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*Converts to the Real: Catholicism and the Making of Continental Philosophy.* Edward Baring. Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 2019. Pp. 493.

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How does an intellectual movement begin to take shape, to have socially and culturally determined effects? At its root, this is the question that motivates Edward Baring's *Converts to the Real: Catholicism and the Making of Continental Philosophy*. Baring's principal concern is to identify the structural forces that helped pave the way for the development and spread of phenomenological and existentialist thought within Continental Europe in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. These philosophical movements now generally fall under the titular continental philosophy, a tradition that stands in contrast to its Anglo-American counterpart analytical philosophy. Baring's thesis is that the spread of continental philosophy was aided by a host of Catholic institutions and networks. It was, Baring shows, this Catholic pan-European foundation that helps account for the propagation of Continental thought.

Baring's study is twined, telling two core narratives. His book begins by tracing the intellectual tensions that arose in late nineteenth century Catholic thought. This account finds its historical point of origin in 1879, when Pope Leo XIII published his *Aeterni Patris*. Leo's encyclical made paramount the theology of Thomas Aquinas as a means for Catholics to think through the tensions of modernity. Two effects emerged from this Thomistic imperative. One structural, the other philosophical. In the first, there was the construction of numerous universities across Europe whose intent it was to advance the viewpoint established by *Aeterni Patris*. Second, a number of academic journals were established. These journals, such as *Civiltà Cattolica*, *Divus Thomas*, and *Revue Néo-*

*Scholastique*, sought to clarify and consider Thomistic principles. The outcome of these two structural effects, Baring demonstrates, was a pan-Continental engagement with Thomistic themes. But – and important to Baring’s thesis – as Thomism spread it was put into conversation with emerging schools of philosophy like phenomenology. One aim of this engagement was to determine the coherency of Thomistic principles in relation to these modern philosophies. It is this later confrontation that Baring argues spurred the development of continental thought throughout Europe.

The second narrative that frames Baring’s study is his intent to explain what it was that made phenomenology appealing to some Catholic thinkers. A key element of this account hinges on the realism/idealism debate. This debate, simply stated, centred around the knowability of the external world. For the idealists, the world was known via conceptually identifiable mental structures that imposed limitations on our capacity to have certain knowledge about the external world. For the realists, there was a mind-independent and knowable external world. Many Catholic thinkers directed their critical gaze against the idealists who they saw as limiting knowledge to a mere solipsistic subjectivity. Underlying this critique was an angst felt amongst followers of Aquinas. True to their Thomistic pedigree these thinkers argued for the knowability of the external world, a knowability from which one could infer true and certain theological principles. However, the simple assertion of these

Thomistic doctrines was not a sufficient critique; a response to the idealists that was grounded in modern philosophy was required. It was in the thought of Edmund Husserl that a reply was identified. In his *Logical Investigations* (1900), Husserl developed the foundation of what would become the phenomenological project. In this text Husserl sought to demonstrate the capacity of logical formulations to provide knowledge about the world via their

experiential origin. To do this he developed a philosophical project centred on the intuitional activity of consciousness – a theory linked to his teacher, the former Catholic priest Franz Brentano. A guiding presupposition to this work was the claim that the mind’s activity produced knowledge about an independent world. Hence, for neo-scholastics like August Messer and Joseph Geysler, Husserl’s claims were thought amenable to a neo-scholastic project. For them, Husserl’s analysis, because of the similar starting points to Thomas’s, could be employed against the idealists. Husserl, in short, was celebrated and his ideas were circulated throughout Catholic institutions and journals around Europe.

However, these acclamations came to a halt with the 1913 publication of Husserl’s *Ideas*. In this text, Husserl abandoned a number of the world-independent claims that anchored his previous work. Instead, in *Ideas*, the conscious-ego as a self-contained system was advocated for. In short, Husserl’s analysis began to look more like the idealists that Catholic thinkers aimed their criticism against. Baring, though, emphasizes an important point here: although Husserl was abandoned by many Catholic thinkers as a result of the publication of his *Ideas* text, his phenomenological assertions – whether critiqued or celebrated – had become anchored within Catholic circles. That is, the engagement with phenomenology had become institutionalized. A factor that helps explain why later Catholic thinkers, like Karol Wojtyła, advanced their own phenomenological theories despite the problems that arose from Husserl’s *Ideas*.

Husserl’s thought, Baring shows, had a dual effect: some Catholics viewed it positively, as it linked modern thought to scholastic philosophy; however, it also had the opposite effect, moving other philosophers beyond religion. Martin Heidegger was a thinker who reflects both of these trends. Building upon his habilitation on Duns Scotus, the early Heidegger saw in Husserl’s

thought a means by which to think through key problems of the “Subtle Doctor” via modern solutions. As his thought matured, though, Heidegger questioned the neo-scholastic assumption that philosophy could provide a path to God or, indeed, to “Truth” itself. Similarly, Baring shows that in the thought of Max Scheler a sort of vitalistic faith was opened up by Husserlian claims. Scheler built his analysis on an intuitionism that, via an appeal to Augustine over Aquinas, wed phenomenology to an intense examination of religious experience. Claims that would continue to orient Scheler’s thought even after he distanced himself from the Catholic Church.

Baring’s premise that the success of phenomenology is best understood as a response to a number of Catholic inspired tensions is a claim that he equally applies to the emergence of existentialism. He traces the intellectual development of Thomistic inspired thinkers like Jacques Maritain, Gabriel Marcel, and Etienne Gilson by contrasting and thinking through their confrontation with the ideas of Soren Kierkegaard, Friedrich Nietzsche, and Jean-Paul Sartre. In addition, Baring discusses numerous lesser known figures, such as Arnaud Dandieu, Jean Daniélou, and Leo Van Breda – especially Van Breda’s instrumental role in establishing the Husserl Archives at Leuven. In each sketch, Baring fruitfully weaves together a host of intellectual, religious, and historical factors that helped contribute to the successes and failures of each thinker and how it is those elements helped propel what came to be known as Continental philosophy. However, it is in Baring’s final depiction of Paul Ricouer and Maurice Merleau-Ponty that the thesis of his analysis is best evidenced, as in both Ricouer and Merleau-Ponty the results of the existentialist and phenomenological links to a Catholic foundation become most obvious. For both thinkers there was an emphasis on one’s embodied relation to the world. An embodied connection that bracketed the objective sciences while also challenging those

thinkers wed to an idealist epistemology. In Merleau-Ponty's project, itself initially grounded in the thought of Gabriel Marcel, the body served as an experiential – indeed incarnational – hinge upon which certain epistemic claims might be made. While for Ricouer, also a thinker influenced by the existentialism of Marcel, symbols acted as concrete ciphers by which to image and thus engage the transcendent. In both thinkers lay an appeal to philosophers bound to and emergent from the Catholic structural order whose lineage Baring traces back to the neo-scholastic resurgence instigated by Pope Leo XIII.

Baring ends his text by discussing more recent developments in Continental thought. He shows how Thomism continues to impact Continental philosophers like Jean-Luc Marion whose *God beyond Being* (1980) used Gilson as a foil, criticizing him “for asserting the primacy of being over the good” thus impeding a “true understanding of God” (347). Moreover, he underscores how Christian themes, in more broad terms, continue to orient Continental thinkers like Slavoj Žižek, Alain Badiou, and John Caputo.

Finally, it is noteworthy that a key scholarly tension that Baring's text is situated against is the position advocated for by Dominique Janicaud. In his *Le tournant théologique de la phénoménologie française* (1991), Janicaud argues that phenomenologists in particular, and Continental philosophers in general, had abandoned their atheistic or agnostic roots by taking an unproductive turn to theological concerns. And, to be sure, that claim is not outright negated by Baring's text. However, Baring does establish firm evidentiary grounds for the position that Continental thought owes its development to Catholic motivations – a position that problematizes Janicaud's basic “turn to theology” thesis. Baring's text, therefore, is vital for those trying to better understand the relationship between Christianity and Continental

philosophy. It is a text that will no doubt emerge as a classic in the field, as it is not only excellently detailed and concise in its historical and philosophical accounts, but is also a pleasure to read.