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### Notes

1. Karma, yoga, zen, and mindfulness can be mentioned as important examples, but śakti, understood as the active dynamic female principle, is also becoming an increasingly common feature in the religious landscape. In Denmark, one can find courses on "Finding your inner śakti."
2. Because Statistics Denmark, which register all new-

comers to Denmark, do not take religious but only geographic affiliation into account, it is difficult to give an exact figure when it comes to religious grouping.

3. I have followed the establishment of this śakta cult in Denmark since the mid-1990s and have conducted more than fifty semi-structured interviews with devotees and other people related to the temple. I have interviewed Lalitha Śripalan twice, had a lot of unstructured talks with people in the temple, and observed both festivals and day-to-day pūjās. I would especially like to thank Koushi, who conducts many of the songs of praise used in the temple and who helps to keep the temple running. He has always answered my question sent to him by mail or in person.

4. I have used the same perspective in relation to understanding what is transmitted and negotiated between generations (Fibiger 2011).

5. See [www.amritapuri.org](http://www.amritapuri.org).

6. This is explicitly expressed by ethnic Danes visiting the temple.

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## Facing Rortian Ethics with Levinas and Kierkegaard: A Review of J. Aaron Simmons's *God and the Other: Ethics and Politics after the Theological Turn*

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We are quite used to hearing about "turns" nowadays. The noun itself is innocuous, denoting a mere kinetic shift in direction. When preceded by certain adjectives, however, it comes to symbolize the radical significance with which many of us have become familiar: the inductive turn, the subjective turn, the linguistic turn, the ethical turn, the postmodern turn, etc. Richard Rorty's humorous "posties" may be the only formulaic rival, with a bullet.

The theological turn, heralded in the subtitle of *God and the Other*, follows on the coattails of the turn to religion in philosophy—more turns to add to the list! Even Radical-Orthodox claims about a "genuine" postmodern past does not detract from the fact that such claims are framed by a philosophic postmodern present rightly or wrongly distancing itself from theology. Nor do the flurry of works that excavate the theological from the philosophical in the postmodern present. Maybe Derrida's distilled "return" to religion signals a desirable balance? J. Aaron Simmons, in this fine installment in the In-

diana Series in the Philosophy of Religion, certainly seems open to the idea. Still, Simmons wants to side with those in the theological turn, such as Richard Kearney and series editor Merold Westphal, who point beyond the religious indeterminacy of Derrida's universalizable culture of faith, "toward a postmodern ethico-religious subjectivity," as Simmons puts it, "that allows for still identifying with a determinate religious tradition" (2011, 206; see also 195, 200, 203).

The proposal is laudable and arguably Simmons's basic position. It fuels his critique of Rorty's dismissal of Derrida and consequently Levinas whom Rorty charges as trafficking in ethically disengaged perspectives. They—Derrida and Levinas, Derrida especially—may be useful for the "private task of self-creation" (Simmons 2011, 26), but they, *a fortiori* Levinas, are "useless for attaining public goals" (17), i.e., politics. The book is basically an answer to Rorty's pragmatist complaint. The Continental tradition is, contrary to appearances, concerned with

the concrete political realm; religion, philosophical “God-talk,” being integral, useful even, to this aim. The problem with Rorty, who represents a basic complaint against Continental thinking, is his pragmatism. It couches a party politics in a rhetoric at odds with Rorty’s otherwise exemplary concern for the suffering of the other. Haplessly myopic, “re-descriptive,” Rorty cannot offer reasons for social engagement beyond something being “correct because it is ‘our’ idea”: “Rorty does not propose his political vision because it is good, but because it is what ‘we liberals’ find to be definitive of ‘our’ identity” (31). He’s an “advocate of the status quo rather than of the to-come” (130). This explains two unconventional and hence contentious parts to Simmons’s argument: why Kierkegaard is wedded to Levinas (the need to include the religious, God, in the ethical priority of the Other), and why a modest foundationalist account of justification is required in Simmons’s theological reading of deconstructive democracy (the need to bring Continental ethico-political discourse into productive conversation with Anglo-American philosophical concerns).

Despite Rorty’s disapproval of Levinas’s ethics as basically theological, Levinas insists that infinite responsibility is not “religious” responsibility to God or ethical responsibility to the human other; it is to their utter singularity, irreducibility. Interestingly, Levinas manages something of a Rortian critique against Kierkegaard, despite Rorty’s pragmatism, while shaking off any understanding of private experience as properly basic to relationality and responsibility. The extended lines of relations do not simply meet in the eternal Thou, as Buber argued and one finds Kierkegaard advocating; they are constituted by the irreducible difference and hence primacy of ethical responsibility. Simmons comes to Kierkegaard’s defense by arguing that the primacy of faith in Kierkegaard, which appears to subordinate ethics to religion, actually champions a “bi-directional responsibility to God and the Other” akin to what one finds in Levinas (Simmons 2011, 39). It is not an either/or issue in Kierkegaard—nor, should we assume, in the current theological turn for which Kierkegaard serves as something of a patron saint. Religion trumps ethics only in the very qualified sense of intensifying ethical responsibility in a theistic conception of bi-directionality. Implied is an aporia of responsibility that shirks closure and is “productive not only for subjective existence, but also for ethical relationship,

religious community, and political life” (63).

A bi-conditionality is at play, one in which duty to the Other is conditioned by the Other, God, and “devotion to the other ... is the condition for the possibility of obeying God” (Simmons 2011, 62). Simmons sees much potential here for a productive if mutually vexing dialogue: “My claim is that when we really see Kierkegaard *as* Kierkegaard and Levinas *as* Levinas, we will begin to view them as moving forward together while constantly challenging each other on the best way toward the singularizing goal of faithfulness to God and justice for the Other” (68). In other words, Simmons’s joint reading of Kierkegaard and Levinas provides him with a theologically based Continental ethics that is at once ethico-religious and politically mindful. The better half of the book is spent developing this theoretical possibility and foundation.

Foundation? Yes, you read correctly. This is one of the more refreshing aspects of Simmons’s argument. An admirable job is done promoting a redecorated transcendental method. Equipped philosophically with Ricoeur, Levinas, and Derrida and theologically with Jean-Luc Marion and Michel Henry (contra, famously now, Dominique Janicaud), just to name a few, Simmons is armed to move past the Kantian metaphysics associated with the transcendental gesture. This particular *redivivus* is existentially contoured. No longer a preoccupation with establishing the logical conditions of possible objects of knowledge, it concerns itself with the “quasi-logical” and existential conditions relative to lived experience (Simmons 2011, 120). Of course, Simmons is not the first to argue this, but he is among the few quasi-transcendentalists doing so without turning crimson.

Not only is Simmons brazen about flashing his philosophic card, he also comes clean about his religious allegiances, hinted at the outset of this review: “post-modern Christianity,” a Christianity whose ideas of *kenosis* and the *eschaton* form the basis of an ethico-political project which is inclusive of other religious traditions. The reader at this point may suspect, as did a former colleague of Simmons, that “Continental philosophy is just Catholicism for atheists” (which is the title, in question form, of Simmons’s eighth chapter). But Simmons (2011, 182) retorts that Continental philosophy is “not ‘just’ anything,” meaning: we should resist the temptation to reify the phenomenon into a cheeky catchall. The details of Simmons’s response combine the idea of *kenosis* in

the thinking of Gianni Vattimo with that implied not only in Kierkegaardian and Levinasian alterity but also in Kearney's thinking about the *eschaton* and Derrida's messianic.

Kearney's (2001) idea of "the God who may be" exploits the philosophical and theological possibilities perceived by Vattimo of a God *after* God explicitly in terms of how we live in the present toward the future. "Drawing on Kearney's interpretation, we can see how Vattimo's rather unorthodox Christianity and Levinas's particular take on Judaism, say, need not stand in the way of a distinct appropriation of the idea of the 'incarnate' God. By reading these thinkers together, both Judaism and Christianity can be understood such that *God's incarnation is best interpreted as our ethico-political project*" (Simmons 2011, 177). The idea overlaps nicely with Derrida's of a democratic vigilance regarding democracy, a necessarily incomplete system, essential to which is justice paradoxically always future. "Derrida repeatedly insists that the 'democracy to come' must always signify 'here and now'; in other words, we can only await the *eschaton* by working to enact it. Justice *to come* is only possible when we live toward justice *today*" (181).

The last part of this eclectic work develops the fine lines of this general theory in the particular context of a postmodern Christian anthropology. Although Simmons refrains from claiming that one has to be determinately religious to advocate an ethico-religious encounter as constitutive of subjectivity, he nonetheless does hold that the bi-directionality of ethico-religious existence becomes "all the more profound" when one is determinately religious. A lengthy quotation is in order:

God is not merely "transcendent to the point of absence" as Levinas claims, but transcendent precisely in the radical historical proximity of God's kenotic revelation in the person and works of Jesus. Attempting to be faithful to God while working for justice for one's neighbor is something that is not, now, undertaken merely in relation to the ethico-religious encounter, but in relation to a particular theological narrative and its determinate social history. Affirming the ontology of constitutive responsibility does not prevent one from identifying as a member of a determinate religious tradition, but so identifying oneself does transform the way in which one understands the "God" before which one stands. (Simmons 2011, 203–204)

For Simmons, this is the God of the Abrahamic traditions, the Christian God in particular—his focus, be it noted, is the Western intellectual traditions. Arguably Simmons augments his personal preference with the edifying thinking of the *via negativa* and the critical denials of Western atheisms, pre- and postmodern. You simply can't have one without the other nowadays.

The last significant thesis to cover in this review is Simmons's position on justification in a deconstructive democracy. This connects with his earlier thoughts about a modest foundational subjectivity concerned with the existential conditions relative to lived experience. The *redivivus* here concerns the legitimacy of epistemology, that is, a theory of justification, "internal to the postmodern commitments of Otherism" that one finds in Levinas, Derrida, Marion, and Henry, not to mention Kierkegaard, Ricoeur, and Lacoste (Simmons 2011, 226). This incantation is necessary, according to Simmons, if "Otherism" is to avoid Rorty's criticisms of being politically irrelevant (231). An important step is to understand justification in Rorty's sense as a social notion rather than an epistemological one; a reason-giving that communicates to those that can help actualize shared goals (228–229). Crucial, though, is to demobilize Rorty's pragmatist notion of justice, integral to his view of justification, and link it instead to the quasi-transcendental function that Derrida attributes to justice: "While Rorty sees justice as a name for certain interests of one's own community, Derrida posits justice as the very condition for ethical life" (237). And again: "This is why Derrida's notion of justice is so important as distinguished from Rorty's: what Derrida calls 'justice' might rightly be understood as the ethico-religious encounter that inaugurates the constant task of subjectivity to serve the Other" (249). But this is a far cry from providing epistemological grounds for justifying this *trust* in justice. Enter analytic epistemology and the philosophers of religion who give it credence.

For Simmons, Derrida's deconstructive democracy requires *belief* that the totally other is totally other further grounded in the belief that justice is undeconstructable. Despite Derrida, such a stance, according to Simmons, requires some justification if Otherism is to avoid Rorty's other charge of being religious fideism (Simmons 2011, 237). Convinced, rightly in my opinion, that not all foundationalism is strong, Simmons enlists another set of philoso-

phers, this time of the analytic persuasion: Nicholas Wolterstorff, Alvin Plantinga, William Alston, and Robert Audi. They help Simmons forge what seems oxymoronic: a modest deconstructive foundationalism. What this basically means is that Otherism (1) distinguishes between basic and nonbasic beliefs—as Derrida’s basic belief in justice that inaugurates deconstructable beliefs about serving the Other (but see #3 below); (2) disclaims the necessity of incorrigibility or self-evidence—as one finds in classical or strong foundationalism; (3) requires that the specific articulation of basic beliefs be revisable; (4) resonates with the centrality of trust in Reformed epistemology; and (5) demands that trust as service to the Other be viewed, not propositionally but concretely as devotion to the Other, thus linking belief and obedience (249–252). Simmons’s ethico-political exemplars provide a narrative frame: Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Corrie and Betsie Ten Boom, and the filmic character of Oskar Schindler. These figures, in Simmons’s opinion, amplify Edith Wyschogrod’s definition of “postmodern saints.” They qualify in that they devoted themselves completely to the alleviation of sorrow and pain, as Wyschogrod argues, but with the added radicality that they transformed justification in their ethico-religious and ethico-political relationships “from an excuse for not doing more into a constant recognition that one has not done enough” (292).

A strong Reformed sensibility is sounded in this and other, earlier segments of the book.

Simmons also connects his “ontology of constitutive responsibility” to issues of environmental ethics (chapter twelve). While useful, it reinforced in me a growing uneasiness about Simmons trying to accomplish too much in the book. His conceptual bricolage will doubtless prove discombobulating to many. Some may even consider it, as I did at times, over-ambitious. However, Simmons knows what he wants to say and consequently knows where to reach in order to say it. This observation doesn’t minimize the value of Simmons’s contribution. In fact, I suspect *God and the Other* will become an important resource in Continental philosophy of religion. It fills a lacuna in current fundamental ethics as a pastiche of impassioned, overlapping arguments, suitably footnoted and well indexed, both timely and stimulating.

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## The Legacy of Structuralism: An Interview with Paul-François Tremlett

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I interviewed Paul-François Tremlett in early 2012, hoping to draw out some of the links between his 2008 book *Lévi-Strauss on Religion: The Structuring Mind* (Equinox Publishing) and the relevance of the anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss for the contemporary study of religion. The conversation that followed ranged over Lévi-Strauss’ connections to theory and method in the study of religion and cognitive science of religion, the relationships between structuralism and politics, gender, and post-structuralism, and Lévi-Strauss’ legacy for the field of religious studies today.

*Donovan Schaefer: Out of all the thinkers you work on, how did you come to write a book about Claude Lévi-Strauss and religion?*

Paul-François Tremlett: I’m interested in social theory generally and sociological and anthropological theories of religion more specifically, so when the opportunity came to write the book, I jumped at it. I could hardly call myself a structuralist or a disciple of Lévi-Strauss but, nevertheless, his work has always fascinated me.

*DOS: You point out early in the book that Lévi-Strauss*