

2002

Blaga's Legacy in America - Giving Blaga a Legacy in America

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Recommended Citation

"Blaga's Legacy in America - Giving Blaga a Legacy in America." In *East-West Cultural Passage: Journal of the "C. Peter Magrath" Research Center for Cross-Cultural Studies* no. 1, 2002, 7-16.

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BLAGA'S LEGACY IN AMERICA – GIVING BLAGA A LEGACY IN AMERICA

INTRODUCTION

I would like to begin by thanking Universitatea Lucian Blaga and the Fulbright Commission for inviting me to participate in this conference again this year. It is both a privilege and a pleasure. This I say not merely because of the fact that your university is named after one of my favourite philosophers, but because of the respect and partiality that I have for your school. During last year's conference, I witnessed what a vibrant university you have; that you have both serious professors and a serious student body. I observed that you are both open-minded and critical. I observed that you love both to work, and also to play. Last year's conference combined elements of both: the sublime pleasure of academic stimulation mixed with good company and the beauty of one of Transylvania's leading cities. I anticipate that this year's conference will do the same.

I have been invited to present a text related to the theme "Blaga's Legacy". Last year I titled my presentation, "The Perception of Blaga in America – the Need of a Perception of Blaga in America".¹ This year I would like to title my presentation "Blaga's Legacy in America– Giving Blaga a Legacy in America". The reason for this will be obvious to those few who remember last year's presentation. While the name Lucian Blaga is, without exaggeration, a household word in Romania, it is totally unknown in the United States. Last year I briefly discussed some of the reasons why Blaga is unknown in the U.S., and what strategies might be successful in making him known in the U.S. I argued that Blaga's philosophy is a better vehicle for reaching the American audience than is his poetry, because Americans as a people are a more analytically oriented than aesthetically oriented. I stated that for Blaga's philosophy to become known and appreciated in the U.S. two things must happen. First, Blaga's philosophy must be translated into GOOD English and published by an American or British publishing house. Second, studies and articles in English must be published demonstrating the value of Blaga's philosophy to contemporary issues.

It is this second important strategy that I would like to further develop today. Blaga's philosophy was a masterpiece when it was written fifty years ago. Today there are parts of it that have, perhaps, missed their chance to bask in the limelight – it is probable that their moment has already passed. But to me it is evident that Blaga's philosophy has elements that are still fresh and applicable and which can make significant contributions to contemporary philosophical discussions. A very few Romanian scholars have attempted to illustrate this fact in articles published in English. For example, Angela Botez has published several articles showing that Blaga has valuable contributions to make in the areas of philosophy of science and postmodernism.² Virgil Nemoianu has discussed aspects of Blaga's literary philosophy in his book A Theory of the Secondary.³ Others have professed that Blaga could make significant contributions to their specific fields of expertise – for example, Mircea Borcila has stated that Blaga's philosophy can make an indispensable contribution to the field of

¹ Last year's presentation will be published by the university press of Universitatea Lucian Blaga, along with other texts presented at the same conference.

² See the following articles: "Lucian Blaga and the Complementary Spiritual Paradigm of the 20th Century." In Revue Roumaine de Philosophie et Logique 37 (1993): 51-55. "Comparativist and Valuational Reflections on Blaga's Philosophy." In Revue Roumaine de Philosophie et Logique 40 (1996): 153-162. "The Postmodern Antirepresentationalism (Polanyi, Blaga, Rorty)." In Revue Roumaine de Philosophie et Logique 41 (1997): 59-70. Unfortunately, these articles were published in a French-language journal that is not widely read by English philosophers.

³ Nemoianu, Virgil. A Theory of the Secondary. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1989. This work is all the more significant because it was published by a major academic press in America.

semiotics.⁴ If each Romanian expert who appreciates Blaga's work would publish at least one article showing the contemporary value of Blaga's philosophy in his or her own sphere of expertise, it would be a great step forward in giving Blaga a legacy in America. Only through this strategy will America's attention be drawn to Lucian Blaga. Every one of you could publish at least one article showing the relevance of Blaga to contemporary debates in your respective fields of study. In a very real way, Blaga's legacy is in YOUR hands.

EXAMPLE: THE ISSUE OF RELIGIOUS DIVERSITY

My own areas of specialization are philosophy of religion and theory of knowledge. Blaga wrote quite a lot on both of these subjects, and many things that Blaga wrote on other subjects are also applicable to these domains. I would like to give you an example of how Blaga's philosophy can make a very significant contribution to a contemporary discussion in the field of philosophy of religion. This I will do by applying specific aspects of Blaga's theory of knowledge as developed in his book Cunoasterea Luciferica (Luciferic Cognition)⁵ to the contemporary discussion of the issue of religious diversity.

The question of the origin and valuation of the immense degree of religious diversity found throughout the world has long been of interest to philosophers and theologians. In the Christian theological tradition, interpretations have ranged from condemning all non-Isaac⁶ religions as Satanically inspired⁷, to viewing all non-Christian religions as partial vessels of God's grace⁸. The issue involves many difficult questions. For example, thinkers wrestle with the question of why belief in something that transcends experience or understanding is found in almost all peoples; why this belief is not homogenous, but rather exhibits immense diversity of detail; and whether this diversity of detail reveals a problem in human cognitive ability which needs to be resolved, or is a reflection of some excellence which should be appreciated. The issue also has very important practical implications: if religious diversity is demon-inspired, then religious diversity is an undesirable situation, and cooperation between religions is a mistake. If, on the other hand, religious diversity is a result of God's own hand, not only is it desirable, but also opposing it is futile. Middle positions also exist, which encourage inter-religious dialogue and appreciation while not enshrining religious diversity and disagreement in the cathedral of Divine providence.

JOHN HICK

One of the most significant advocates of a middle position on the issue of religious diversity is the British philosopher of religion John Hick. Hick has taught philosophy at well-known universities in the United States and in Great Britain, and is the author of numerous books and articles. He has published four books dealing specifically with these issues: God and the Universe of Faiths⁹, published in 1973; God Has Many Names¹⁰, published in 1982;

⁴ Private conversation with Dr. Mircea Borcila at the Faculty of Letters, Universitatea Babeş-Bolyai, March 2002.

⁵ Lucian Blaga, Cunoasterea Luciferica. Sibiu: Tiparul Inst. de Arte Grafice "Dacia Traiana", 1933. I have intentionally translated the title "Luciferic Cognition" rather than "Luciferic Knowledge" because in my opinion the book deals with the action of knowing much more than the product of knowing.

⁶ By non-Isaac religions I mean all religions outside of Judaism and Christianity. I do not say non-Abrahamic, because there are Christian theologians who view Islam as Satanically inspired.

⁷ For a contemporary theological defense of this position, see James Boreland, "Religious Exclusivism", in Michael Peterson, William Hasker, Bruce Reichenback, and David Basinger, Philosophy of Religions: Selected Readings, pp.495-502.

⁸ For a contemporary theological defense of this position, see Karl Rahner, "Religious Inclusivism", in Peterson et al, pp.502-513.

⁹ John Hick, God and the Universe of Faiths: Essays in the Philosophy of Religion. London: Macmillan Press, 1973.

¹⁰ John Hick, God Has Many Names. Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1982.

Problems of Religious Pluralism¹¹, published in 1985; and An Interpretation of Religion: Human Responses to the Transcendent¹², published in 1989.

Hick's solution to the problem of religious diversity hinges on an adaptation of neo-Kantian epistemology. According to Kant, the knowing subject does not have direct access to or knowledge of things in themselves, called by Kant noumena. What the subject experiences are called by Kant phenomena. Phenomena are the experiences that the noumena cause in the person experiencing them. Phenomenal experiences are subjective, being constructs composed of empirical inputs as processed by the faculty of human understanding.

How the subject experiences a particular object depends on the natural categories of the understanding and on the circumstances of the subject and the experience. The categories of the understanding, according to Kant, are universal: they are the same in all people. On the other hand, the circumstances in which the subject experiences the object can vary considerably. This accounts for the great diversity of experiences which an object can cause in different subjects or in the same subject at different times.

Kant himself did not apply this aspect of his epistemology to religion, because he was convinced that God cannot be an object of experience. However, Hick observes that many people do in fact claim to have experiences of God. He affirms that this large body of evidence should not be simply ignored. Therefore Hick considers himself justified in applying Kant's epistemology to claimed experiences of God.

Although Kant cannot, according to his own theory, empirically prove that the noumenal object exists, because he does not have direct access to any thing-in-itself, he asserts that one is justified in positing the existence of the noumenal in order to explain the existence of the phenomenal. Hick uses a very similar strategy in his philosophy of religion. He posits the existence of a transcendent reality, God. This God cannot be experienced directly, since it is transcendent, since it is noumenal. But it can be experienced as a phenomenon. These phenomenal experiences of the transcendent are what are commonly called 'religious experiences'. They are the experiences caused in the subject by the noumenal object, which experiences are constructs composed of inputs which are processed by the faculty of human understanding according to its categories and the circumstances in which the experience takes place.

This epistemological framework provides Hick with a means of answering various questions relating to religious diversity, such as those mentioned above. If there exists a transcendent being, and if this being is available to human experience, then we should expect to see many experiences of this being occurring throughout the world. Furthermore, if these experiences exist throughout the world, then they will necessarily occur in a variety of different contexts. If our knowledge of this being is constructed from these experiences and the categories of the understanding plus other circumstantial factors, as in the Kantian epistemology, then we should expect to see beliefs about the transcendent being which reflect many different points of view. These points of view, or 'interpretations of the transcendent', to use one of Hick's phrases, should be expected to contain both similarities and differences, as a result of the similarities and differences of the contexts in which the experiences have taken place.

LUCIAN BLAGA

A notable deficiency in Hick's proposal is a significant lack of details. Hick has written much arguing for the benefits and advantages of this theory. He has not, however, further developed *the theory of knowledge* which is the heart of his proposal. As it appears in

¹¹ John Hick, Problems of Religious Pluralism. London: Macmillan Press, 1985.

¹² John Hick, An Interpretation of Religion: Human Responses to the Transcendent. London: Macmillan Press, 1989.

the writings of Hick, Kant's theory of knowledge is quite sparse. Here we find our chance to introduce Lucian Blaga. Blaga has further developed Kant's theory of knowledge in a way that is very applicable to the issue of religious diversity.

It is clear that Blaga is in many ways himself a neo-kantian.¹³ The distinction between objects as they are in themselves, and objects as they are known, is retained in Blaga's philosophy, as is the constructivist element wherein empirical data is known through the medium of concepts of the understanding. As in Kant, objects are not known directly, but rather are known through the mediation of experiences and ideas superimposed upon these experiences.

In his book Cunoasterea luciferica, Blaga details a method of resolving problems, which method is likewise named "cunoasterea luciferica" (Luciferic cognition). Cunoasterea luciferica is a method for deepening understanding of paradoxical problems of inquiry,¹⁴ rather than a method of accumulating new facts. The problem of religious diversity, as it is found in the work of Hick, is a problem of the type which is well suited to the method of cunoasterea luciferica, because it involves an attempt to reconcile at least two paradoxical facts: the widespread existence of experiences of a transcendent being, and the puzzling diversity of the forms or interpretations of these experiences.

According to Blaga, cunoasterea luciferica proceeds according to the following steps: it begins with empirical data (called "fanic material"), which can be sensory, conceptual, or imaginary.¹⁵ Next, the problem to be resolved is "posed," (or in other words, "the mystery is opened")¹⁶, when an attempt is made to deepen the understanding of the fanic material and it is discovered that the problem also has a "cryptic" aspect, an aspect which is hidden from investigation.¹⁷ The attempt to understand the cryptic is guided by a "theory idea", a well-established principle that guides the researcher in his interpretation of the cryptic, and which also supports his conclusion in favor of this interpretation.¹⁸ With the help of this theory idea, the researcher proposes a "theoretical construction" which explains the relation between the fanic material and the theory idea, thus resolving the problem (or "revealing the mystery").¹⁹ The theoretical construction is a postulate which eliminates or diminishes the interior tension between the fanic material and the theory idea,²⁰ yielding a more profound understanding of the problem and the relationship between the fanic and the theory idea. This interior tension is a feeling of disaccord between the fanic and the theory idea which is relieved when the relationship is explained with the help of the theoretical construction plus other "theoretical accessories".²¹

This epistemological elaboration can be used to gain further understanding of Hick's solution to the issue of religious diversity. The fanic material of this problem would be the vast body of religious experiences. The problem posed, or the mysteries opened, would be those mentioned already: why belief in a transcendent being is found in almost all peoples

¹³ Blaga might not be happy with this assertion. He roundly criticizes Kant in many passages. Nonetheless, the influence is undeniable (see, for example, the description of the distinction between cunoasterea luciferica and cunoasterea paradisiaca on p. 320 of Cunoasterea luciferică, în Opere 8, București: Editura Minerva, 1983). Blaga also praises Kant when he deems it appropriate. Blaga discusses some of the differences and commonalities between his philosophy and that of Kant in the chapter "Eficiente" in his book Despre constiinta filosofica.

¹⁴ *ibid*, 316-318, 349.

¹⁵ *ibid*, 320, 332.

¹⁶ *ibid*, 321, 327, 363.

¹⁷ *ibid*, 320, 332. Blaga states that the distinction between the fanic and the cryptic is not the phenomena-noumena distinction found in Kant, *ibid* 387.

¹⁸ *ibid*, 334, 369, 378.

¹⁹ *ibid*, 339, 366.

²⁰ Called "tensiunea interioara", *ibid*, 337.

²¹ *ibid*, 342.

around the world, why there exists such a large diversity of interpretations of what this transcendent being is, and whether religious diversity is something to be appreciated or a problem to be overcome. The theory idea which guides the solution of this issue would be Blaga's idea of transcendent censorship. Guided by this idea, a possible theoretical construction would be the theory that knowledge of the transcendent is necessarily always a creative attempt to disclose that which cannot be known in its own essence. This theory has an interior tension between the fanic (the wealth of religious experiences) and the theory idea (transcendent censorship), namely, if knowledge of the transcendent is 'censored', how can religious experience take place? The theoretical accessories which serve to attenuate this tension are Blaga's ideas on the destiny of humankind as creators and the important role played in this destiny by the striving of humanity to disclose the mysteries of existence.

Through the use of Blaga's method it is seen that religious experiences are responses to a single reality, just as in the solution suggested by Hick. The answer to the question, "why is belief in a transcendent being found in almost all peoples around the world," would be that all people are responding to the same transcendent reality, and that their responses to this reality all reflect the same human destiny to strive to understand the mysteries of existence. The answer to the question, "why is there such a large diversity of interpretations of the transcendent," would be that this diversity is a result of the human striving to discover the transcendent within different historical and cultural contexts. The answer to the question of whether religious diversity is something to be appreciated or a problem to be overcome would be that religious diversity should be appreciated as a demonstration of the creative genius of humankind, but should not be considered as a final state of successful revelation of mystery, but rather should be continually subjected to further creative analysis and development in order to refine and improve religious beliefs and practices.

CONCLUSION

Through this brief sketch of one contemporary application of Blaga's philosophy I hope to have demonstrated that the window of opportunity has not closed on Lucian Blaga. I believe that there are many other contemporary applications of Blaga's philosophy. All that is needed is for those who appreciate Blaga's creative genius to go out and show the rest of the world that Romania has a great thinker who has something valuable to contribute to their own disciplines.