

*The Reconstruction of Religion: Lessing, Kierkegaard, and Nietzsche.* By Jan-Olav Henriksen. William B. Eerdmans, 2001. 208 pages. \$22.00.

Jan-Olav Henriksen's thought-provoking work explores the fate of religious subjectivity in three authors who faced the challenges of the modern decentering of religion. Gotthold Lessing (1729–1781), Søren Kierkegaard (1813–1855), and Friedrich Nietzsche (1844–1900) responded to the breakdown of religious authority and tradition by rethinking the religious subject. Lessing appealed to the common natural morality of humanity found in reflective religious subjects in order to justify the validity of the monotheistic faiths. Kierkegaard grounded Christianity in the ungroundable abyss of the interiority of the individual's faith, which is constituted in the paradox of an utterly unique and personal relationship with a transcendent God disclosed in history. And Nietzsche unraveled religion as a symptom of the weakness, sickness, and self-deception of the religious subject interpreted from the perspective of the dynamics of the will to power.

Because they recognized that religion should be articulated according to the disposition of the human subject, from religious experience rather than through doctrinal authority or reason, the use and enactment of language are significant to interpreting their thought. They share the use of masks (an image all three utilize) and irony, shifts in perspectives and styles, reversals in argument, and the use of indirect communication in their writings. These ways of speaking indicate that religion is a question that can address and concern the self of the inquirer. Even with Nietzsche's radical critique, religion remains a personal question of the highest import. Henriksen interestingly relates the focus on self-questioning subjectivity in these thinkers to their Lutheran context—which each appropriated or rejected in his own way—and to contemporary discussions of postmodernism and the deconstruction of the subject. As such, this work also serves as an excellent introduction to their religious thought.

Christianity has been confronted in modernity with the loss of its traditional authority and certainty and by questions of its possible justification through the rationality and personal experience of autonomous agents. It has encountered a growing plurality of religious, political, and scientific views and has been tested by the development of historical criticism and internal reforms. Lessing responded to this situation by reinterpreting and justifying Christianity according to the emancipatory ideals of the Enlightenment, thus transcending its evaluation of religion. He reconceived the religious subject as self-reflectively appropriating religious tradition, with its historical claims and positive doctrines, in accordance with "natural religion." Instead of dissolving historical faiths into natural religion, he used natural religion to justify and evaluate the former, that is, they receive their sense in promoting the morality and self-development of humanity and individuality. For Lessing, religion is constitutive of human nature and the development of subjectivity, even if religions fail to live up to the inner meaning—the practice of charity, tolerance, and virtue—that makes them essential to human life. Lessing avoided the extremes of orthodoxy and Enlightenment rationalism, for he refused to reduce religious and moral sentiment to reason while maintaining

the vital role of reason in interpreting and appropriating religion. Rationality is normative and orienting because it enables communication, and religious self-understanding is impossible without self-reflection. Not only can Christians be self-critical, but they ought to be.

Lessing argued that the recognition of pluralism is a consequence of charity and tolerance. Unlike other Enlightenment thinkers, he also defended both Judaism and Islam. In the parable of the three rings in *Nathan the Wise* (Barron, 1950), the father has given rings to his three sons. He tells them that one of them has the true ring. Because the sons do not know which ring is the true one, this uncertainty means that they have to practice a morally good life rather than act without tolerance and charity in the belief that they alone have the truth. It is thus the same thing that differentiates the positive religions and calls their practitioners to mutual recognition. Because all religions express the truth without being (as human appropriations) the final word, the readers of *Nathan the Wise* are asked to change how they experientially relate to religion. Henriksen rightly concludes that there are elements in the Enlightenment critique and reconstruction of religion that remain significant for the critical self-reflection of religious subjects, such as the critique of authoritarianism, dogmatism, and intolerance as well as the insistence on a personal and self-reflective appropriation of one's religious beliefs.

Whereas Lessing argued for religious pluralism on the basis of the development of a common truth, that is, the moral core of religion, Kierkegaard articulated Christianity as a question of the radical singularity of faith and the absoluteness of what seems relative and paradoxical from an objective and rational perspective: the appearance and event in history of the transcendent God. For Kierkegaard, the question of religion is a question that deeply addresses and concerns me—my own existence, my own authenticity, my own salvation. As with Lessing, religion is not simple immediacy but, in fact, involves mediation, reflection, and self-distance. Thus, irony and indirect communication are the tools to move through critical reflection and alienation in order to embrace and overcome them—although not through reconciliation or synthesis—in the moment of decision and leap of faith. Religious immediacy is accordingly the result of the development of subjectivity through the particularity of pleasure and aesthetic immediacy, the universality of reason and morality, to religious singularity. These stages unfold through a dialectic of irony and passion. The self consequently has a double relationship to itself, and Christian faith cannot speak without irony in modernity. Unlike the romantic irony that keeps possibilities open, this irony is committed to the loss of self and resignation of mastery through which everything is gained.

Rational autonomy and free and creative expression of one's power orient the discourses of Lessing and Nietzsche. Kierkegaard emphasized that Christian freedom is received in giving up the self and its obsessive attempts at mastery in the openness of faith. Kierkegaard, like Schleiermacher, explored faith as dependence and thus its inherent sociability. Henriksen therefore aptly argues that, for Kierkegaard, the faith that addresses and concerns me—and so can be described as self-concern—is always refereed through others and ultimately the absolute otherness of God. The Christian does not make her or his life poetic, but it is made poetic through the openness of faith. This is more than an aesthetic

option. Kierkegaard argues that humans live outside the truth in untruth or sin and, worse yet, cannot even know on their own that they exist in deception. This self-deception is only broken in moments of otherness, which allow for the choice and decision to exist otherwise. Authenticity or becoming a new person occurs in these moments of conversion in which one is given over to God. Without uncertainty, doubt, and irony, this movement of/toward faith would not be possible. Because faith places the self into question and opens it to what is other than itself, subjectivity and self-reflection are necessary to the appropriation of Christianity by the fragile and uncertain self. This appropriation occurs in faith, which means in the passion and paradox of the present.

For Kierkegaard, religion is fundamentally a challenge to the self that places it and its self-deception into question. There is no faith without the questionability and provocation of faith. Nietzsche argued, however, that religion is an excuse and a mask for dynamics of weakness and power. Nietzsche also emphasized the tasks of personal and self-reflective appropriation, by embracing critical history and genealogy. However, religion and morality prevent and deform the creation and assertion of the subject. This subject is interpreted both as spontaneous and as an expression of biological, historical, and linguistic conditions. Religion is life-negating in its affirmation of another world or a beyond and rejection of this one, it has accidental and contingent historical origins rather than a divine one, and God is a fiction generated by our belief in grammar.

Henriksen contends for the necessity of taking Nietzsche's radical critique of religion as self-deception to heart, for Nietzsche legitimately criticized the psychological and political misuses of religion. Nietzsche's critique goes too far for him but needs to be answered, for—as Lessing and Kierkegaard have shown—religion demands a personal and reflective response that affirms this world and life even while transforming it. Henriksen also connects Nietzsche's rejection of religion with his approach to modernity. Although Nietzsche radicalized the Enlightenment idea of autonomy into the spontaneity of the will to power, he also used the tools of reason to undermine reason and to deconstruct the subject. The author argues further that Nietzsche's radical perspectivism and pluralism undermine the recognition of difference as otherness. He consequently opposes the discourse of difference as otherness and difference as plurality or multiplicity. Instead of seeing two variant forms of postmodernism, Henriksen associates the former with the legitimate achievements of modernity—including the Christianity expressed in Lessing's moral vision and Kierkegaard's passion. This work presents a compelling portrayal of the relevance of their religious thought. Although it also provides a nuanced reading of Nietzsche, it occasionally risks underestimating the power of his thought and its postmodern successors.