

## Philosophy in Review



# Edward Baring, "Converts to the Real: Catholicism and the Making of Continental Philosophy."

Kristof Vanhoutte

Volume 41, Number 1, February 2021

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1076205ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/1076205ar>

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

University of Victoria

ISSN

1206-5269 (print)

1920-8936 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this review

Vanhoutte, K. (2021). Review of [Edward Baring, "Converts to the Real: Catholicism and the Making of Continental Philosophy."]. *Philosophy in Review*, 41(1), 1–3. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1076205ar>

Copyright © Kristof Vanhoutte, 2021



This document is protected by copyright law. Use of the services of Érudit (including reproduction) is subject to its terms and conditions, which can be viewed online.

<https://apropos.erudit.org/en/users/policy-on-use/>

érudit

This article is disseminated and preserved by Érudit.

Érudit is a non-profit inter-university consortium of the Université de Montréal, Université Laval, and the Université du Québec à Montréal. Its mission is to promote and disseminate research.

<https://www.erudit.org/en/>

**Edward Baring.** *Converts to the Real: Catholicism and the Making of Continental Philosophy.* Harvard University Press 2019. 504 pp. \$51.50 USD (Hardcover ISBN 9780674988378).

The devil is in the details. No other proverb could be more appropriate to start a review of this book than this one. In fact, two different judgements could be offered about this book. And these judgements depend on one simple detail: what can be included or contained by the name ‘phenomenology.’ Is phenomenology a philosophical current that has gained recognition all over the European continent (by now even the world)? Or can we understand it differently by letting the concept of ‘continental’ outgrow its merely geographical understanding? Can phenomenology thus be understood and identified as ‘continental philosophy’? Before passing judgement on this issue, let me first give a general outline of this otherwise interesting book.

Edward Baring’s *Converts to the Real: Catholicism and the Making of Continental Philosophy* tells the history and importance of Catholic thought (itself), the international academic network it created, and how both aided in the propagation of the philosophical current known as phenomenology (and early forms of existentialism) on the European continent during the first half of the 20th century. This is a little known—and often gladly forgotten—aspect of European intellectual history, and so the time was more than ripe for a book of this type. Credit goes to Baring for writing it and writing it well. Broadly and accurately researched, the work includes many nearly forgotten thinkers from the beginning of the last century, who are remembered correctly and given credit and position in Europe’s intellectual history. The book needs to be considered as a necessary breath of fresh air that does not bow down before the contemporary biased orthodoxy of an obligatory downplaying of all things religious. Instead, it gives the due and necessary credit to Catholic thought and Catholic institutions that contributed to the spread and development of phenomenology (and existentialism).

Considering this volume in more detail, the first part starts at the beginning of the 20th century. We find ourselves in the middle of a cultural battle between Catholicism and Protestantism, and within the Catholic ranks the philosophical current that will be known as neo-scholasticism, or neo-Thomism, is gaining the upper hand. It is this Catholic philosophical current that will be at the forefront in the ‘first encounter’ with Edmund Husserl’s philosophical thought, known under the label of phenomenology. The first joys of this encounter between two possibly compatible philosophical currents, one religious and the other lay and modern, dissipated—as we can read in the second chapter—as Husserl’s thought progressed and turned into an idealism that no longer seemed compatible with neo-Thomism. If the master’s thought did not prove as fruitful anymore for Catholic thought, then two of Husserl’s ‘pupils’ did have high potential to continue the ‘collaboration’ between Catholic and lay/modern thought. The third and fourth chapters explore the encounter between neo-scholasticism and the thoughts of Martin Heidegger and Max Scheler, respectively.

The second part of the book takes us on a trip beyond the German borders and beyond strict neo-Thomism during the decades leading to and through the Second World War. The betrayed ‘faith’ the neo-scholastics had put in Husserl’s original realism by his idealist turn had also undermined the hegemonic position of this strain of Catholic thought and other intellectual traditions within Catholic thought aimed to take over. The mainly French Christian Existentialists were the first. They continued the encounter with phenomenology (which they used in their battle against neo-Thomism), broadened their horizon by including different German voices (like Karl Jaspers) with whom they shared basic understandings and used the existing Catholic international network to spread in other European countries (like Italy). The second part of chapter 2 brings us back into the Thomist camp.

The neo-Thomists, in fact, not only needed to defend themselves and their ‘appropriation’ of phenomenology from non-Thomist Catholic intellectual traditions, but also from ‘hardcore’ Thomists who had not taken the turn into neo-Thomism and were now starting to raise their voices and reopen the realist/idealism debate. The primacy of human existence, which had found a new breath on the continent, did not excite only Catholic intellectuals. Non-Catholic and secular intellectuals also found in this primacy fertile ground to let their philosophy grow. The third chapter deals with Kierkegaard, Jaspers and, once more, Heidegger. The last chapter confronts a thinker Baring previously discussed: Scheler. This time, however, Scheler’s importance in the personalism debates is at the center of attention.

The volume’s third and last part is subdivided into two chapters. The first chapter delves into the saving of Husserl’s papers by the young Belgian Franciscan monk, Herman Leo Van Breda, before the outbreak of WWII, and the following institution of the Husserl Archives at the Catholic University of Leuven. Here as well, the role of Catholicism and the importance of its European network cannot be denied. The last chapter investigates the development of phenomenology (mainly) after the war. The two figures through which Baring reads this part of phenomenology’s history are primarily the French philosophers Maurice Merleau-Ponty and Paul Ricoeur.

Returning now to the devilish detail of our opening sentence: as much as this book needs to be correctly praised, the ambiguity regarding the understanding of the ‘continental’ nature of phenomenology does leave a bad taste in one’s mouth. Did phenomenology achieve a geographically continental reach or did it simply become that symbolical all-embracing ‘continental philosophy’ that became a term of abuse for ‘analytic’ philosophy (which it became during the 1950s for that part of the Anglo-American philosophical world that believed and lived by that invented binary opposition)? Said simplistically, is phenomenology simply continental philosophy, or is it merely ‘*a* continental philosophy’ (280)? And, to be clear, this ambiguity leaves a bad taste not only because understanding phenomenology as the symbolic continental philosophy is simply wrong, but because it plays into the hands of those who intend to keep the idiot theory of the ‘great divide’ between two types of philosophy alive.

Unfortunately, it is not clear—not in the beginning nor in the conclusion of the book—what Baring’s position is. On several occasions, Baring’s understanding and portrayal of ‘continental’ seems to be merely geographical, but overall, it seems to be more than that. On multiple occasions, it seems that our author is listing all philosophical developments in the decades that are of interest under the umbrella of phenomenology. Even the clearly autonomously born (and mainly independently developing) philosophical current of existentialism is multiple times described as ‘existential phenomenology’ (152) or ‘existentialist phenomenology’ (307); it is even called ‘a version of phenomenology’ (7), which it simply is not. The fact that other philosophical currents that were very much alive during the decades that are of importance in Baring’s book (like Marxism or critical theory—the latter even originally developing only a couple of hundred kilometers away [Frankfurt] from the German ‘home base’ of phenomenology in Freiburg) are hardly mentioned, makes this work not only play out in a historical vacuum (although Baring does recognize the limits of his work), but also seems to emphasize the symbolical all-embracing understanding of phenomenology. That Dan Zahavi’s gross exaggeration that ‘almost all subsequent theory formations in continental philosophy’ are to be understood as ‘extensions or reactions to phenomenology’ (2) is quoted in the opening pages of the book does not help either.

In the end, and considering the many positive aspects of this book, I can only hope that the book sells well and that Harvard University Press asks Baring to prepare a second edition—one where our author can take up this critique and turn this book into a necessary classic.

**Kristof Vanhoutte**, Paris Institute for Critical Thinking