

Religion & Philosophy in Germany, 1918-1933, an interdisciplinary symposium

November 2-3, 2017

Profs. Thomas Pfau & Judith Wolfe, co-conveners

Overview: This is to be a focused, cross-disciplinary conversation about the struggles of German philosophy and theology to regain their bearings during the decade and a half following the end of WW I – a war of which major philosophers and theologians had initially been strongly supportive, yet whose disastrous course left both German culture and its institutions in disarray. During the decade and a half following (1918 – 1933), the political and legal foundations of the Weimar Republic proved too fragile to furnish German society with the intellectual capital and ethical clarity needed to move beyond the trauma of WWI and the Treaty of Versailles. While literary modernism and abstract expressionism tended to highlight the dystopic elements of the era, German philosophy and theology in particular felt obligated to envision a way forward. This impetus, together with their frustration with the seemingly bankrupt outlook and modes of enquiry of the 19th century, led both fields to a fitful but brilliant surge of activity, as well as to a remarkable fluidity as regards shifting intra- and inter-disciplinary allegiances.

Intellectual Rationale: The aim of the symposium is to examine how theology and philosophy, the two disciplines preeminently expected to delineate a viable social and ethical framework for modern life, struggle to rebuild after the collapse of political, legal, and cultural institutions in 1918. The attempt to put German society on a more trustworthy institutional and intellectual footing is greatly complicated by the fact that the two disciplines in question had corrupted themselves in the lead-up to WW I, when many of their eminent representatives spoke out in vigorous support of imperial Germany's bellicose foreign policy – a support motivated not by personal preference but by dominant convictions and trajectories of the academic fields. Theology and Philosophy during the Weimar era thus offer a test-case for the perils confronting higher learning at a time when a nation's institutions have to confront their complicity in misguided and, in their outcome, disastrous policies.

Representative trends within philosophy and theology during the period 1918 to 1933 form the starting point for our discussion: by 1918, the influence of neo-Kantianism within philosophy is fading and being displaced by the growing role of phenomenology. As part of this shift, thinkers like Husserl, Stein, Heidegger, Jaspers, Arendt, and Scheler acknowledge the centrality of ancient and pre-modern thought (Platonic, Augustinian, Scholastic) for formulating the challenges of philosophy in their time. The resulting expansion of philosophical inquiry from the "truth of correctness to the truth of disclosure" (Husserl) causes its lines of inquiry to intersect, converge, or collide with theological inquiry, which is also undergoing major changes. For here, too, the cataclysm of WW I and an examination of the political and intellectual hubris that led to it brings about a fundamental self-examination of theology's disciplinary aims, its relevant sources

(both modern and pre-modern), as well as its entanglements with modern, liberal-secular society. Within the fields of Protestant and Catholic theology, and also in the resurgent field of Jewish philosophical theology, the post-WW I era is marked by a concerted effort to overcome the affective and historicist frameworks that had shaped theology during what is often called the long 19th century (1789-1918).