also shows up in the way that it promotes a disembodied bird's-eye view of reality, which Thomas Nagel famously describes as the "view from nowhere."[1] That standpoint perhaps reflects a deeply embedded masculine fantasy that seeks to gain control and power over the limitations of finite, embodied, affective life. As Simone de Beauvoir noted in *The Second Sex,* this attitude is likely fueled by primordial, irrational fears around the imagined unruliness of the female body and the perception that emotions are primarily the domain of feminine psychology. Unable to acknowledge its own limitations, the hyper-abstract masculinist viewpoint takes flight from the concrete condition of fragile, feeling bodies. In the process, it ignores and sometimes disparages those philosophical perspectives that desire to speak honestly from a particular body and place.[2]

[1] Thomas Nagel, *The View from Nowhere* (New York and London: Oxford Univ. Press, 1989).
[2] Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, trans. Constance Borde and Sheila Malovany-Chevallier (New York: Vintage Books, 2011).

As one can probably discern, I agree with much of Diane's presentation. But Diane also knows me well enough to know that our philosophical views on religion don't always overlap. In particular, I wonder about her framing of what she takes to be the dangers of religious language. Early on in a discussion of William James's description of religious experience, Diane talks about her "almost allergic reaction" to the religious language of the "mystical, sublime, sacred, spiritual, transcendent, ek-static, [and] divine." She later expands on that reaction when she articulates a reservation she has with Richard Kearney's notion of anatheism:

> I remain doubtful that any transformative project can be achieved if we persist in naming a divine entity; whether male or female, the temptation to anthropomorphize is too great. As soon as we name God, or religious experience more generally, institutions spring into life, bringing with them moralism, doctrine, orthodoxy, and criteria for inclusion and exclusion.

I take Diane to be saying, in a nutshell, that we might be better off avoiding religious language altogether. There is ample evidence to support her concern about the ever-present dangers that the reification of religious language poses. (Though, I would remind her that Kearney also wholeheartedly shares that concern.) Nevertheless, I think that this reservation, left as it is, reveals a potential blind spot.

The first problem I see with the view that we ought to avoid using religious language in our philosophical articulations is that it doesn't consider the extent to which religious meanings, whether we like it or not, are deeply embedded in the fabric of secular political and ethical discourses. Even if we could stop talking explicitly about God and transcendence, we would not have succeeded in freeing ourselves from religious presuppositions. Thinkers as diverse as Carl Schmitt, Jacques Derrida, Jürgen Habermas, and Charles Taylor have made the persuasive case that much of our modern political and ethical landscape is shot through with theological assumptions. The second problem I see is that these religious significations are intricately woven into the very language of modern critical thought, even though it believes itself to be mostly at odds with the spiritual heritage of the West. As Hent de Vries succinctly puts it, an undeniable "minimal theology" motivates the vocabulary and philosophy of many modern and contemporary critical

thinkers.[3] More to the point, this minimal theology often serves as the ethical kernel of this thinking. This is a point that Emmanuel Levinas makes explicit in an essay entitled "To Love the Torah more than God." Levinas expresses a certain amount of sympathy with those who, after the catastrophe of the Holocaust, are appalled by the hasty recourse to a loving and merciful God as a way to make sense of that debilitating trauma. Such appeals to a soothing religiosity strike Levinas as inappropriate and offensive in light of the unimaginable suffering that the victims of European fascism endured. In that context, Levinas notes, "[t]he simplest and most common response would be atheism. This is also the sanest reaction for all those for whom previously a fairly primary sort of God had dished out prizes, inflicted punishment or pardoned sins—a God who, in His goodness, treated men like children."[4] Levinas's reaction to a business-as-usual attitude towards religious language after the horrors of the twentieth century aligns with Diane's similar concerns. But, the critical point is that Levinas immediately follows that comment with an arresting challenge aimed at progressive, secular perspectives in general. These perspectives are likewise too quick to renounce all reference to the Good or transcendence as antiquated or potentially oppressive. Progressive secular movements continue to embrace some conception of the Good tacitly—that is to say, some notion of transcendental or religious value. Of the thinker who denounces the very idea of the Good as outmoded but continues to make critical pronouncements regarding injustice and the hope for a better world, Levinas poignantly asks: "But with what lesser demon or strange magician have you, therefore, filled your heaven, you who claim that it is empty? And why, under an empty sky, do you continue to hope for a good and sensible world?"[5] Any political or ethical movement that sees itself as advancing progressive goals presupposes, for Levinas, some reference to the "Good beyond being," that is, a religious or transcendent meaning to human life. Far from breaking with religion, secularist progressive discourses are secretly guided by a particular religious insistence regarding our obligations

[3] Hent de Vries, *Minimal Theologies: Critiques of Secular Reason in Adorno and Levinas*, trans. Geoffrey Hale (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 2005).

[4] Emmanuel Levinas, *Difficult Freedom: Essays on Judaism*, trans. Seán Hand (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 1990), 143.

[5] Ibid.

towards others, especially the most disadvantaged of these. Levinas's point is that the progressive intellectual ambition to fully secularize language, to reinscribe transcendence into the field of immanence, inevitably betrays its undisclosed attachments to certain religious commitments.

It is important to note that for Levinas, it is not some general religious idea that is surreptitiously reinscribed in the grammar of progressive, critical theory. What gets reinscribed is a messianic desire to do justice to the violence directed at the Other. That conception of the Other has undeniable roots in a particular religious legacy, specifically Judaism, where the Other is explicitly identified with the most marginalized members of society as understood in the ancient context of the Israelites, namely, the orphan, widow, and stranger. Christianity extends this legacy. In its distinct idiom, the New Testament speaks of this Other as the "least of these." One can attempt to secularize this language as much as one would like. Still, it seems difficult, if not impossible in my view, to altogether remove the religious traces in this form of moral valuation. There is nothing obvious about the requirement to care for the least of these, especially when *these* people are not members of *my* tribe. We are confronted here with a singularly sacred condition, namely, the call to recognize and respect the holiness of the Other.

I think it was an awareness of this point that led a dyed-in-the-wool atheist like Jean-Paul Sartre to concede late in his life, perhaps begrudgingly, that

> ... we are all still Christians today; the most radical unbelief is Christian atheism, an atheism that despite its destructive power preserves guiding schemes—very few for thought, more for the imagination, most for the sensibility—whose source lies in the centuries of Christianity to which we are heirs, like it or not.[6]

As Sartre testifies here, our religious heritage has profoundly shaped the modern Western imagination and many of its key categories, whether we like it or not. Even the atheism of the modern Western world is incomprehensible outside the context of our Christian heritage.[7] Rather

[6] Jean-Paul Sartre, *The Family Idiot: Gustave Flaubert, 1821-1857,* Vol. 4, trans. Carol Cosman (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 2021), 346.

[7] A potential counterargument to my position might make use of Nietzsche's attempt to undercut Christianity altogether by showing that it amounts to nothing more than a life-

than deny ourselves that language, it is incumbent on all of us, believers and non-believers alike, to be cognizant of and, yes, above all vigilant about the persistent and perhaps inevitable role that religious assumptions and language play in our ethics, politics, and thinking in general.

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denying moral project (a will-to-Truth) that is rooted in a reactive will-to-power. This is the famous view that he puts forward in *On the Genealogy of Morals*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Random House, 1967). In the wake of Foucault and Deleuze, Nietzsche's two most well-known progeny, this has become one of the dominant perspectives of the academy today. This perspective has some merit. It captures something about certain forms of reactive religiosity. That it captures the totality of what constitutes Christianity is, however, debatable, to say the least. For a rebuttal of this perspective that acknowledges its valid concerns while also pointing out its potential weaknesses, see Charles Taylor's *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA.: Harvard Univ. Press, 2007); in particular, see pp. 373-374, and 635-637.