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# THE RELEVANCE OF CONTINENTAL PHILOSOPHY OF RELIGION FOR THEOLOGY IN CONTEMPORARY SOUTH AFRICA<sup>1</sup>

## ABSTRACT

Theology in South Africa has a strong metaphysical element. This article argues the relevance of the work of modern continental philosophers of religion and theology for a post-metaphysical South African context. In their criticism of metaphysics, philosophers such as Descartes, Kant, Nietzsche, Heidegger, and Derrida raise fundamental questions about the relation between theology (including religion) and metaphysics, as well as about the future of theology and religion. Attempts to respond to these challenges by modern philosophers of religion and theology, such as Caputo, Nancy, Stoker, Kearney, and Schrijvers, are explored to identify possible approaches to theology in a post-metaphysical age. The article argues the pertinence of these insights to making theology relevant in a diverse South African society.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Theology in South Africa has to take account of the complexity of the country and its diverse ethnic and racial groups, languages, and religions.

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<sup>1</sup> This article is based on a paper delivered at the Forum for Academic Discussion, Faculty of Theology, University of the Free State, Bloemfontein, August 2016.

Christianity itself has a wide range of denominations and traditions, reflecting the diversity of culture, education, and income in the country. The term “theology in contemporary South Africa”, therefore, needs some qualification. In this article, I focus on theology in the reformed tradition, and particularly theology practised as metaphysics in the tradition of Karl Barth, Robert Jenson, and others.

The trenchant criticism of metaphysics by philosophers such as René Descartes, Immanuel Kant, Friedrich Nietzsche, Martin Heidegger, and Jacques Derrida raises fundamental questions about the relation between theology (as well as religion, in general) and metaphysics (as well as ontotheology and transcendence), and about the future of theology and religion. Theologians and philosophers of religion such as John Caputo, Jean-Luc Nancy, Wessel Stoker, Richard Kearney, and Joeri Schrijvers have attempted to counter the criticism of theology as metaphysics, and to find ways to “justify” or “transform” metaphysics, ontotheology and transcendence. In this article, I explore the question as to whether (and how) they succeed in opening a space for theology and religion in our post-metaphysical era, with specific attention to theology in the South African context.

The article offers an overview of the main issues related to the criticism of metaphysics and the attempts to counter this, and highlights some of the implications for theology in the South African context.

## 2. THEOLOGY AS METAPHYSICS

Metaphysics can be described as underlying our reality (*meta-*, under + *physics*, reality).<sup>2</sup> For this reason, metaphysics has sometimes been described as the “study of the ultimate reality” (Van Inwagen 2014:1). Plato

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2 The concept of metaphysics has a long history. Aristotle’s book *Metaphysics* focuses on, among other things, the relationship between potentialities and actualities, while in his essay, “What is metaphysics?” (1929), Heidegger talks about metaphysics as being receding. The concept of metaphysics is often used as a spatial metaphor: is something under – or under-girding – actuality or is it pointing toward the beyond of actuality through potentiality? Both essentially are restating the question of potentiality and actuality. Heidegger stresses the complicated nature of talking about metaphysics with spatial metaphors, while making the point that this is the best possible way to describe the nature and purpose of metaphysics: it grounds our being and our being is a spatial yet linguistic one. I will proceed with a particular spatial metaphor of metaphysics – beyond – throughout, but will do so with a cautious understanding that beyond does not only point ahead or behind, but also above and below.

viewed ultimate reality in the world of ideas as distinct from the world of phenomena. Aristotle explored this “categorical delineation of reality” in search of the penultimate reality (Plato 1956:316). Metaphysics poses a fundamental challenge for ontology – the exposition of prephilosophical facts that determine reality. In responding to this challenge, Immanuel Kant, for example, developed the idea that certain concepts such as time, space and causality determine our perception of the world. Metaphysics, viewed epistemologically or ontologically, can thus be broadly described as “the most general attempt to make sense of things” (Moore 2012:1, 5), or the attempt to find something worth living for; to discover how things work, and to make sense of, and find meaning in life.

Theology attempts to make sense of things through belief in, and a focus on God as the creator, inevitably in theological terms. Although often understood as a practical science concerned with religious life or the activity of the church, theology is partly metaphysical, because it is about God – as the foundation of reality and life; as a metaphysical being; as distinct from creation. God can be understood as non-metaphysical, but in theology (in general) God is viewed as a personal Being, identified through the gospel – “the events of the Gospel [are] understood as being somehow identical with God” (Crocker 2016:336) – and belief in God’s existence helps us make sense of, and give meaning to life. Although it is not the intention of theology to find metaphysical explanations, it inevitably attempts to do so. In his recent book, *Theology as revisionary metaphysics*, Jenson (2014:9) mentions:

You try to think your way through the gospel, letting the metaphysical chips fall where they may. In the process, however, they make a heap. They amount to something. They add up to something like a Christian philosophy. It won’t be because you started out to make a Christian philosophy either. It will be because you started out trying to understand the gospel.

In South Africa, theology is contextualised in different ways: as public theology (De Villiers 2011); in terms of ecology (Conradie 2013); as feminism (Haddad 2013), and in faith/science dialogue (Conradie & Du Toit 2015; Veldsman 2010). This kind of contextualised theology aimed at being socially relevant does not ignore God’s transcendence and sacredness. It thus retains a strong link with the metaphysical.

The symbol of the Divine or of God becomes central in this discourse [SA theological literature] and the shape of the challenge is to explore to what extent this Reality could have fruitful existential, social and

cosmic meaning. Life's so-called "big questions" ... are addressed from this metaphysical perspective (Venter 2016:5).

Viewed as the "Reality" in contextualised theology, God represents a return to metaphysics. In other words, adopting God as its metaphysical principle – that which gives sense to everything else – means theology is metaphysics. In the South African reformed tradition, this move is strengthened when theology takes the "revelation of God" (through grace, Scripture and Christ), as opposed to human experience, as its starting point. An example of this is Karl Barth's theology (reflected in the work of well-known South African theologians such as Willie Jonker and Dirkie Smit), which is extremely critical of any "natural theology" that uses natural phenomena to prove God's existence. Barth argues that theology does not need a philosophical prolegomenon, (a philosophical foundation to justify its axioms), because it has a firm foundation in God's revelation.

Similarly, the Lutheran theologian Robert Jenson contends that theology does not require a philosophical prolegomenon, because it has its own "theologomenon" – its own metalinguistic assertion about the gospel. In line with George Lindbeck, Jenson views "first-order discourse of faith" as proclamation and praise. Theology is second-order discourse, where *hermeneutic reflection* on discourse of belief takes place (Jenson 1997:18). In this sense, theology can be described as grammatical – a discussion on norms of speech. However, for Jenson (1997:18), some theological propositions are not mere grammatical rules. The issue is not linguistic, but extralinguistic in the person of Jesus Christ. In that sense, Christian theology becomes prescriptive grammar and as such, in Jenson's view, it is metaphysics:

theology ... claims to know the one God of all and so to know the one decisive fact about all things, so that theology must be either a universal or founding discipline or a delusion (Jenson 1997:20).

It is clear that "when Jenson says his theology is metaphysics ... he is right" (Crocker 2016:345).

Both Barth and Jenson have had a strong influence on South African theology, especially with regard to Trinitarian theology (Venter 2004; Verhoef 2011a, 2011b). Barth's theology makes claims that can only be justified from first-order discourse of faith (praise and proclamation) and it largely escapes the usual criticisms of metaphysics. This position is comparable to the Radical Orthodoxy of John Millbank and others.<sup>3</sup>

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3 For the contributions Jenson and Millbank made to various books, see, for example, Braaten & Jenson (2002).

However, it is difficult to ignore the criticism of theology as metaphysics, because it claims to be prephilosophical in nature.

### 3. CRITICISM OF METAPHYSICS

Metaphysics has been subjected to harsh criticism by continental philosophers, especially by Descartes, Kant, Nietzsche, Heidegger, and Derrida. One of the main reasons is that these continental philosophers ask fundamental epistemological and ontological questions as opposed to analytic (Anglo-American) philosophers who focus on aspects of logic and the coherence and structure of the argument (for instance, natural science model; proofs of God's existence). What follows is a brief historical overview of the criticism of metaphysics by some of the leading continental philosophers.

At the beginning of modernity, René Descartes (1596-1650) strongly advocated moving away from questions about reality (ontology or metaphysics) to questions about knowledge (epistemology). In his *Meditations on first philosophy* (1641), Descartes argued that everything (all knowledge) starts with me: *cogito ergo sum* (I think, therefore I am). Everything is subjective, even my perception and knowledge of God. The focus shifted from "what is out there" (waiting to be examined as part of God's creation) to the "human subject who subdues or conquers the object in research" (Gschwandtner 2013:6). The shift is thus away from "objective knowledge" of God's order to the subjective world of human cognition.

Immanuel Kant (1724-1804) continued Descartes' epistemological questions, arguing that we cannot know anything that is beyond the categories or concepts in our minds (for instance, time, space, causality). These categories filter and interpret all experiences. Consequently, we can only have an understanding of *phenomena* (how things appear to us) and not of the *noumena* (how things are in, and of themselves, *Ding an sich*).<sup>4</sup> Kant basically put an end to Descartes' metaphysical speculation (the thinking self as the metaphysical principle) and focused instead on the nature and limit of human reasoning. For Kant, all noumena remain products of our transcendental categories and we cannot know how they are in, and of themselves. Kant was quite clear that we cannot know "anything about the existence of God or of anything that is beyond the

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4 One should take note that there is a move in contemporary European philosophy to question whether Kant was "genuinely able to deduce categories instead of imposing them" (Malabou 2014:242). This potential break with Kant has not developed fully yet, but it can have huge implications for rethinking religion if such a break does occur.

categories and concepts of the mind” (Gschwandtner 2013:7). In matters of morality, God’s existence has to be assumed, since it cannot be proved. Religion – *within the limits of pure reason alone* (Kant 1788 [2014]) – was limited to ethics.

This remaining, limited role Kant gave to religion and God (as useful for ethics) was eliminated by Friedrich Nietzsche (1844-1900) in his criticism of the link between religion and morality. In his book, *The gay science* (1882), he described the “death of God” in his well-known parable of the madman searching for God at the marketplace. Nietzsche used this to argue that belief in God had effectively ceased. We could no longer ground one universal system of moral values on one overarching reason, religious or not. All values, as Nietzsche argued cogently in his *On the genealogy of morals* (1887), had to be revalued and recreated. This view led to Nietzsche’s second point of criticism: truth. He radically questioned the whole concept of truth:

What, then, is truth? A mobile army of metaphors, metonyms, and anthropomorphisms – in short, a sum of human relations ... which after long use seem firm, canonical, and obligatory to a people: truths are illusions about which one has forgotten that this is what they are; metaphors which are worn out ... (Nietzsche 1954:46).

Along with this assertion came the

postmodern awareness that all metanarrative structures stand upon a shifting surface of dead and living metaphors, while all “truths” are endlessly fluid (Hart 2003:7).

Truth is nothing more than a lie socially agreed upon; it is something competed for, a matter of power. Truth, in other words, is no longer guaranteed by, or established from a metaphysical position or world. All we have is fluid self-constructed truths/lies. Concepts such as the metaphysical or the final truth are devised in our heads. Referring to the metaphysical world, Nietzsche ([1878] 1986:9), therefore, stated:

It is true, there could be a metaphysical world; the absolute possibility of it is hardly to be disputed. We behold all things through the human head and cannot cut off this head; while the question nonetheless remains what of the world would still be there if one had cut it off.

The famous twentieth-century philosopher Martin Heidegger’s (1889-1976) view of metaphysics is that it is “onto-theo-logy” (Heidegger [1957] 1969:54). Ontotheology is (and the influence of Nietzsche is clear, in this instance):

the human pretending to come up with a “transcendental signifier” that totalizes and unifies human existence (or even “being/s in general”) in its entirety and so provides existence with an *arche* and *telos* from which there seems no escape (Schrijvers 2016:xi).

This transcendental signifier represents the Being of beings as *causa sui* (self-caused cause). The problem in this ontotheological thinking is that Being and beings cannot be thought separately from each other. This ontological difference (between Being and beings) becomes forgotten and metaphysics is onto-theo-logically constituted. In other words, we create something (*theo*: a Being; transcendental signifier; metaphysical principle) to give our existence (*ontos*: beings) a logical structure (*logos*: coherence, meaning), but we forget that, in this process of onto-theo-logy, we remain beings. Consequently, God becomes the philosophical god of *causa sui*, a Being of beings, and nothing more:

Man can neither pray nor sacrifice to this god. Before *causa sui* man can neither fall to his knees in awe nor can he play music and dance before this god. The god-less thinking which must abandon the god of philosophy, god as *causa sui*, is thus perhaps closer to the divine God (Heidegger [1957] 1969:72).

Heidegger thus develops the criticism of metaphysics into a criticism of ontotheology. A continuation of thinking in metaphysical terms of God might lead to the onto-theo-logical understanding of God as a “transcendental signifier”, the *causa sui*, or the philosophical god. According to Heidegger ([1957] 1969:72), we need to “step back out of metaphysics” and ask the ontological questions first, because, ultimately, we “carve up reality by the way we understand existence” (Du Toit 2011:7).

In a sense, Jacques Derrida (1930-2004) continues Heidegger’s criticism of onto-theo-logy and metaphysics in his deconstruction of our logical systems and language, which intend to unify our existence. However, there is a more direct link between Derrida’s criticism of metaphysics and Nietzsche’s criticism of the concept of truth. Derrida describes the fluidity of truth in his term *différance*. *Différance* is

irreducible to any ontological or theological – ontotheological – reappropriation, but it opens up the very space in which onto-theology – philosophy – produces its system and its history. It thus encompasses and irrevocably surpasses onto-theology or philosophy (Derrida 1973:134-5).

*Différance* does not refer to a master discourse but to a “constant deferral of meaning, pointing to the differences and distinctions always operative

in the play of meaning” (Gschwandtner 2013:60). It is itself not a concept, but rather refers to the undecidability of meaning itself, to the multivalency and complexity of meanings.

Applied to God and metaphysics, Derrida’s *différance* does not necessitate negative theology (Coward & Foshay 1992), but a deferral (referral, postponement), a contentless naming, the name “of the bottomless collapse, of this endless desertification of language” (Derrida 1998:59). Therefore, religion is “without religion” (Caputo 1997:161-181), without commitment to, or identification with any particular concrete religion. Within this linguistic move by Derrida (the turn to language in philosophy, in general), the traditional interpretation of metaphysics becomes impossible, because “there is nothing outside the text [there is no outside-text; *il n’y a pas de hors-texte*]” (Derrida 1997:158). What Derrida means is that “there is nothing outside of the text that one can have access to without language, which is not also text” (Meylahn 2012:1).

#### 4. THE CRITICISM OF METAPHYSICS AND THEOLOGY

The criticism of metaphysics raises fundamental questions about the relation between theology (and religion, in general) and concepts such as metaphysics (as the study of the ultimate reality), ontotheology (as the transcendental signifier that totalises and unifies human existence or beings in its entirety), and the notion of transcendence (which includes any “beyond”, God, the o/Other). If we take notions such as Derrida’s *différance* seriously, the transcendent will forever lie beyond – becoming still more transcendent transcendence (Caputo & Scanlon 2007:2). This raises a number of questions. Does this mean that we have to view transcendence as forever beyond us? Will this mean the end of theology, at least the end of theology as metaphysics? Should metaphysics, ontotheology and transcendence be reconceptualised? The ultimate question is whether theology and religion have a future in a postmetaphysical age.

There have been a variety of responses to the criticism of metaphysics by theologians and philosophers. One is to accept that theology is metaphysics (as in Jenson’s case) and continue as before. The Radical Orthodoxy – as a nostalgic return to the pre-modern era – is an example of this kind of imperviousness to criticism of metaphysics. John Milbank, for example, offers a Christian counterstory to metaphysical criticism. According to him, Christianity “declares that the world is ultimately not about power [Nietzsche] but about love” (Placher 2004:42). For Milbank,



the world that God created is made for peace, not violence, and so violence is always a distortion of the true nature of things.

“[T]he Nietzschean story of how things are is really a story of how things have become distorted. Christianity’s story of love and peace is the truer story” (Placher 2004:42).

Milbank’s strategy is rhetorical. Hart uses a similar strategy in his *The beauty of the infinite* (2003), but emphasises that the persuasiveness of the Christian story lies on an aesthetic level. Jenson (2000:17) takes a similar route in his plea to return to the true story and promise of the church:

What is to be done *within* church and synagogue seems relatively plain. God’s people must gather the courage to subordinate other narratives to their own, to proclaim and live within a metanarrative that is “meta” in the superlative degree. If the story the Bible tells, running from creation to consummation and plotted by Exodus or Exodus-Resurrection, is *true*, it is not just our story but God’s. If it is God’s story, it is universal. And if it is the *triune* God’s story, it cannot be oppressive.

The problem with this kind of answer is that it does not take the criticism of metaphysics (or, one could say, postmodern thought) seriously enough. This kind of theology – although it might be good metaphysics (Crocker 2016:344) – runs the risk of becoming increasingly removed from philosophical engagement, and eventually being quite unable to provide answers to fundamental epistemological and ontological questions. There have been noteworthy attempts in theology to deal with metaphysical criticism (Stoker & Van der Merwe 2012a; 2012b), but the general trend is towards rehabilitating metaphysics in a type of fideism (Barth, Jenson, Millbank) or adopting a postmetaphysical theology (Sally McFague, Thomas Altizer) so that theology becomes pantheism (Verhoef 2013:180).

An alternative to taking one of these two responses is to examine how continental philosophers of religion have countered the criticism of metaphysics. It is important to note that their concern is not with (Christian) apologetics, but to investigate the phenomenon and existence of religion within our world. The starting point is philosophy and not the “revelation of (a) god”. It is an academic discipline in which not only theologians participate, but also atheists as part of their philosophies (Derrida, Deleuze, Nancy). Their diverse responses to the criticism of metaphysics all attempt to open up new ways of thinking about religion, rather than necessarily allowing for a return to theology as metaphysics. Some of these new approaches to metaphysics and transcendence hardly consider traditional theological thinking.

## 5. THE CRITICISM OF METAPHYSICS AND PHILOSOPHY OF RELIGION

In my broad overview of some of the key responses to the criticism of metaphysics by contemporary philosophers of religion, I briefly discuss the work of Caputo, Nancy, Stoker, Kearney and Schrijvers.

John Caputo's (1940- ) work on religion is mainly an application and/or reaction to Derrida's deconstruction. For Caputo, the possibility of faith in a postmetaphysical era lies in the "passion of *non-savoir* [not knowing], impassioning the desire for the impossible and the unforeseeable" (Caputo 1997:312). Such faith is a "religion without religion", a messianic expectation without a messiah, a non-supernatural expectation that is mostly materialistic. The transcendent cannot be accommodated within this messianic view as something metaphysical (or radically transcendent). Although this "postmetaphysical theology" does allow for religious discourse (religion without religion), the space for theology (or God-talk) in this context is only one of "theo-poetics":

a poetics of what stirs within the name of God, within what "we" call "God". Since these quasi-phenomenological forms of theo-poetics never reach the stasis of a fundamental Absolute reality, one must acknowledge that religion is *Vorstellungen* all the way down! (Caputo 2014:52).

For Caputo, the transcendent is found on a horizontal level within language, text, and on the boundaries of space-time, but not in a metaphysical sense. Theo-poetics does not concern itself with the unknown beyond the text (in a metaphysical sense), but with the unknown (alterity) in the text. It does, however, offer an ethical alternative to completely "closed postmetaphysics" by desiring (active hoping) this unknown and/or unthought and/or other still to come. Theo-poetics (as a function of *différance*) brings with it a "vulnerable inconclusivity and an active expectant openness" (Meylahn 2012:8) that might help theology steer away from "theo-poetry" (absolute knowledge; fundamentalism) and "theopolitics" (a battle of the gods), which is often found in metaphysical theology. Although "theo-poetics" has some definitive advantages, the notion of a "religion without religion" seems too far removed from traditional theology to be acceptable. It is, therefore, worth examining another response to Derrida's philosophy.

Jean-Luc Nancy's (1940- ) book, *Dis-enclosure: The deconstruction of Christianity* (2008), is an attempt to deconstruct Christianity in line with Derrida's philosophy. He does not view the deconstruction of Christianity as the end of sense (meaning). The world still has sense (contrary to what

the nihilists say) even after we eliminate grand narratives and ultimate signifiers, as the world is “continually taking place” (Nancy 2000:5). However, the sense of the world should “not be sought in one or the other transcendental signifier that would decide on the meaning of our world” (Schrijvers 2016:48). Sense emerges and is present in any inner-worldly encounter thinkable – it arises from our everyday encounters with one another. What is advanced here is what one can call a “praise of everydayness” (Nancy 2000:10).

This notion of meaning/sense has certain consequences for thinking about metaphysics and transcendence. The relation to transcendence is no longer found in a term(inus) outside the world, like God. It is transcending without a Transcendent, without anywhere or anyone to transcend to except for the gap that is the world. Transcendence “goes nowhere outside of the world, but rather stays in the world” (Gerber 2016:86), not as substance, but by moving (transcending) to another, as circulating – a movement of “transimmanence” (Hutchens 2005:233).

With transimmanence, not only is transcendentalism (where meaning is found in a source outside the world) rejected (Nancy takes Nietzsche’s notion of the death of God seriously), but also immanentism or the search for a being or substance or absolute reference point inside the world (in the realm of immanence). In this sense, “transcendentalism and immanentism are two sides of the same coin” (Gerber 2016:86) – both seek an ontotheological grounding principle. Nancy rejects both, but still finds sense in the world in transimmanence – the circulation of sense between one another, through the cutting across of being-with. It is here where transcendence is to be found, but then not as a substance, but as the movement (trans) of sense (meaning) as circulating between the subject and the other (without being fixed in either, nor in an external source). This transimmanence gives one an idea of how transcendence (metaphysics) is reconceptualised in a postmetaphysical era: it rejects the opposition of transcendence (metaphysical world/principle) and immanence (closed reality) and instead opts for an “absolute immanence” where there is a continual openness to finding sense/meaning in the world as a totality of infinite relationships without exteriority. However, this “open-immanence” leaves no room for a metaphysical god, or even an openness of transimmanence to the theological concept of eschatology (Verhoef 2016:13). A different understanding of transcendence is needed to maintain a metaphysical theology. For that we need to go to Stoker.

The Dutch theologian and philosopher, Wessel Stoker (1946- ), reacts to the criticism of metaphysics by reconceptualising transcendence in heuristic terms as, first, “radical transcendence” (Stoker 2012a:5-26). This

is a “vertical” type of transcendence where the absolute (God) is viewed as the totally other, and clearly distinguished from mundane reality. Secondly, Stoker (2012) identifies a concept of transcendence called “immanent transcendence”, which emphasises the notion that one can experience the absolute/divine through mundane reality. Thirdly, Stoker interprets the radicalisation of immanence as a type of transcendence, namely as “radical immanence”. This transcendence is regarded as “the default position in contemporary culture” (Van der Merwe 2012:509). In radical immanence, the absolute is not sought outside mundane reality; rather, both realities flow into the immanent (for example, Deleuze’s “plane of immanence”). In speaking of transcendence in reference to immanence, the immanent obtains a normative and/or divine character. Fourthly, Stoker presents an alternative view of transcendence as “alterity” that primarily seeks to retain something of the metaphysical and existential nature of transcendence. Transcendence as alterity returns to radical transcendence and builds on it, emphasising the ineffability of the “Other”. It differs from radical transcendence, since it rejects the notion of transcendence and immanence as opposing concepts. Instead, one should think beyond this opposition and acknowledge the “totally other” that is in “every other” (Levinas and Derrida). The challenge to think between these two poles is taken up by Kearney with his concept of anatheism.

In his postmetaphysical thinking, Richard Kearney (1954-) has recourse to Derrida’s notion of the future that is not deconstructable (the messianic future – as Caputo discussed it) and to Levinas’s view of the other as the Other. In his books, *The God who may be* (2001) and *Anatheism* (2010), he follows Derrida’s understanding of the messianic as “the form of any promise of something to come” (Derrida 1992:56). This is something that transcends us: the “God who may be”. This God is not definable in traditional religious doctrines, in “dogmatic formulae” (Kearney 2010:179), but may be the other as the Other and, therefore, we must live with openness, and hospitality to strangers – whether gods or monsters (Kearney 2003). He describes this “religious” position as Anatheism – not a theism or atheism, but a return to God as something else, an openness to the stranger, the other, the future, the God that may be.

Kearney has thus an implicit metaphysical expectation. The God that might not be here now (except perhaps in the other as Other, but not as an external source or substance), may be there or here in the future. This eschatology leaves a gap for a possible metaphysical understanding of transcendence, as a transcendence in immanence. It is only in our immanent future expectation (micro-eschatologies) and in our immanent experience with others in this world (the epiphanies of the everyday) that

transcendence is to be found. Ultimately, it is doubtful whether Kearney succeeds in moving beyond Derrida and Caputo's "religion without religion", although his concept of Anatheism does seek to allow for more "particularity" (Kearney 2010:64) in religion in order to avoid "empty secularism that merely aestheticizes religion by removing its faith content" (Kearney 2010:130). For Joeri Schrijvers (2016) it raises three questions. Should we do away then with specific religious expectations and content, with belief? Does this not entail a loss of faith in any theistic transcendence in the end?

Schrijvers (2011) surmises that the ontotheological constitution (Heidegger) of metaphysics is inevitable. However, Schrijvers (2016) argues that we should not attempt to rid ourselves of ontotheologies (and metaphysics). Loss of faith – becoming indifferent to all that transcends our finite lives – might make us lose sight of the excess found in this world (love in Binswanger's phenomenology). Schrijvers (2016:xvii) wants to avoid this, because it is

in and through love that one encounters, embraces, and holds on to a sense that surpasses the endless finitude of things.

We should thus remain open to the infinite, to transcendence, and to God. This openness or *faith* does not necessarily entail a move back to *belief*. Nor should belief or faith be separated. We should instead explore being between belief and faith, and embrace its potential. However, the question remains as to whether this "between belief and faith" position is sufficient space for (metaphysical) theology to function.

## 6. THEOLOGY IN A POSTMETAPHYSICAL ERA

We need to explore whether (and how) these philosophers open up a space for theology and religion in the postmetaphysical era. A radical metaphysical understanding of God (as in Radical Orthodoxy, Barth and Jenson) has become untenable. Theology that denies or ignores these epistemological, ontological and metaphysical challenges risks lapsing into postmodern fideism. It is postmodern in the sense that it accepts the notion of truth as subjective and determined by me or my group and fideistic in the sense that it does not attempt to rationally justify its beliefs. This postmodern fideism can quickly lead to an "apathetic pluralism" where

one culture or language game (or religion) dares not to criticize the presuppositions and non-neutrality of other cultures and language

games because, well, such presuppositions are all we have (Schrijvers 2016:4).

This kind of fideism leads to a type of particularism where everyone's presuppositions are valued at least as much as anyone else's other. Therefore, theology needs to take the criticism of metaphysics seriously.

Theology must address contemporary questions. Not to do so holds the danger that theologians might "resemble the band that kept on playing on the Titanic, not realizing that their audience had already left" (Schrijvers 2016:73). However, in addressing contemporary challenges presented by postmetaphysics and postsecularism, we run certain risks. Theology may adopt the norms of postmetaphysics or radical immanence, as in the work of Thomas Altizer (1966) (the death of God theology; *kenosis* as the complete emptying of God), Sally McFague (2007) (the world as God's body), and some liberation theologians (God incarnated in the poor). Such theologies find it difficult to view God in metaphysical terms and opt instead for His embodiment in the concrete world (Verhoef 2013:188), veering towards pantheism. In contrast, theologians such as Bonhoeffer (see Gregor & Zimmerman 2009) and Tillich (1948) have striven for a type of immanent transcendence or as transcendence as alterity (Stoker & Van der Merwe 2012a:11; Vosloo 2012:45).

Continental philosophers of religion have not eliminated the space for theology (and religion), but have transformed it. They appear to offer two options to theologians in South Africa. One is to take the criticism of metaphysics seriously. The other is to continue reinterpreting theology within, or in relation to, this space (by remaining faithful to the theological tradition).

## 7. THEOLOGY IN A POSTMETAPHYSICAL SOUTH AFRICA?

Describing South Africa as "postmetaphysical" is problematic because of its diversity. However, South Africa is not isolated from global developments and challenges. This exposure to trends and ideas from all over the world through the media and the results of international cooperation means that it is increasingly postmetaphysical (at least secular). This applies to all the various cultures in South Africa.<sup>5</sup> The criticism directed at metaphysics

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5 A very diverse cultural and racial audience attended the presentation of this paper at the Faculty of Theology in Bloemfontein. All of them agreed that the communities and cultural groups they represent share this awareness (in a varying degree) of our postmetaphysical age.

thus has some relevance to the South African theological context, as it seeks new “spaces” so that it can continue to explore existential questions. Intellectual integrity demands that theology move beyond particularism and avoid postmodern fideism.

We need to find new “spaces” for doing theology for the sake of intellectual integrity and (more importantly) for continuing to explore the existential questions that are at the heart of theology. Intellectual integrity seeks to move beyond particularism or lapsing into postmodern fideism. An apathetic pluralism will neither serve the interests of theology nor a diverse South African society.

The second point of relevance lies in the focus on fundamental questions that help us make sense of our lives. Theology in South Africa is very diverse and can appear very fragmented (with a focus on public theology, social justice, ethics, feminist, ecological, the poor, and so on). A metaphysical theology has the merit of creating a coherent understanding of all these issues. Such a coherent metaphysical answer cannot be a move back to premodern fundamentalism, and it cannot be an uncritical move towards a new metanarrative. This theology – if it takes the criticism of metaphysics seriously – can give answers that take account of its constant need to question itself. In this way, theology remains an ongoing and open-ended task.

The third point of relevance lies in the continued tension that is brought forth by the philosophers of religion, between metaphysics and “mere physics”; between transcendence and immanence; between faith and belief. This tension can be fruitfully exploited by theology in the South African context. Theology should guard against becoming so contextualised that it loses its metaphysical mooring, but cannot be pure metaphysics. The danger is that theology could become a mere sociological phenomenon focused on improving socio-economic conditions, on the one hand, or so concerned about the metaphysical, God, and/or the (real) afterlife, that it devalues our physical existence, on the other. The tension of the in-between position’s potential should be embraced. In South Africa, it means continually exploring and appreciating the transcendent, and the mystical found in traditional African religions, as well as engaging in some very contextualised, but diverse theology.

The final point of relevance is the separation between state and religion, and the freedom of religion provided by the state. With so many religions in South Africa, it would be easy for state and civil society to relegate religion to certain spheres of society. Theology as postmodern fideism or particularism increases this danger. While theology might still be able to

justify its own existence, its metaphysical beliefs, and its “own language game”, society (and the state) might restrict it to that: an isolated group with their own beliefs and limited influence. It means that theology (in this instance, the emphasis is on an unapologetic metaphysical theology) may be reduced (and even vilified) by society to something like “science fiction”. In other words, theology may have limited significance, and no real universal appeal or meaning. Criticism of metaphysics and the responses to it (as discussed) can help theology be more modest in its claims, more searching in its utterances (as a religion without religion; as theopoetics; as atheists; as between faith and belief), and ironically become more relevant to society and its needs.

## 8. CONCLUSION

Theology in the South African context can greatly benefit from these philosophers. They do not provide complete answers to the criticism of metaphysics and the questions theology has to face. However, their serious engagement with the criticism of metaphysics and the questions presented by our postmetaphysical age has opened up or pointed to the space in which theology (with its metaphysical moorings) can continue addressing existential questions. Our challenge is to reinterpret theology in the space between faith and belief so that it becomes more relevant to the societies in which it functions, and assists people to live more fulfilling, meaningful and ethical lives.

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