

John C. MÉDAILLE and Thomas STORCK, *Theology: Mythos or Logos? A Dialogue on Faith, Reason, and History*. Tacoma WA, Angelico Press, 2020, 178 p., 13,9 × 21,5 cm, ISBN-13: 978-1-62138-663-6

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interest in parapsychology public, but by publishing rigorous, high-quality examples of research in an area of study often dismissed, disregarded, or outright derided. *Dangerous Pursuits* continues to test the limits of possibility, presenting Braude's controlled observations frankly and honestly, and not shying away from trickery or downplaying fraud when he encounters it. Throughout the book, Braude uses his critical reasoning to evaluate the observations of writers less open to possibility, and to speculate on how so-far unanswered questions pertaining to paranormal activity (the perceptual means of spirits, or the meaning/relevance of terms like "super-psi," etc.) might be answered. Braude remains focused and methodical from start to finish, and so is his book.

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Theology: Mythos or Logos? is inspired by Plato's *Euthyphro*, where Socrates' rational discourse and questioning quickly overwhelm the naïve simplicity of the Athenian prophet Euthyphro's theological worldview ("Are holy things loved by the gods because they are holy, or are they holy because they are loved by the gods?") (10a). In the original dialogue by Plato, the question proves to be a problematic one for Euthyphro (for it suggests that goodness and holiness are either arbitrary, dictated by the will of the gods, or else principles to which even the gods are subjected). Over the course of their discussion, Socrates suggests that Euthyphro's beliefs about what is "good" and "holy" are neither clear nor distinct, and may even prove to be meaningless, if indeed they are determined by the whims of inconsistent (and often disagreeable) gods.

In this book, the authors John C. Médaille and Thomas Storck take it upon themselves to carry on the discussion, with Médaille taking up the unenviable task of defending Euthyphro (as Euthyphro himself was not up to the mark). Over the course of their correspondence (the 16 letters which comprise the book, along with the full text of *Euthyphro*, included at the end as an appendix), the discussion continues. *Theology: Mythos or Logos?* is interesting as an epistolary text, a contemporary dialogue between two more evenly matched minds; while Euthyphro himself lacked the ability to respond effectively to Socrates' questions on the spot, the format of this book allows both participants to respond at length, and with deliberation, each taking the time to think carefully about the other's words before responding.

The discussion begins with Médaille offering an understanding of theology based, not on reason, but on some other form of experience. Médaille notes the drastic difference between the objects of worship and the gods of philosophy; after all, "[h]ymns to the pure ideas are rather rare, and liturgies that invoke the *primum mobile* are not well attended." While such ideas of divinity may flow reasonably from logic,

they are not the sort which human beings tend to sacrifice to or worship (p. 15). It is through the power of stories, which Médaille says are more fundamental to human understanding than facts, or principles of reason, that gives religion its power or voice, through which the gods (or God) enter into human life. And this is true for all of us, for we all base our lives around stories: "So there are no 'mere stories'; there are only good and bad stories, better and worse stories" (p. 60).

For indeed, what things we count as "facts" or consider "reasonable" depend largely on the stories we tell ourselves about our lives, our world, and its history. Socrates, therefore, is asking the wrong kinds of questions to Euthyphro, and Euthyphro's failure to respond in terms of Socrates' questioning comes as a result of his attempt to respond to it "reasonably." Euthyphro's real mistake, then, comes from his frustration and eventual departure at the end of the dialogue ("Another time, Socrates; for I am in a hurry, and must go now") (15e); as Euthyphro himself realizes that his answers are insufficient for addressing Socrates' questions, and he feels his reasoning to be inadequate.

This is not really the case, though; Socrates is asking Euthyphro the wrong sort of question, Médaille says, and Euthyphro fails to call him on this; as a result, Euthyphro responds to Socrates' irrelevant questions with ineffectual answers. By putting stories as more fundamental to one's understanding and worldviews than reasons (or "reason"), Médaille finds a way to respond to Socrates' questions, and defend Euthyphro's position in more appropriate terms.

Médaille sees religious behavior, including prayer, sacrifice, and the incorporation of religious stories into everyday life (rituals and holy days commemorating past or legendary events), as a universal trait of humanity: in nature a world "imbued with life and spirit," we propitiate it with ritual and sacrifice, giving back to it (p. 133). From before recorded history, this has become a universal part of our relations with the world, a shared aspect of our many mythology narratives, by every culture, "in one form or another" (p. 133). But Médaille notes that this personal, relational response to nature/spirits/the gods/the sun/whatever object of worship, is revered by any particular culture and is not a product of reason or rationality; the abstract idea of God found in philosophy (the proofs for God's existence found in Descartes' *Meditations*, or Saint Thomas' "Five Ways") does not fulfill this need for prompt response, and so Médaille concludes that reason does not supply the right questions, nor can it answer the questions Socrates asks Euthyphro.

Storck's response to Médaille, in Letter 6, is sceptical (and reasonable), as is appropriate, since he is stepping in for Socrates in this exchange of ideas; while the idea that stories underlie reason and rationality is interesting (defining what they are/ what counts as "reasonable" or "rational" for each of us), it also begs the question, "Which story is the right one?" "This sort of criterion" Storck observes to be "dangerously and hopelessly subjective" (p. 67). Storck also points out that not everyone finds the same stories interesting/compelling:

What one person finds good or interesting, another finds bad or boring. The story of God's creation, our Fall, God's redeeming acts and final return – the "Christian story" – appeals to some, but others find other stories more appealing, more interesting (*Ibid.*).

Storck's observations regarding other faiths besides Judaism and Christianity (pagan religions, which, he says, do not appeal to historical revelation, offering "nothing but a mass of discordant stories about divine beings," and his decisive references to Islam as a false revelation (p. 25) make clear his conviction that there is indeed a "right" story (and, therefore, many others which are "wrong"). Judaism and (especially) Christianity, with their appeal to history, miracles, and the wisdom of thinkers like Saint Thomas Aquinas (pp. 27-29), are the most reasonable.

This particular challenge, of whether there is something more reasonable or fundamental than storytelling, however, is not to be satisfactorily resolved by the end of the book, and Médaille and Storck end at a sort of stalemate. Médaille argues that stories create/contextualize facts and determine what is considered reasonable, and Storck argues that facts create reasonable stories. So, while Médaille and Storck agree amicably to agree to disagree, in Letter 16, it remains up to the reader to decide whether a response is possible to Storck's observation: "Otherwise, what do we have? Your story and mine, his story and hers, their story and ours, but none ever based on anything save the shifting sands of personal taste or subjective attraction" (p. 140).

Why should any of these stories be given special prominence or priority, if each of them provides meaning for those who believe in them?

I will offer a few thoughts, reflecting on the exchange after finishing the book. A large part of Médaille and Storck's disagreement stems from the attitude each one has toward rationality and what counts as "rational." Because Médaille would put stories before reason (and argues that what is "rational" is conditioned by the stories which shape one's life and experiences, Médaille points out that what is "rational" is often determined by one's culture, rather than any objective truth (if such a thing is even possible, conditioned as we are by biology and culture).

In this, Médaille is supported by Justin E.H. Smith's observations, in his recent book, *Rationality*, where he notes

That religion is marked as "irrational" and secularism as "rational" is a contingent fact about our society and our recent history. In other historical contexts it has been the unbelievers who are the raving, unhinged, and marginal characters, while religion in turn has enjoyed the full support and buttressing of the best logical arguments emerging from the most elite institutions of learning.¹

But Storck is committed to the idea, throughout the book, that Christianity is a uniquely rational religion. It seems to me, though, that this very point about the subjective nature of what counts as "rational" may be his Achilles heel.

As for what counts as "rational," it is interesting to note how both Médaille and Storck, both Catholics, are able to agree on the distinction of the rational from matters of faith, yet disagree on the merit of relying on faith itself (and whether the various reasons one may have for accepting Christianity as one's story count as

1. Justin E.H. SMITH, *Irrationality: A History of the Dark Side of Reason*, Princeton NJ, Princeton University Press, 2019, p. 40 (I published a review of this book in *Science et Esprit*, 74 (2022), pp. 439-441). Smith also notes that irrational responses to facts, such as confirmation bias (p. 66), phobias (his own fear of flying, in spite of being well informed about the statistical safety of airplanes) are a part of human life, something we may never be free of, so long as we remain biological life forms conditioned by evolution (pp. 67-69).

“rational” or not). They would agree, for example, on the experiential and miraculous aspects of Christianity as important reasons for its acceptance as a worthwhile, compelling story, which a person could accept as true: the empty tomb is absurd, says Médaille, for no one (including Jesus’ own disciples), could have expected it; it defies reason, and so it convinces. But Storck argues that, as there was an objective fact underlying the Resurrection (the tomb *was* empty), the real experience of Jesus’ disciples made their conviction “rational.” Both accept the Resurrection, but “story” comes first for Médaille (as any sceptical historian, he says, could argue that it was a hoax perpetrated by Jesus’ disciples, if the story shaping the historian’s life does not allow for such possibilities) (p. 59).

As noted already, both Médaille and Storck have different attitudes regarding the relationship between matters of faith and matters of rationality. The views of each are reflected in their responses to miraculous events, religious experiences, etc.; things such as these may justify or explain an individual’s religious belief, but are they *rational*? Recalling the idea of faith and reason as compatible (but with faith going beyond the limits of reason), A. Tamarut (2014) describes Peter and John, in John’s Gospel (20:1-10), running together toward the empty tomb, representing reason and faith, respectively: Peter reaches the tomb, but it is John (signifying faith) who goes inside. The two are both a part of the same journey through history and toward salvation, racing “with the same passion and curiosity toward the same goal.”²

This is the very view Médaille presents, where faith and reason may investigate the world differently (and tell their unique stories about it) in distinct, yet complementary ways, while working together. Storck, meanwhile, is suspicious of what is not considered rational, and constantly seeks ways to attribute “reasonability” to anything he wishes to describe as meaningful or important (see the above example of the empty tomb). He, therefore, sees the non-rational as being at odds with reason, something to be overcome and cast aside, like superstition or delusion, in the search for truth (which he sees as Catholicism).

This distinction between faith and reason arises, as both recognize, with the scholasticism of the Middle Ages. Médaille sees the scholastic distinction between faith and reason as a kind of “intellectual divorce,” separating reason from faith and weakening both (for reason depends on the story one tells about the world, in order to have anything of value to teach us). Storck, meanwhile, sees this separation as a good thing, as a process of “purifying” reason and discarding the unwanted “leftovers” of irrationality. (It is interesting to note how much the two actually agree on in their respective understandings of scholasticism and its effect on human thought, and how much the two also differ, as a result of the stories each one has underlying his respective understanding).

Finally, this discussion of faith and reason, with fewer and fewer mentions of Socrates or Euthyphro by the time we reach its conclusion, replaced with a discussion on the nature and merits of rational thinking, seems at first to move far beyond the constraints of Plato’s original dialogue. Yet when Médaille observes, near the end, that until the philosopher came along, no religious person doubted the need to

2. Anton TAMARUT, “The Relation of Faith and Reason in Light of the Human Being’s Createdness in the Image of God,” *Theological Review*, 84 (2014), pp. 245- 261 (at p. 245).

pray or sacrifice, we see that this exchange of letters has not gone off-topic, after all. Médaille's suggestion that philosophy, pulled apart from faith and used to question it, alienates humankind from its religious stories with its questions, and therefore is not capable of analyzing religious stories or experiences (pp. 128-129).

Perhaps it is appropriate, then, that I find myself personally able to resolve this question in a non-rational way, taking a cue from Socrates himself and admitting my own ignorance. Socrates claims to know nothing ("I neither know nor think that I know," Plato's *Apology*, 21d), and so claims to be open to any and all possible truths. Having met (or at least read the works of) many wise people in my life, not all of whom were compelled to accept Storck's, Médaille's, or my own Catholicism, it is not obvious to me that reason leads inevitably to Catholicism, or that Catholicism is somehow the most rational faith (indeed, its mysteries, including the Virgin Birth, the Resurrection, the Ascension, and transubstantiation, would suggest otherwise).

It was noted above that Storck uses the observation that not all people will find the same stories "good or interesting" (or "bad and boring," p. 67) in order to suggest that story alone is not enough; there must be something more truthful or substantial underlying a particular set of stories, beliefs, or ideas. Yet, again, there are many reasonable people in the world who do *not* find the story of Christianity appealing or convincing; perhaps our stories really *are* the most important determining factor for what we believe (or are willing to believe).³

We all have our stories, and perhaps we really cannot reason one another into agreement with our own point of view (even of what *seems* so obvious to us), so long as we all have different ideas of what counts as "rational," "realistic," or "true." Perhaps respecting that, and putting those differences aside, compassion, interest and understanding are the best course of action. In which case, the rational approach must make way for something more important.

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THÉOLOGIE

Kumiko TAKEUCHI, **Death and Divine Judgment in Ecclesiastes** (Bulletin for Biblical Research Supplement, 26). University Park PA, Eisenbrauns, 2019, 15,2 × 22,8 cm, xv-238 p., ISBN 978-1-57506-991-3.

Ce livre, qui comprend sept chapitres, une trop brève conclusion de deux pages, une bibliographie (p. 199-222) et trois index – auteurs, références bibliques et sources anciennes – (p. 223-238), est le fruit d'une thèse de doctorat présentée à l'Université

3. Michael Ruse's *A Meaning to Life* (Philosophy in Action), Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2019, reflects at length on his present lack of religious belief, contrasted with his Quaker upbringing and his subsequent studies of Christianity and Buddhism.