

DIVINE LIFE: THE REVITALIZATION OF RELIGION

Jim Urpeth

(University of Greenwich)

Notes for Parallel Session Presentation

"Towards a Philosophy of Life" Conference, Liverpool Hope University, June 2009

Introduction

- The perspective I would like to sketch briefly on the timely conjunction of 'philosophy of life' and 'continental philosophy of religion' grows out of my interests for many years in certain strands of ('continental') philosophical naturalism and philosophical biology that, in my view, tend towards a conception of natural life (or 'immanence') as, in-itself, *intrinsically* 'religious' in essence, as indigenously 'sacred' in its primary processes. That's to say that, the view is taken that natural life itself, within the processes most fundamental to it, blossoms in an expression of joyous, and decidedly religious, self-affirmation, a process of auto-transfiguration in which its products - partially individuated species – are invited to participate as an index of their vitality. From this perspective, the conference theme concerns the task of articulating the religion of life itself insofar as this is discernibly expressed in and through a seemingly 'privileged' organism in this respect - human being. What is the 'religion of the real?' What is, exactly, its relation to empirical human religions? Are some religions, or aspects thereof, more 'in tune' with reality's religious self-expression than others?
- The figures who have been fundamental to my development of this perspective are, first and foremost, Nietzsche and (as perhaps his pre-eminent *religious* interpreter) Bataille. More recently I have worked on Bergson's conception of the convergence of temporal natural life and religion. I have also explored how aspects of the thought of Deleuze and Guattari could be conceived positively in such a context. Whilst this 'naturalistic' and 'genealogical' orientation has often necessitated a critical stance towards phenomenological perspectives within 'continental philosophy of religion' it also affirms many of its insights into the reductionist nature of many attempted naturalistic explanations of religion and draws heavily upon phenomenology's articulation of the nature of religious consciousness and being (here the work of thinkers such as James, Otto and Eliade have been particularly important). I have experimented with notions such as 'religious materialism', 'religious atheism' etc., to try to encapsulate what I take to be distinctive about the naturalistic strand of continental thought on which I have drawn. Leaving aside the very many significant differences between the main protagonists in question, I would like here to attempt an overview statement of key, fundamental shared features of the perspective their thought makes possible within 'continental philosophy of religion'

Key Features

- A naturalistic conception of 'self-transcendence' in the sense of 'self-difference' (i.e. without transcendent reference or orientation) conceived as a potency of natural life; a primary material force. This is a religiosity inherent to natural life conceived as an ontologically self-sufficient process of self-difference and creative becoming [Nietzsche: 'Dionysian' life/Bataille: primary 'expenditure'/Bergson: *élan vital*]
- Critique of alleged primacy of instinct of 'self-preservation' and functionalist interpretations of primary tendencies of natural life in terms of 'survival value'.
- Irreducibility of natural life to scientific explanation; instrumentalist philosophy of science
- Accessibility of 'in-itself' to human organism as itself a living entity; reality disclosed non-cognitively and affectively.
- Unequivocally impersonal conception of natural life – the deification of trans-individual natural processes; a religion of impersonal process
- Rigorous and absolute critique of anthropomorphism [i.e., a 'de-deification of nature' – pursued as a religious programme of critique towards affirmation of impersonal religious processes] – the 'religious affirmation of life' as the implantation within human affectivity of reality's beatitude
- Pursuit of religious possibilities of 'death of God' as the revelation of the religion of the real via the dismantling of anthropomorphic religious categories and values – resistance to theological and humanist interpretation and appropriation of this historical revelation
- Reconfiguring the sublime in immanent rather than transcendent terms
- Development of a religiously grounded and inflected ethics of life-affirmation in which the ontological priority of impersonal, trans-individual life processes valorised; the categories, values and needs of individuated life de-prioritised. The a-symmetry of religion and 'morality'.
- The foregrounding (in terms of a notion of 'ontological emotion') of the primacy of affectivity and the non-cognitive as the essence of religion; religion as the qualitative creative becoming of immanent life in its movement of self-transcendence; the religious becoming of natural life disclosed in a-subjective affects
- The evaluative contrasting of different religious sensibilities in terms of their respective libidinal-affective economies ('tragic joy' vs 'negative pleasure')

Significance

- Provides a means of overcoming and escaping ingrained and derivative dichotomies prevalent in philosophy of religion, theology and religious studies. These include 'immanence/transcendence' and the debates between 'reductionism' (naturalistic and sociological explanation: Feuerbach, Marx, Freud, contemporary socio-biology etc) and 'anti-reductionism' (non-naturalistic conceptions of religion - phenomenology). These and others, surpassed via elaboration of the convertibility of material life and 'sacred' not as a product of human evaluation but as the auto-deification of an impersonal natural process of creative self-difference. Non-reductive naturalism of religious life; transcendent religion as reductionist (as hostile to primary material process of impersonal self-differing)
- Religious challenge to principle post-Enlightenment narrative of secular-rationalism. The continuation and radicalisation of the 'project of critique' but from the perspective of a radical religious ontology of the real aimed at the anthropomorphisms of scientific naturalisms (when conceived non-instrumentally) and transcendent religion
- The development of a naturalistic, ontologically grounded, resource for the *religious* critique of empirical religions and aspects thereof; the identification of 'denial' and 'affirmation' within an empirical religion; the primacy of 'mysticism' as an ontological religious process
- The re-articulation and reassertion of the notion of 'natural religion' without reference to the 'argument to design'
- The development of an alternative within 'continental philosophy of religion' to phenomenology and its 'theological turn' drawing upon hitherto under-represented resources of post-Kantian philosophical naturalism and the manifestly religious tendencies and orientation of some of its key figures [e.g., Nietzsche, Bergson and Bataille]. The intrinsically numinous character of natural life.