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LEIDEN, THE
NETHERLANDS

The Reconstruction of Religion: Lessing, Kierkegaard, and Nietzsche

By Jan-Olav Henriksen

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0-8028-4927-x.

The central thesis of the book is that Lessing, Kierkegaard and Nietzsche (hereafter 'L', 'K', and 'N') try to reconstruct, each of them in his own way, the Christian religion which previously had been deconstructed (i.e. lost its evidential character) during the process that is commonly known as 'modernization'. According to the author, who is professor of systematic theology at the Norwegian Lutheran School of Theology, the three reconstructions by L, K and N could be interesting for people who want to rethink religion in our modern or even post-modern era.

For anyone studying the fate of religion in modernity, L, K, and N should be of interest because of the marginal position they held in relation to institutional religion. They had to rebuild religion from the bottom up. The main contribution of L, K, and N to the modernization of religion is, Henriksen argues, the introduction of the notion of subjectivity into the field of the (philosophy of) religion. According to L and K religion can successfully be translated in terms of subjectivity. N thinks that even subjectivity as the last foothold of religion, in the end, will not survive the ongoing process of modernization.

With Peter Berger Henriksen characterizes modernity as the era of the so-called heretical imperative. In contrast to pre-modern times, modern people are forced to construct their religious position themselves. This 'imperative' almost inevitably runs counter to authoritative faith. Henriksen obviously wants to investigate whether it is still possible to reconcile the historical heart of Christianity (i.e. the reverence inspiring fact of the incarnation) with modern subjectivity and its corollary, religious pluralism. Moreover, Henriksen questions whether subjectivity is a desirable concept at all ('the challenge of post-modernity').

Thanks to L, the author argues, subjectivity and history have received their place in modern mind next to reason as sources of truth. However, history is only the provisional manifestation of truth and subjective knowledge lacks, according to L, the quality of indubitability that is characteristic of reason. Because the process of truth uncovering itself to reason will never come to an end, the meaning of human life is fundamentally uncertain. This insight gives birth to L's famous tolerance and grants history and subjectivity, and with them religious faith, their relative importance.

L's esteem of history, subjectivity and pluralism makes his thinking, accord-

ing to Henriksen, a valuable framework for people who want to reflect on religion in modernity. However, the most important element in Christian tradition, the lasting authority of Jesus Christ, is missing in L's reconstruction of religion. Here the thought of K enters the stage. K, in the eyes of Henriksen, is, more than L, a forerunner of post-modernity. He is sceptical regarding to reason and tradition and, therefore, less interested in history. Thus, in his view, the human subject remains the only authority which is able to account for the meaningfulness of life. The subject cannot possibly do that by itself, but has to be helped by the paradoxical presence of Christ in its life. The first indication of the possibility of this presence comes from history, viz. the testimony of the gospel.

N's scepticism outruns K's. Subjectivity, according to N, is an arbitrary construction designed by the will to power. For N there is no truth that uncovers itself, no paradoxical presence of God in history that can bestow an ultimate meaning on life. His thought results in 'hard pluralism'. Henriksen tries to read N against N. He states that N is too positive about the meaninglessness of life and that Christianity leaves more room for negativity and uncertainty than N thinks. In his 'Conclusion', Henriksen, endorsing views held by L and K, criticizes traditional theology for being insensitive to the importance of subjectivity. By means of subjective appropriation, historical facts could be reconstructed into a meaningful whole. But, although it is true that subjectivity can save religion from becoming the spiritual anaemia that treats religion as a matter of, more or less scientific, facts, the example of N shows, according to Henriksen, that religion in its turn can be helpful to preserve subjectivity from being destructed by the idle search for certainty inside itself. It is K, Henriksen maintains, who provides us with the most balanced view of the human subject. K shows 'how religion can develop the transparency of the subject, thereby also securing (...) the insight into the unfinished, not yet fully transparent and rational subject' (194).

Henriksen's style is not very persuasive and his way of arguing is rather loose. Therefore the book is not very hard to read and could very well be of use as a first introduction into the way philosophy of religion tries to cope with the problem of modernity. But Henriksen clearly wants his book to be more than that. However, as a contribution to the general debate in systematic theology concerning the direction in which (post-)modern theology should develop the argument of the book is too cautious. It is often unclear what Henriksen's message is and which public he is aiming at. I doubt, for instance, whether the book succeeds in convincing the adherents of a pre-modern, more metaphysical kind of theology of the merits of a Lessingian or Kierkegaardian theology. Likewise, I am not sure whether the book has any disquieting effect upon a professing Nietzschean or postmodernist reader. Both kinds of readers would perhaps need a more sharp discussion of their views, whereas the modernist reader might like to get more detailed information as to the concrete religious views that were held by such fascinating modernist thinkers as L and K.