Eleven

DOING PHILOSOPHY OF RELIGION AS GLOCAL LOSERS

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“S’enquérir de ce qui mérite question chez un penseur est non seulement rare; c’est aussi le plus difficile.”
(Boutin #179, p. 453)

I wish to risk remarking upon the thought of Maurice Boutin and his engagement of Peter Sloterdijk. I believe doing so helps to explain Boutin’s orientation for the philosophy of religion. The risk is that I might misconstrue some of the most challenging aspects of Boutin’s work in such a short space. His orientation is directed towards relationality, which is that form of relation that cannot be an object per se. Where in his earlier writings Boutin draws on apophatic theology, in his later writings he engages Sloterdijk’s account of the disappearance of the human subject. Having dispensed with both God and the subject, I believe Boutin’s project of relationality can be understood. However, Boutin may find the orientation outlined here to be both disturbing and suitable for philosophy of religion today.

The “philosophy of religion” in question is “philosophical theology,” which can be thought of as distinct to “religious theology.” Philosophical theology is more than simply formalized God-talk. Rather than faith seeking understanding, philosophical theology explores the structures of possibility for such understanding and thereby the same of the conditions for faith. Boutin’s (#6) major work addresses the problem of subjectivity in terms of relationality. He would later summarize the upshot of his argument in these terms: “Relation and otherness do refer to the intentional structure of faith” (Boutin #110, p. 61). Here philosophical theology is the analysis of the “intentional structure of faith.” Boutin’s point is not meant to be descriptive; it has normative implications.

The form of that intentional structure of faith is the possibility of a “non-objectifying perception,” which is meant to challenge the possibility that an objectifying subject can properly seek understanding of the conditions for the possibility for religion. Such a subject presumes itself to be a finite pole of existence while considering God to be the ultimate object. This will always be religious theology, according to Boutin. While this bipolar structure may be intentional, its intentional structure sets inadequate limits for the philosophy of religion. In particular, Boutin is concerned that such an understanding
overlooks the fundamental form that makes for religious theology: the possibility of relation. Boutin thus recommends that philosophical theology become capable of discussing relationality. And this requires adopting an approach that forsakes the poles of a finite subject and an ultimate object. Put otherwise, the approach should be as dislocated as one finds it in relationality: an *u-topic* analysis. For this, Boutin first draws on apophatic theology for one pole and on Sloterdijk for the other.

The orientation of Boutin’s approach to apophatics is aligned with his reading of Edmond Jabès: “If it was possible for us to imagine God, it is because we are able to conceive Him and to bury ourselves in our invention” (Jabès quoted in Boutin #78, pp. 269–70). In the relation of the human subject to God as the ultimate object, the “burying oneself in” is logically and temporally prior to the “conception” of the object. Doing so “makes a product out of the conceiving of God; it objectifies the projection by taking the conceiving of God as the *result* of a human activity” (ibid., p. 277). In the process, the subject tacitly assumes control over its object. The actual object of faith is thereby nothing ultimate, as it is the subject’s projection. This is the relationship of objectifying perception, which loses “thinking” in the moment of presuming the “that” of its production is a “what.” Boutin takes this self-deception of objectifying perception as grounds to seek the understanding of a logic that gives priority to relation over against the poles of a relationship (ibid., p. 277).

To emphasize this point, Boutin turns to apophatic demonstrations, according to which no object of faith exists *per se*. If the “God-pole” of which faith seeks understanding cannot be objectified, then perception must focus on something else. And so Boutin sets aside the theological content and presumptions of so-called negative theology. Not only are theological affirmations insufficient; this much is true. Boutin (#152, p. 341) also takes the basic apophatic *form* to be prescriptive as philosophically understanding the possibility of religion. Taking leave of apophatic theology—which buries itself in the invention of a hyperessentiality beyond quiddity or essence—Boutin amplifies the basic apophatic denial of an ultimate object in order to demand a paradigmatic change for thinking the relation between finitude and transcendence.

Boutin goes even further. In order to establish the possibility of non-objectifying perception, a denial of the objectifying subject is also necessary. It is not enough to question only one of the poles, as apophatics does; the displacement of the other pole must also come into play, if one is to move toward the proposed orientation. Boutin (#78, p. 278) argues that “[God and Man] are cause and effect for one another and at the same time, which means that the cause-effect relationship is not involved in this process ….. It is rather the ever inchoative process in which Man overcomes both himself as a subject and his understanding of God as a subject.” Boutin thus proposes a difference