

Protestant Metaphysics after Karl Barth and Martin Heidegger

Timothy Stanley

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ZUSAMMENFASSUNG

Was ist Protestantismus? Jeglicher Versuch, diese Frage zu beantworten, bedarf einiger ontologischer Hingabe seitens des Fragers, welche die folgende Diskussion einer Lösung näherbringt, die zwangsläufig durch diese Hingabe beeinflusst wird. Timothy Stanley untersucht dieses unlösbare Problem mittels der Beiträge zweier herausragender intellektueller Persönlichkeiten: Karl Barth und Martin Heidegger. Er führt ihre geistige Herkunft auf einen gemeinsamen Vorfahren zurück, nämlich Martin Luther, und ist dadurch in der Lage, Ähnlichkeiten zu entdecken, aber interessanterweise auch Unterschiede. Die letzteren treten als ein Ergebnis der unterschiedlichen „Kreuze“ zutage, die ihren Vorhaben zugrundeliegen. Auf diese Weise entfaltet Stanley eine Deutung protestantischer Metaphysik, dessen Schicksal nicht notwendigerweise darin besteht, sich in der anti-metaphysischen Nicht-Aussagbarkeit post-moderner Theologie zu erschöpfen.

SUMMARY

What is Protestantism? Any attempt to answer this question necessitates some form of ontological commitment on the part of the questioner which will propel the ensuing discussion towards a solution which cannot but be influenced by this commitment. Timothy Stanley explores this aporia by means of a close reading of two important intellectual figures: Karl Barth and Martin Heidegger. In relating them to a shared common ancestor in Martin Luther, Stanley is able to detect similarities but, more interestingly, differences between the two, occurring as a result of the different ‘crosses’ evident at the heart of their projects. In this way, Stanley develops an account of Protestant metaphysics which is not necessarily fated to end in the anti-metaphysical apophaticism of postmodern theology.

RÉSUMÉ

Qu'est le protestantisme ? Toute tentative de réponse nécessite, de la part de celui qui se pose cette question, une forme ou une autre de présupposé ontologique qui orientera sa démarche pour trouver une solution, laquelle ne pourra qu'être influencée par ce présupposé. Timothy Stanley examine cette aporie à l'aide d'une lecture attentive de l'œuvre de deux figures intellectuelles importantes, Martin Heidegger et Karl Barth. En les situant dans la ligne d'un ancêtre commun en la personne de Martin Luther, il parvient à détecter des similitudes mais aussi, ce qui est plus intéressant, des différences entre les deux qui découlent des différentes « croix » dont on constate la présence évidente au cœur du projet de chacun d'eux : Heidegger met une croix sur l'être, tandis que Barth a une compréhension de la croix théologiquement plus parlante, dans la mesure où il fait une place plus grande à l'ontologie,

mettant l'accent sur la différence ontologique entre le divin et l'humain situés dans l'être de Jésus-Christ. Ainsi, Stanley élabore une présentation d'une métaphysique protestante qui n'aboutit pas nécessairement à l'apophatisme anti-metaphysique de la théologie postmoderne.

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What is Protestantism? Despite its apparent simplicity, the question folds back on itself augmenting the 'is' at its heart. That is to say, any attempt to answer the question necessitates some form of ontological commitment on the part of the questioner which will propel the ensuing discussion towards a solution which cannot but be influenced by this commitment. Timothy Stanley introduces his book on Protestant metaphysics with an evaluation of this aporia, unpacking Graham Ward's claim that, 'Protestantism is one of the key developments in modernity and, to the extent that postmodernity offers itself as a critique of modernity, then the ethos it fosters is antithetical to Protestantism' ('The Future of Protestantism: Postmodernity' in *The Blackwell Companion to Protestantism*, ed. McGrath and Marks [Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2004] 453). At the heart of Ward's assertion is a simple equivalence between Protestantism and modernity. In taking issue with this overly-straightforward appraisal of their affiliation, Stanley discloses the itinerary of the remainder of the work: 'The possibility which opens itself out before us is that Protestantism plays a much more pervasive role in the philosophical narration of the metaphysics of Postmodernity than Ward's analysis allows.' (4) In other words, the 'is' of Protestantism is not reducible to the 'is' of modernity whatever Protestantism is.

Stanley chooses to explore the possibilities of Protestantism through two intellectual figures in particular: Karl Barth and Martin Heidegger. In both, he detects a shared recognition of 'the value and importance of the ontological intrigue at the heart of the theology of Protestant progenitors' (4). Principal among these 'progenitors' is Martin Luther, whose influence is easily perceptible between the lines of the book. Beginning with Luther's notorious metaphysical pronouncements in the *Heidelberg Disputation*, Stanley is able to propose a loosely 'Protestant metaphysic' which allows enough consistency to be serviceable but enough equivocality to differentiate various permutations of the general class. By utilising Luther in this way, he links the post-Heideggerean anti-metaphysics of postmodernity to a shared common ancestor with Karl Barth, allowing Stanley to broaden Protestantism beyond the limits of modernity, but also allowing him a framework through which to offer an alternative to the post-ontological apophaticism arising in the wake of Derrida.

Ultimately, as the argument progresses, Stanley finds a cross punctuating the ontologies of both Barth and Heidegger. For Heidegger, being is 'crossed out', that is completed evacuated from the ontic realms so that 'by leaving metaphysics to itself, he [could] understand the

being of beings all the more fully' (194). Barth's cross, however, encompasses a far more ambitious account of the ontological difference between the divine and human, located within the being of Jesus Christ. As Stanley puts it, 'Barth's understanding of the cross is far more vibrant theologically than Heidegger's, and this is in no small part because of Barth's more ontologically rich interpretation of Luther.' (194) In conclusion, Stanley diagnoses Heidegger's problem as the obverse side of Barth's achievement: an inability to engage with thesis 20 of the *Heidelberg Disputation* and its claim that, 'He deserves to be called a theologian, however, who comprehends the visible and manifest things of God seen through suffering and the cross.' By dealing theologically with the 'manifest things of God seen through suffering and the cross', Barth was able to develop an ontology which avoided the pitfalls Heidegger discerned with an 'onto-theology', but which did not simply 'cross out' being, as Heidegger did. In the end, Protestantism can be seen as developing its own unique elucidation of the 'is' at the heart of the question, 'What is Protestantism?'

The book is an impressive work of Protestant theology and post-Heideggerean philosophy. Stanley offers exciting new approaches to both Heidegger and Barth, maintaining more nuanced readings of their ontologies than are often found in theological works. The capacity to read Heidegger faithfully without deferring to the pervasive readings of Derrida and Jean-Luc Marion is highly laudable in this regard. That said, the second half of the book, on Karl Barth, is even more breath-taking, arguing against the standard readings of Barth which are instantiated in the work of Bruce McCormack and the over-emphasis on 'analogy' in the wake of Von Balthasar's engagement with Barth. In place of these standard accounts, Stanley begins with Barth's early doctrine of God, expressed through the maxim 'God is God', before tracing its development through the Anselm book (*Fides Quaerens Intellectum*) through to the latter volumes of the *Church Dogmatics*. As Stanley sees it, the underlying ontology evinced in this progression is a concept of ontological difference articulated not as 'dialectic' or 'analogy' but christologically, finding its apogee in Barth's late essay, *The Humanity of God*.

In light of this impressive reading of a particularly Protestant metaphysic, the book offers itself as an essential text for anyone interested in plotting the development of Protestant theology, but also the particularities of the interplay between philosophy and theology at a general level. All in all, this book could well be the most important work of creative Protestant metaphysics of recent decades, recommending Timothy Stanley as an exciting new prospect in the Anglo-American theological sphere.

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Christ the Stranger: The Theology of Rowan Williams

Benjamin Myers

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SUMMARY

Benjamin Myers offers a beautifully composed, clear summary of the theology of Rowan Williams. To achieve this, he draws out the influence of Wittgenstein, Hegel and Freud, as well as Augustine, Vladimir Lossky, Sergius Bulgakov, T.S. Eliot and Donald MacKinnon. In conjunction with biographical details, Myers demonstrates Williams' unique apophatic and poetic methodology. The theology that emerges is not only a picture of an untamed, unpredictable Christ, but an unconventional, unsuspected faith marked by a discontinuity and alterity that, although finding resonance with Karl Barth, offers its own unique vision.

RÉSUMÉ

Benjamin Myers livre ici un résumé clair et bien écrit de la théologie de Rowan Williams. Il montre que se sont exercées sur sa pensée les influences de Wittgenstein, Hegel et Freud, ainsi que de Saint Augustin, Vladimir Lossky, Serge Bulgakov, T.S. Eliot et Donald MacKinnon. En rapport avec des détails biographiques, il présente l'approche apophatique et poétique unique de Williams. Il en découle, non seulement une théologie qui dépeint un Christ insaisissable et imprévisible, mais aussi une foi non conventionnelle et inattendue, caractérisée par la discontinuité et l'altérité, qui, tout en trouvant quelques résonances chez Karl Barth, apparaît comme une vision tout à fait unique.

ZUSAMMENFASSUNG

Benjamin Myers präsentiert eine wohl aufgebaute, klare Zusammenfassung der Theologie von Rowan Williams. Zu diesem Zweck legt er die Einflüsse von Wittgenstein, Hegel und Freud dar, wie auch die von Augustinus, Vladimir Lossky, Sergius Bulgakov, T.S. Eliot und Donald MacKinnon. Anhand von biographischen Einzelheiten zeigt Myers Williams' einzigartige apophatische [nicht aussagbare] und poetische Methodik auf. Die Theologie, die dabei herauskommt, zeigt nicht nur das Bild eines ungezähmten, unberechenbaren Christus, sondern auch einen unkonventionellen, unvermuteten Glauben, der von einer Diskontinuität und Andersartigkeit gezeichnet ist, die – obwohl sie einen Widerhall bei Karl Barth findet – ihre eigene, einzigartige Sichtweise bietet.

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While some volumes are written merely to inform or defend, *Christ the Stranger* is composed with an eye to delight. In sixteen brief chapters – vignettes more than expositions – this slim volume offers a clear and compelling sketch of the views of Rowan Williams, the previous archbishop of Canterbury, of sociality, tragedy, language, boundaries, tradition, growth, mission, saints, desire, hope, prayer, fantasy and renunciation. The