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Kenneth Jason Wardley, *Praying to a French God: The Theology of Jean-Yves Lacoste*. Intensities: Contemporary Continental Philosophy of Religion. Patrice Haynes and Steven Shakespeare, eds. Farnham, U.K.: Ashgate, 2014. ix + 246 pp. Notes, bibliography, and index. £60.00 U.K. (hb). ISBN 978-147242865-3.

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Following closely on the heels of Joeri Schrijvers's pioneering work on Jean-Yves Lacoste's phenomenological and theological thoughts, Kenneth Jason Wardley's *Praying to a French God: The Theology of Jean-Yves Lacoste* provides the reader with a series of conceptual studies within Lacoste's oeuvre, ranging from prayer to silence, and from ambiguity to time, in an effort to reconceive theology entirely anew, and in fragmentary form. Though there certainly may be both stylistic and content-oriented critiques of the work possible, I find the book, on the whole, to do a tremendous service to not only Lacoste's work, but also to those needing further introduction to his writings.

Wardley begins with a first chapter that also serves as an introduction, asking us to consider what we are to make of the more or less recent appearance of "God in France" that has come to dominate so many contemporary accounts of twentieth-century French philosophy. Wardley makes clear that one of the insistent features of these intellectual trends is that we are not able to necessarily "overcome ontotheology," but that we are capable of subverting the border between philosophy and theology (pp. 6-7). Combining sketches of postwar French philosophers, both the influences upon them and their own lasting legacies, with Lacoste's interpretations of such a context, Wardley gives us brief tours through the reception of Hegel, Nietzsche and Heidegger in France (via Sartre and Bataille mainly) in order to ascertain just how a phenomenological-theological account might actually function vis-à-vis philosophy's ontological claims.

At this point we witness the entrance of Jean-Yves Lacoste's efforts to frame the "overcoming of metaphysics" as an explicitly theological task (p. 14). To see things as such means likewise accepting, as Jean-Luc Marion has, that the "invisible" is yet a subject matter proper to phenomenological study. It also demonstrates how Lacoste is concerned with rethinking the relationship between the theological and ontology in such a way, moreover, as to take Christian tradition and revelation more seriously than most. What transpires in this creative space, for Lacoste, is a sort of "phenomenology of liturgy," what we encounter in standing before the Absolute, or God, and what becomes a state of "being-before-God" that evidences a sharp contrast to the limits of Heidegger's "being-in-the-world." By giving phenomenological descriptions of experiences such as going on a pilgrimage or undergoing a vigil, Lacoste invites a new sense of meaning to the philosophical, as well as the theological—and Wardley does an excellent job of convincing us of Lacoste's more than relevant challenge to traditional, disciplinary boundaries.

One of Lacoste's initial considerations, in this light, is the way in which "liturgy exacerbates a sense of homelessness" (p. 20), that is, it accesses a way of dealing with humanity's fundamental sense of alienation that does not simply leave it abandoned down the deadends of anxiety, alienation or death. Liturgy, as such, is capable of pushing us to an experience of that which lies beyond our world, and

which is invisible to it, in order to foster a sense of transcendence in us through the immanent liturgical realities in which we partake. In this way, Lacoste is not worried about the “lack” of transcendence in the “logic of liturgy” (p. 22), but rather orients himself toward the “language of the flesh” (p. 23) that characterizes our situation in the world. By looking at the human being, not as the subject who has projected itself onto God, but as the “object” of God’s activity, Lacoste re-centers our orientation upon what is formed in this relationship as the true content of theological inquiry, something much more personal and biographical than philosophers have generally perceived.

The obvious theological continuation of this line of thought, as Wardley correctly assumes, is the life of prayer, that which comprises the second chapter of the book. As Lacoste himself outlines, prayer becomes the pivot upon which the religious self turns, or rather is poured out (kenotically) in relation to its object, who is also a subject come alive within the person who prays. In Wardley’s wording, and it is well worth quoting in full, “...the questions of phenomenology almost invariably revolve around questions of intentionality and the subject/object distinction. Prayer offers a paradigmatic study in intentionality, whether it is that of the one who is doing the praying (the praying subject) or the divinity (or object) to which those prayers are ostensibly addressed” (p. 25).

Though humanity has more clarity than it ever has regarding certain scientific understandings of itself, it has, Lacoste claims, lost its sense of self-understanding in terms of *who* it is. Yet since trying rationally to prove the existence of God is a near worthless exercise, Lacoste focuses on the nature of the human being found in relation to God, that is, in prayer, the only way to properly understand the human being who transcends the purely rational sphere of its being. In this manner, he is able to analyze concepts such as conversion, penance, reconciliation, singing, praise, fasting and the vows we make in relation to God, and Wardley does a just job of representing the various analyses and digressions within his writing on the whole. Lacoste works, by this count, to construct an “ontology of prayer” (as event) that is an alternative way to construct an ontology, one that recognizes the displacement of the self in relation to God and seeks to ‘build’ on this insight. Hence, he conceives of how liturgical experience suspends normal relations, between subject and object, but also between the (Hegelian) master and slave.

Prayer is in fact further defined as the “interaction between remembrance and hope” (p. 38), and thereby as the suspension of a normal sense of temporality. It is also conceived here as the clearing of a space for God, which is a sort of pouring out of the self for God (its particular form of *kenosis*) but also the space in which nothing might happen. This is in its nature, to be sure. To his credit, Wardley underlines the notion of how “the liturgical self is a kenotic self” (p. 42), but also of how “[t]he wounded words of prayer speak of mankind’s ontological poverty before the Absolute” (p. 44).

The third chapter explores the Kierkegaardian influence upon Lacoste’s work, primarily looking to discern how “theological speech is not an end in itself” (p. 45), but is instead simply the work of ‘sinners’ who try to depict God in ways that God cannot be depicted. As such, he articulates how the very life of the theologian is caught up in the pronouncements they make, thus making it terribly difficult, again, to draw a firm boundary between theology and philosophy. The way in which the lives of the saints are part and parcel of doing theology means also that Lacoste takes such ‘forms of life’ quite seriously. As Wardley points out: “It is in this context that one should understand Lacoste’s preference for the ascetic, the pilgrim and the holy fool” (p. 49).

In this accounting of the significance of prayer, Wardley reviews Lacoste’s analysis of Christology and transcendence, moving toward the way in which, through liturgy, truth can be *felt* and not just understood (p. 66), as it is an act of the whole human person, and not just of their rational capacities. What Lacoste finds lurking in this space, and which he embraces, is the form of radical Christianity that Kierkegaard imparts to Lacoste and which has left its defining signature upon the latter’s attempts to

formulate a 'humble' phenomenology of the human being engaged in liturgical acts of orientation to the self, this world and God.

This particular way of configuring one's relation to the world, in turn, opens us up to an alternative phenomenology, one that sees beyond what lies before the eyes and is rather transfixed toward a radical re-reading of our orientation to the world. In Lacoste's estimation, then, "...it is only due to the perception of affections such as kindness or love that one can perceive at all" (p. 69). Hence, beauty and truth are more genuinely "known" through a form of 'liturgical knowing' that surpasses our senses. In Wardley's estimation, "Liturgical knowing is not necessarily knowledge gained in and through the explicit celebration of liturgy, but an understanding gained through a liturgical disposition, *coram Deo*, which eludes definition and can be expressed in a variety of ways" (p. 73). As such, we confront the inherent ambiguity present within theological discourses, all bent on explaining that which they truly have no way of capturing. This insight will define, in many ways, Lacoste's openness to the plurality of theological discourses that occupy Christianity, and which therefore typify its inherently 'fragmentary' nature.

The fourth chapter takes up the topic of "phantasy," which is contextualized through Lacoste's turn to poetics and hermeneutics, wherein he follows Paul Ricoeur's lead in his rendering of art and the imagination in light of developments in narrative theology over the past fifty years or so. Heidegger's comments on poetics and hermeneutics are only an initial launching point for Lacoste's elaborations upon the way in which we might "listen" to literary texts in order to find within them a "renewal of the language of faith" (p. 84). Contrasting imagination, "which enables one to think and to live in reality" with fantasy, here described as "a mere escape from reality" (p. 86), he paints a vivid picture of just how essential the imagination is to theological language.

At this point, Wardley highlights an interesting side of Lacoste's thought, namely that the phenomenological account of openness to ambiguity that he has sought to portray as inherent to theological work is precisely that same feature which sensitizes theology to particular literary worlds. Specifically, Lacoste is drawn to those "magical" literary worlds--here illustrated by the fictions of C. S. Lewis and J. R. R. Tolkien, figures about whom Lacoste has written--that incorporate mythological elements into a Christian framework in order to seek out a terrain (citing Lacoste himself), "above the antagonism between the historic (or the historical) and the mythical" (p. 87). Though Lacoste himself critically evaluates whether or not such an admixture of elements both mythological and Christian can be so directly expressed, he utilizes this precise mixture in order to rethink the relationship between faith and reason (with their accompanying forms of knowledge) which often leaves out the role of the imagination altogether. Theologians, Lacoste warns, have wrongly given up on enjoying "the naivety of children," a condition that only renders theology more susceptible to "either hypocrisy or fideism" (p. 107). Allowing ourselves to reshape our ethical imagination by listening to the world of literature and myth is actually a necessary part of the theologian's task, and one for which he is willing to make a deliberate call.

If you take into consideration the manner in which one's opening up to the realm of imagination is brought into the theological, then the fifth chapter's movement toward the long neglected dimension of being human that is our 'flesh' appears likewise as a focal point much in need of further discussion. What Lacoste directly discerns here is that our talk about God is inextricably linked to the ways in which we perceive our bodily being, and yet it is also true that "liturgy must transgress" this "carnal dimension" as well (p. 112). In Wardley's estimation of things, "...embodiment provides the shared locus between the continuity and discontinuity of all present human experience. Liturgy thus begins from this corporeality, and takes the body as its starting point..." (p. 115).

As the reader can well imagine, this analysis is quickly steered toward a rich description of the Eucharistic implications of such an understanding of our liturgical being. This connection to the

Eucharist, as well as his general exposition of the role of the flesh, is what allows Lacoste to discuss the concepts of fatigue and boredom, sleep and holding vigil—states encountered in relation to our bodily being—as major *loci* for the theological. His topical choices, as Wardley makes clear through his analysis of them, is a very creative reading of theological focal points, and one that has the potential to reshape theology *tout court*. Fatigue, for example, in Lacoste’s reckoning, can be a state of being that allows us to access prayer in ways that are denied by the usual frenetic activity of our everyday lives. Indeed, fatigue can be another way to conceive of *kenosis* in relation to both God and self.

The sixth chapter on silence offers us Lacoste’s way to rethink something like a “theological epistemology” as that which gains in knowledge only by listening (p. 128). Illustrating the “complex and positive phenomenon” that is silence, rather than simply depicting it as a negative absence in our world (p. 131), we witness how “[f]or an embodied consciousness endowed with memory, hopes and a body which can keep silent, then silence signifies not simply an absence of words but the necessary temporality of life” (p. 134). Wardley proceeds to illustrate the dialectical rhythm between silence and speech that undoes our overreliance upon an ontotheological logic of speech alone. For Lacoste himself, to acknowledge the significance of silence as a theological exercise is to likewise acknowledge the primacy of poverty as a religious vocation—the very thing that Christianity highlights in its depiction of a God who willingly pours Godself out (again, kenotically) in order to experience the “poverty” of being human. The conclusion that Wardley draws from this, in turn, is that “[l]iturgical experience is similarly ascetic—a voluntary choice for poverty that is authentic to humanity’s own ontological poverty” (p. 136). This configuration of things gives rise to another type within Lacoste’s writing: the hermit, who allows us to see the body of the monk as another site upon which silence works its influence. The deeply meditative experiences of reading scripture—*lectio divina*, for example—become a way to unite body, memory, prayer and silence.

Beyond this, Wardley moves through a series of solid reflections on the nature of suffering and theodicy within the context of silence, including a look at the way in which theology is often silenced in the face of suffering, but also called to a form of sympathy which is also a “suffering-with” those who suffer (p. 154). To my mind, this produces one of the best connections that Wardley makes within Lacoste’s work, and which fittingly serves as a reminder of his entire phenomenological project.

While the issue of suffering can reduce theology to silence, this does not mean that it reduces it to nothingness. In being silenced, theology finds itself reduced to its essentials as *theologia viatorum*, as a way of life rather than simply a province of transcendent knowledge. And, for Lacoste, philosophy also has its own “*moment silencieux*” in which its theorizing collapses and *com*-passion is perhaps the only response (p. 156).

The seventh chapter on time begins by asking, quite literally, whether prayer is a waste of time. Suggesting, of course, that prayer is not a waste of time moves us a slight step toward the major point Wardley is trying to make: theology must reconfigure our entire temporal orientation in this world and, again, it must do so as a challenge to the Heideggerian understanding of being in relation to time. For Lacoste, liturgy, holding vigil and keeping the Sabbath are all human relations to time that exist outside our normal sphere of everyday activity, and which must, for that very reason, be allowed to reconceive our understanding of self in relation to time. Lacoste therefore points toward an eschatological dimension within time, that which serves as a “messianic dispossession” of time as we generally experience it (p. 167) in order to envision such reconceptualizations at work. Even art or joy can be experienced as “mini-eschatologies” in that they transport us outside of ourselves, our routines and our habits and into a realm that prefigures the Kingdom of God.

The “unnecessary” realm of liturgy becomes that which opens us up to what takes place beyond the everyday routines and habits in which we “dwell.” In contradistinction to Heidegger’s account of our “being-in-the-world” which depends on these forms of “dwelling” in our world, and which are intimately

linked to our anxiety about death, liturgy brings us to a space outside of this very worldly economy, that is, to the “supernatural.” “Liturgy can thus be conceived as *sacred play* which fulfils no external purpose, even if it has its own internal rules and purposes” (p. 176). In conjunction with this, Wardley provides a discussion of concepts such as anticipation and givenness, presence and *Parousia*, the time of sleep, the anarchy of eschatology and the role of drama, all so that he might underscore Lacoste’s insistence on a form of *kairos* that interrupts *chronos* in order to show us a world beyond the one we thought we “dwelt” within. In this way, Wardley points toward the “liturgical consummation” of philosophy as a possible theological goal and eschatological horizon of understanding that arises from Lacoste’s work (p. 192).

The final chapter, which serves as the book’s conclusion, takes stock of this French phenomenological interruption of otherwise “peaceful” relations between theology and philosophy and, more specifically, of Lacoste’s recommended candidature in the school of *nouvelle théologie*, which Wardley suggests is due him (p. 194). In making this claim, Wardley turns to look toward the sacramental nature of Lacoste’s project, something that permeates it throughout, and which should be of no surprise to the reader of the book at this point, though it certainly bears solidifying at this juncture. Wardley’s finding, which is as rich as it is suggestive, is that the only proper response to Lacoste’s work that we can offer up is that of “a theology of ‘small matters,’ a fragmentary theology of the plural” (p. 204). This, Wardley suggests, is where the sacramental nature of things is to be found.

Perhaps there is a certain choppiness to the book at times, mainly due to the myriad reference and citations that abound in the work, and which often jump quickly from one author to another. But I should add that such transitions also do the reader a great service in situating Lacoste’s work within a much larger framework of twentieth-century French intellectual life, and Wardley’s narrative is at its best when providing just such contextualization. The book on the whole is an excellent source of inspiration on Lacoste’s work and is bound to move many readers and scholars that much closer to comprehending the significance of a great Catholic intellectual’s writings.

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