Sylvie Avakian, *'Being Towards Death.' Heidegger and the Orthodox Theology of the East*, Theologische Bibliothek Töpelmann, 191, Berlin-Boston: Walter de Gruyter 2021, 340 p., ISBN: 978-3-11-070533-1

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Heidegger stands as a profoundly intricate philosopher and, after Kant, as one of the most important thinkers of modern philosophy. Although it may seem trivial at first glance, his thought has been brought into dialogue with a range of unexpected religious traditions, such as Japanese Buddhism or, broadly, Asian religiosity. Some of these comparisons may initially seem rather strange and unexpected, yet they have often proved surprisingly fruitful. In any case, Heidegger remains a profoundly spiritual thinker – a point that is difficult to deny – and for that very reason, placing his work alongside various spiritual traditions appears not only legitimate but meaningful.

From the perspective of both method and subject matter, philosophy and theology exhibit several things in common. Neither can be abolished or reduced to natural sciences, since both arise from the human being's inner "struggle" with *being* or with God, and thus remain an essential, fragmentary, and ongoing search for *reality*. Moreover, neither discipline possesses a direct object of inquiry, since neither *being* nor God can be scrutinized *as such*; consequently both must acknowledge their own inadequacy in attaining absolute or certain knowledge. That being said, comparisons between philosophical and religious systems ought to be undertaken since in many respects they prove complementary and mutually instructive.

Sylvie Avakian's study (a *Habilitationsschrift* to the Faculty of Protestant Theology at the University of Tübingen) undertakes precisely such a project by placing Heidegger in dialogue with the early Church Fathers and, in particular, with Nikolai Berdyaev, one of the most significant Orthodox thinkers of the modern period. The book unfolds in five chapters: (1) Openness to the Mystery; (2) Human Reality - Worldliness and Transcendence; (3) The Human Spirit and the Divine; (4) Christianity as Authenticity; and (5) Temporality and Eternity.

Despite certain stylistic differences, Heidegger and Berdyaev share a common horizon of concerns drawing on Greek philosophy, early

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Christian thought, as well as on figures such as Eckhart, Böhme, and Schelling. Avakian nevertheless stresses that both thinkers are not open in regard to the origins and sources of their discourses. Despite their shared sources and further affinities she identifies, both thinkers converge in their critique of "the highly technical-objectified world of modernity" (p.13), i.e. the dominance of "technological" rationality and the attendant reduction of reason to instrumental calculation (p. 88-89). While the analytic of *Dasein* does not explicitly address technology, it prepares the ground for Heidegger's later critique of modern technological rationality, especially his distinction between calculative and meditative thinking. Avakian argues, however, that this analysis requires correlation with a theological anthropology, and it is precisely at this juncture that she locates a particularly fruitful basis for comparison with Berdyaev. At the same time, she finds Heidegger as less persuasive or "too optimistically affirmative of technology" (p. 104), in contrast to Berdyaev, who argues that technology and mechanizing life entrap humanity in artificial worlds and hollow relationships (esp. pp. 103-104).

On this account, technology is not merely an instrument for the domination of nature but an expression of the will to power exercised over the human person. As Avakian observes, "technology might therefore end up not merely allowing the human to control nature, but also allowing the human to have control and power over his/her fellow human being, namely power over people's life" (p. 104). Berdyaev correspondingly recognizes that Christian theology bears the responsibility of seeking ways "to prevent the spirit from becoming a tool used for the purposes of technical organizations" (*ibidem*). In other words, Christianity carries a double burden: it has, in part, contributed to the technicalization of humanity, yet it is also called to safeguard the spirit from being reduced to a mere instrument. These reflections appear all the more urgent today amid the rapid and often chaotic rise of artificial intelligence, reinforcing Berdyaev's concern that humanity risks becoming subordinate to technology.

Avakian stresses that, for Berdyaev, true theology is mystical and apophatic, since God is not objectifiable, and she suggests that Eastern apophaticism can be linked to the incomprehensible nature of *being* as such. Drawing on Heidegger's interpretation of ἀλήθεια as unconcealment, she correlates it with the Eastern apophatic tradition. According to Avakian, for Heidegger, the "human being remains incapable of any knowledge of its essence, maintaining that the true path is a mystical path" (p. 36). She convincingly aligns Heidegger's critique of metaphysics with Orthodox

apophaticism, insofar as conceptual thought reveals its limits in front of God and *being*.

In turn, Berdyaev's anthropology lives the sciences no opportunity to grasp the essence of human being. For him 'philosophical anthropology' is the principal philosophical discipline "as it studies the human being through and with the human being" (p. 7). Avakian rightly emphasizes that Berdyaev rejected patristic anthropology as being more related with Greek intellectualism rather than to God (p. 19, f. 49). Consequently, Christianity lacks a genuine anthropological revelation, since any true anthropology is necessarily Christological (p. 158).[1] Berdyaev also correctly observes that "the anthropological element was absent in the dogmas of the first Ecumenical Councils and even in the theology of the Fathers." Avakian synthesizes this position by arguing that for Berdyaev the incarnation demonstrates that the "self-consciousness of Christ is inseparable from the self-consciousness of the human being", making the revelation of Christ an *anthropological revelation* since human nature mirrors the nature of Christ (pp. 220, 250).[2] Conversely, errors in theology concerning the nature of God underscore the need for apophaticism rather than anthropomorphism.

The main concern of the book is death, or *being towards death* (*Sein zum Tode*), which Avakian identifies as at the "core and true nature of the Christian faith" (p. 20). Death is understood in relationship with *care* and *the other*, as well as to Berdyaev's "being towards freedom". Both "being towards death" and Berdyaev's "spiritual freedom" imply an openness to the other (whether God or fellow human beings). Death of humans and the death of God together render Christianity as an authentic religion (p. 203-248), with a particular emphasis on creation, incarnation and resurrection. Avakian brings together Heidegger's notion of *anticipatory*

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[1] A related line of thought appears in the work of another Orthodox theologian, André Scrima, who argues that the incarnate Logos should not be understood solely in terms of Christ's suffering on the Cross, but also in terms of the very specificity of humanity (André Scrima, *Apophatic Anthropology*. *An English Translation*, trans. Octavian Gabor, New Jersey: Gorgias Press, 2016; see also Florin Calian, review of *Apophatic Anthropology*, by André Scrima, *Review of Ecumenical Studies* 12, no. 3, https://doi.org/10.2478/ress-2020-0039).

[2] In this regard, one may also consult the insightful study by Christoph Schwöbel (1955-2021) – to whom Avakian extends a word of thanks, (p. VII) – which offers a complementary perspective on the themes of revelation in Christianity ("The Concept of Revelation in Christianity", in Georges Tamer (ed.), *The Concept of Revelation in Judaism, Christianity and Islam*, Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2020; see also Florin Calian, review of *The Concept of Revelation in Judaism, Christianity and Islam* by Georges Tamer [ed.], *Review of Ecumenical Studies* 17, no. 2, https://doi.org/10.2478/ress-2025-0025).

resoluteness, "as the experience of one's anticipation and acceptance of one's own death, that brings one into authentic existence" (p. 205) with Berdyaev's *spiritual development*, "which is the activity and the responsibility of the inner self and the free and creative nature of one's spirit" (*ibidem*). While for Heidegger, *care* and *authenticity* are inseparable from "death", for Berdyaev encountering one's own death without fear or anxiety entails experiencing eternity (p. 254-5).

In conclusion, the book's title, *Being towards Death*, reflects well the conceptual dialogue between the two authors. For Avakian, Heidegger's *being towards death* and Berdyaev's *spiritual freedom* converge: in a sense, *being towards death* can be understood as *being towards freedom*. Given Christianity is a religion fundamentally shaped by *the death of God* as its core, Heidegger's reflections on *death* resonate naturally with the spirituality of the Cross. Although Heidegger's *being towards death* primarily addresses human finitude, Avakian's linking with Christianity (a religion centred, through other things, on death) is particularly compelling.

This ambitious book is best read alongside works such as *Heidegger and Theology* by Judith Wolfe,[3] or *The Early Heidegger and Medieval Philosophy* by Sean McGrath,[4] which situate Heidegger within theological and historical contexts. In this way, Christianity may be illuminated by Heidegger's thought while his works (especially *Sein und Zeit*) can, in turn, be better understood through Christian theology. It is therefore not accidental that Heidegger's *Habilitationsschrift* focused on Duns Scotus. Avakian goes further by turning toward Eastern Christianity, demonstrating a deep structural congruence between Heidegger and Eastern Christian theology, a correlation that has received relatively little attention so far. I take her contribution primarily as a comparative study of shared structural patterns rather than as a genealogy of Heidegger's thinking, as in McGrath's study. Overall, the book offers valuable insights for theologians and scholars working at the intersection of philosophy and Eastern Orthodox theology.

[3] Judith Wolfe, *Heidegger and Theology* (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2014).
[4] Sean McGrath, *The Early Heidegger and Medieval Philosophy* (Washington D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 2013).