

# Introduction

God is back!

No, not quite like before, thank God. Why? Well, God does not come back from being away, like when we return from vacation or from prison. God returning is not a god from the ancient world or the pre-modern God of the Middle Ages. If God returns, this does not mean that history is reversed. That would imply a certain betrayal, for after all, God must also go through history in the right direction.<sup>1</sup> So God returns through modernity. More than that, God returns through his own death. A philosophical resurrection, so to speak. God is dead, long live God!

When God comes back, he obviously brings along an appropriate vocabulary, even if the meanings have undergone a notable change—after all, “to mean” is a verb. It is then up to philosophy to open itself to the strong theological signs that profoundly signify the present. This implies that kenosis, i.e., humiliation/exaltation (see introduction), plays a crucial role in the rapprochement between philosophy and theology. God also brings with him an appropriate grammar. This in turn means that the death of God, which thoroughly marks our time, directs the rapprochement. This rapprochement marks actuality. It is therefore in a sense itself the return—and vice versa. God returns in the rapprochement, in the event of philosophy and theology befriending each other. The rapprochement registers the return where postmodern thought leaves behind any hard rational resistance to God.

The modern opposition between philosophy and theology, between reason and faith, is actually a surface phenomenon, a caricature, an ideological strategy, suitable for textbooks and introductions. The relationship was turbulent, notably but not exclusively during modernity. Tertullian already claimed (ca. 200 AD) that Athens had nothing to do with Jerusalem. But

a marriage crisis does not necessarily end in a messy divorce. Even though modern philosophy has viewed the church, religious practice, and theology with suspicion, it has never fully eliminated religion from thought—some have tried to do so, but they turn out not to be the great ones. By “religious,” I mean not denominational but rather receptive thinking that confesses to being recalibrated by hope, trust, and openness—and of these three, the last one is most important (if this sounds familiar: 1 Cor 13:13).<sup>2</sup>

In any case, one of the modern ambitions did include the reckoning with the God of faith—attempts that were rather carelessly lumped together under the vague heading of “secularization.” God was conceptually inserted into cosmological and ethical theory. This insertion eventually killed God. Surprisingly, this death did not erase the name “God.” Current events actually testify to the opposite: God was never eliminated, though this was an effect or sometimes even an intention of modernity, at least of Enlightenment.

Such persistence deserves at least our interest. If God keeps returning, we must take this return seriously. Then something noble like philosophy must not cycle cowardly around it, as it has actually done for a long, modern time. Then it should urgently confer with that part of theology that also takes this return seriously. Academic philosophy had got into the habit of leaving God up to theologians and surreptitiously hooking up with both human and natural sciences. This means that the dead God had to molt into a marginal research topic. Science as mummification.<sup>3</sup>

This “exuviation” is indeed clearly an echo of God’s death. After all, God’s death is an event that manifests itself through many facts. Those facts are usually gathered under the term “atheism” and arranged according to the already cited denomination “secularization.” Perhaps, however, the term “atheism” in its current sense is not broad or deep enough. Perhaps there is more meaning hidden inside it than can be discerned on the surface. After all, facts never exhaust the sense of an event. Philosophy and theology reach beyond science. The latter calculates (on) facts; the former deals with what happens behind, inside, beyond those facts. Well, then it certainly cannot hurt to examine this so-called atheism in depth. Who knows, a philosophical atheism may turn out not to be atheistic in the superficial, factual sense—spoiler alert: it is not. For this book does not seek to deny that modernity thinks atheistically; it does argue that its “flat” determination does atheism philosophical injustice. It is precisely where philosophy abandons or avoids this flat atheism that it becomes interesting for and relevant to the purpose of this book.

## Philosophical Apostles

I introduce twelve philosophical apostles, great modern thinkers, each of whom has bent and shifted the path of philosophy. Most of them are also called “atheist”—to a greater or lesser degree. This raises some thorny questions. First of all, how come these twelve heavyweights have not succeeded in pushing God completely and definitively out of the world, or at least out of Western culture?<sup>4</sup> Except for Kierkegaard and Levinas, they all seem to have tried to do so.<sup>5</sup> At least so the textbook caricatures teach us. But take Marx, for instance. He did not want to banish religion at all. He wanted to banish the reason why people sought solace there. Nor did Sartre want to throw God out of the world; he advised humanity to exist as if God did not exist. These are just two examples of important nuances that are usually left out of textbooks and introductions. The answer to the question why these guiding thinkers did not help religion out of the world therefore cannot simply be “because people are too stupid.” For that matter, that might as well be the answer to the question of why, after 2000 years, people still have not understood the message of Christianity. Rather, the answer is that these thinkers aimed their critique at something other than religion. Thus, they are all critical of traditional metaphysics to a greater or lesser degree.

This leads me to yet another pertinent question. How is it that the thoughts of these supposedly Godless giants nevertheless breathe religiosity, even emphatically Christianity? In one way or another, sometimes firmly disguised, they each thematize a longing for God, a redemption from a state of decay, philosophy’s receptivity to the “other,” a hope for a better future, and so on. These are all recognizable religious traces, traces that point to a name, God, without ever ending up with something or someone called God. None of the philosophers gathered here, by the way, has ever unequivocally claimed that God does not exist. After all, it is characteristic of great thinkers, unlike their disciples, that they at least think in nuances. Shouting “God doesn’t exist, period!” comes down to “meatball thinking.” That is what I call “flat” atheism. Unfortunately, this is the most widespread form of it. By the way, the same goes for “God exists, period,” which is just “flat” theism.

The philosophical giants in this book are not to blame for this. They never lowered themselves to such a caricature—although it sometimes took them until the end of their lives to correct their own version of the caricature. This was the case with Sartre, for example, although his Simone tried to

hush it up. Marx also denounced the caricature that was spread among his comrades of his thoughts on religion even during his lifetime. Heidegger, on the other hand, made a fascinating circumambulatory movement from the Catholic to the Protestant God and farther along a consistent philosophical atheist path to the “last god” that will arrive to save us. Derrida’s thought path also exhibited ever more religious traits after he was accused of trivial speculation. Even Kierkegaard, like Augustine, led a fairly debauched life before trying to devote his existence to Christ.

I present each of the twelve philosophical apostles in his own unique way. They are virtually lured out of their atheist camp. I do not turn them into “Bible thumpers” but I will highlight some nuances of their thinking. This will reveal how the stereotypical determination of atheism will not fit them. Instead of proving the existence or non-existence of God in a glass-hard, ice-cold, one-sided, detached—in short, objective-rational—way, I present them on a philosophical and theological eggshell plate of religious, even Christian-motivated thinking that seems to seek a philosophical answer to Eckhart’s well-known plea to God to deliver us from God. They do not, therefore, propose yet another divine substance. They do ask difficult questions and propose answers that raise even more questions—but is that not precisely what is expected of a philosopher?

I would like to insert a term here that I borrow from the greatest theological rascal of our time, John Caputo, who speaks of “*hieranarchy*.” This should be read positively and affirmatively as when and where Christ repeatedly challenges and undermines moral complacency, which could count as a possible philosophical interpretation of original sin. In this way, the apostles in this book bring a traditional way of thinking to a standstill, which is experienced as liberating by all those who do not avoid the deeper questions and are not (or are no longer) satisfied with the traditional answers in the guises of Grand Narratives and Strong Systems.

It begins with Feuerbach undoing the hitherto obvious identification of God and Supreme Being. Nietzsche then suddenly declares the very position of the Supreme Being itself invalid. Kierkegaard and Wittgenstein strip the divine of any theory. Marx and Freud find a lowest being that resides beyond the reach of those theories. Heidegger suddenly dismantles all traditional metaphysics, courtesy of Nietzsche. Metaphysics never recovered from all this critique, but that turns out to be precisely what offers the most fascinating perspectives regarding the relationship between philosophy and theology. Each in his own way, Sartre, Levinas, Lyotard, and Derrida elaborate on an aspect of Heidegger’s track.

On that track, rather unexpectedly, theology comes into view. This is no longer the triumphant, glorious theology that engages philosophy in the name of a powerful world church. Rather, it is a theology that by the middle of last century has learned, step by step, to be a little more modest as far as its truth claims are concerned. This theology finds that it can learn something from a philosophy that is inclined toward a certain atheism. Philosophy finds that it can cooperate with this theology, humble rather than triumphant, rather of the Cross than of the Glory. “As is the case in friendship, both show the greatest respect for each other, support each other where necessary, and lay no claim on each other. One stimulates, provokes, nurtures the other, but at the same time knows that each must do his own work, have his own style.” In such words, spoken at a conference, Jean-Luc Nancy described his friendship with Derrida, but these words apply just as well to the relationship between philosophy and theology that I have in mind here.

### Religious Atheism

This “other” atheism no longer avoids the name of God. Until not so long ago, it was not done in philosophical circles to speak benevolently about God. However, now that “otherness” or alterity has become a basic term in thought—we will run into differential thought step by step along the path of our twelve philosophers—God, as “Other,” (re)enters. This philosophy does not pronounce on the existence or the unity or the height of God and is essentially religious in register, even if it rarely acknowledges this. It is a philosophical atheism that, with an open mind and in close friendship, allows itself to be informed by theology—and vice versa, of course. This philosophy does not start from an image of God or from the idea that there must be a God who has revealed himself, but from the incontrovertible fact that the name “God” (still) circulates. This may count as a “minimal” revelation in philosophy upon which theology builds lustily. Heidegger speaks of “publicity” (*Offenbarkeit*), the worldly framework in which a manifestation of the divine becomes conceivable, receivable. The circulation of the name is thus also a public event, a revelation or publication.

Where does this name get its obstinacy to “last”? The name—for philosophy has no other “beginning,” no other material in the form of concepts or things to start from—continues to circulate without ever falling back on something as a referent—for this referent is rather a matter for theology,

after a long time finally the best friend of philosophy. God may no longer exist, but he can insist (again Caputo) and persist—at least insofar as he may be (Richard Kearney here). Only theology and philosophy that have won through to the “other” side of metaphysics can and have indeed become good friends. Within metaphysics, philosophy can choose between service either to theology or to scientific rationality. In the latter case theology is usually rejected; in the former case scientific rationality is not necessarily rejected—at least if philosophy follows in the footsteps of Thomas Aquinas rather than Augustine. This picture is somewhat clouded, however, by the rise of the universities. Whereas previously theology, with or without any help from philosophy, provided the clarification of religious experience and practice, theology then moved to the university, where it became an independent variety of scholarship, leaving faith orphaned in the abbey.

Religious experience succumbed to the rigid schemes of metaphysics. Now, metaphysics has long espoused a two-world model: this world of appearance and transience (nature) versus the other, eternal and true world (supernatural). Theology was concerned with the supernatural, and philosophy (which then included the natural sciences) with nature. Once the domain of theology, especially that of the supernatural, lost its credibility, philosophy turned its back on the queen of the sciences and hooked up with the natural and human sciences. These conformed even better to the rigors of metaphysics than theology with its revelation truths.

It seemed as if philosophy traded its position of maid for that of judge and thus no longer served theology but since then judged it on its reasonableness. But it is also true that philosophy traded its position of servant of theology for that of servant of science. Enlightenment agreed that reason took over from faith and thereby disenchanting the world; that transcendence imploded into pure immanence and so enclosed the world in one final scientific explanation; that no longer that other but this world had become the “true” world. These claims were then cast in (mostly one-sided) models of secularization.<sup>6</sup> In the brilliant fourth chapter of *Twilight of the Gods*, Nietzsche “unmasks” the notion of the “true” world, thereby stopping the process of persistent falsification of one world in favor of yet another “true” world, over and over again. Actually, Nietzsche unmasks this unmasking at its very core. Real unmasking does not replace one mask with another.

In any case, the aforementioned double switch significantly muddied the relationship between philosophy and theology for three centuries. Philosophy did not feel called upon to save the household and left theology. The latter

apparently could not continue on its own—only a giant like Kierkegaard could still pull both philosophy and theology up together and light the fire underneath. Western culture noted that both discourses concerning the ultimate questions had failed. Mystery was outsourced to hopeless romantics. Here, the modern division between faith and reason silently manifests itself. Philosophy turned to science and theology committed itself to socio-ethical engagement. For philosophy, the true world became the scientific-technical world, and for theology, the true world became the third and later the fourth world. They no longer shared a world. They no longer even wrote each other a Christmas card.

Now philosophers no longer get around to thinking because the academy demands publication and promotion. Theologians no longer get around to praying because abbeys have become tourist attractions where you can buy beer and cheese and practice yoga. Bishops have become managers with troubling bank accounts and even more troubling scandal records.

But that's not the reason why the miracles have left this world. Looking back over the last half century, it is safe to say that this was not a case of final separation, of drifting further and further apart, but rather one of reshuffling the cards and a few sessions of marriage counseling. Philosophy and theology learned to listen to each other again, began to read and write to each other again, and lo and behold: it works. They dare to speak each other's language again. Suddenly words like "hope," "trust," "hospitality"—the theological virtues from above, still from 1 Cor 13:13—find their way into philosophy, without meeting any headstrong resistance.

I contend that philosophy and theology, like thinking and believing, are not opposites. It is not even easy to delineate believing and knowing in opposition to each other. Thinking and believing each presuppose the other. They relate as each other's extensions, as poles of thinking/believing. No thinking without believing, no believing without thinking—though the respective doses may vary. A religious philosophy is not thought that is being outsourced to institution and dogmatics (metaphysical or natural theology) or to evidence and method (scientific reason). On the contrary, it experiences thinking as an event of receiving and giving back that never allows itself to be fixated in a comprehensive system, but always maintains a modest openness. The twelve apostles in this book bring, mostly unintentionally, philosophy back to theology.

The introduction is circular. God comes back into philosophy, but (of course) not as before. God does not come back from being-away. If God is coming back into philosophy along the tracks of the critique of

metaphysics by the twelve philosophers here presented, then this return is at the same time a retreat. God does not become present except as absent. You will notice that both traditional metaphysics and analytic philosophy, with their rather rigid views on the logical consistency of thought, cannot deal with this kind of statement.

### This Book, Then

I start from the legacy of Immanuel Kant and Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel. These are the two summits of high modernity. Kant radically broke with the crucial scholastic evidence that God is beyond the reach of knowing. We can speak meaningfully about God only within the moral register. Theology becomes ethics. Even though we can never know God, we recognize that without God any ethical qualification of our existence remains meaningless. Hegel called Christianity the epitome of religious truth, but not of truth as such. Full truth is only attainable by philosophy. After all, religion works with vague representations (images, stories . . .) whereas philosophy deals with clear and lucid concepts. It is only in philosophy, in rational concepts, that the world comes to full self-understanding. You see that theology no longer plays the first violin here as it did with Augustine and Thomas Aquinas. The roles are even reversed: it is now philosophical reason that assigns theology its place. A book by Kant is entitled *Religion within the Bounds of Pure Reason*. That tells the whole modern story. As we shall learn from Heidegger, philosophy needs to dim Enlightenment if it wants to approach the “divine God.”

This inferiority of metaphors that is supposed to match the epistemological and even moral superiority of concepts is a common thread throughout metaphysics that only appears as arbitrary and unjustified in the critique of metaphysics. Nietzsche showed that this subordination is based on nothing, and Derrida went even further by showing that even the opposition is hardly valid. In this sense, the rapprochement between philosophy and theology lies beyond Hegel and his distinction and subordination of concepts and representations. Here we see a rather philosophical metaphor at work; there we notice a rather theological one. These turn out to be mutually intelligible without one having to rewrite the other in pure concepts or revelatory jargon and thus reduce it to itself.

This brings me to a final, important observation. Critique of metaphysics or continental philosophy is also referred to as differential thought.



Difference means that terms, words, and names can interact with each other without having to be accommodated in a structure that is established according to the principles of identity and opposition. Meaning does not belong to things or words, but hides in the way these differ from each other. Meaning also never “fills up”; there is always more coming in and always some leaking out. Here, meaning is not the product of a rigid logical system. A very interesting effect is that the other is also allowed to remain “other”—that is, truly different. That may sound strange, but not when you consider that “different” usually means different-from. This way, the other is again thought of as a function of a “self.” This is how philosophy and theology used to treat each other, namely as the other-than-self, with that self as norm. Now their relationship is called “differential.” That means they are not the same, nor are they opposites. There is no overarching or antecedent agency that controls or directs their relationship. There is no relationship in the classical sense, only a healthy tension and instructive caesura. They are . . . different.

Once again, I must insist on reminding the reader that this is a philosophical study, not a theological one. I intend to show that during the last century and a half, much has happened in philosophy that has unblocked the channels between philosophy and theology. I see this unblocking at work in the twelve philosophical apostles, even though most of them did not desire this unblocking—perhaps sometimes quite the contrary. That work has led to the futility of flat atheism and shows the need for a more philosophical version.

With great respect for other philosophies of life and interfaith dynamics, at least as long as not superficially lived or proclaimed in an exclusive register, this study is limited to Western philosophy and Christianity. I am of course aware of what both owe to other cultures and traditions, but again, that is not what this book is about. Of course, I am also not denying here the brave steps that great theologians have taken to rejoin philosophy, but that is again not what this book is about. Finally, I regret that the twelve apostles are all white males. This specific exclusiveness is, however, a pre-woke cultural-historical phenomenon for which I can hardly be held responsible.

This book does not aspire to convince; it only invites the reader to explore a perspective that I open enthusiastically—that means “visited by the divine.” There are no logically-analytically compelling arguments for that perspective, fortunately. Nor does that perspective petrify into a system. My intent is more modest. Finally, to reassure the critical reader, all twelve chapters have been reviewed by experts in the respective fields.

“The purpose of philosophy of religion has changed. It is no longer an analysis of given statements of belief. It is a quest to elevate thought to a level that is divine.”<sup>7</sup>

I would like to thank Ger Groot, Joeri Schrijvers, Herbert De Vriese, Roland Breur, Walter Van Herck, Walter Weyns, Johan Taels, Jens De Vleminck, Wilfried Op 't Eynde, and Marc Meganck, whose pertinent comments on specific chapters have considerably increased the quality of this book. Thanks to Doug Donkel and James Peltz, editors. My students and pupils also remain invaluable. Their eyebrows alert me when I need to explain things more clearly.

I dedicate this book to my father Jacques\* and to my little son Ezra. They never leave my mind and, each in their own way, sat by me while writing this book.