



25th Conference of the *European Society for Philosophy of Religion*

The Revival of Metaphysics in the Philosophy of Religion:

New Universalisms, Catholicities, and their Opposites

10, 11 & 12 September 2026

Catholic University of Leuven, Belgium

<https://theo.kuleuven.be/en/espr2026>

Deadline proposals: 15 March 2026

Notification of acceptance: 15 April 2026

Conference registration: before 1 July 2026

Metaphysics, once vehemently criticised by logical positivists and postmodernists alike, seems to make a comeback both in the context of the analytic tradition and of the continental schools of phenomenology and critical thinking. Is there really a return of metaphysics and if so, what types of metaphysics are involved? A return of metaphysics forces us to reconsider our attitude towards premodern and modern philosophical and theological thought, with implications for the nature and tasks of philosophy of religion. What are the consequences for our view of the relationship between philosophy and theology?

Pressing questions are:

- (1) Which varieties of contemporary metaphysics are most relevant for the philosophy of religion? What brings this metaphysical turn about? Can religion do without metaphysics? Is a metaphysical approach in the philosophy of religion in any sense avoidable?
- (2) Does a metaphysical turn overcome the standard objections to metaphysics? Is there any truth to post-metaphysical approaches?
- (3) Does the emergent universalism within contemporary metaphysics encourage a joint search for common ground between philosophical and religious traditions? Can a revised notion of catholicity which goes beyond particularist approaches, bring different traditions closer together? Or should it strengthen the post-metaphysical critique and formulate opposites at the limits of possibility of that search?
- (4) What are the ethical and political consequences of the return of metaphysics in philosophy of religion? Is a return to metaphysics and universalism in danger of bringing back a discourse of dominance and logocentrism? Is the search for common ground used as power tool?

More information about these subthemes is offered here below.

Short papers proposals and more: Encouraging diverse approaches within the philosophy of religion, this conference invites short papers with a presentation time of 20 minutes (followed by 10 minutes Q&A). Templates for submission of paper proposals will be provided timely via a link on the ESPR website. The names of the keynote speakers will also be announced on the website as soon as available. The use of English is recommended, but the organizers are open to a limited number of papers in German, French or Italian. There will be no hybrid sessions but a separate online section will be organized for those unable to attend. Passive attendance of the plenary sessions will be made possible through live streaming. Submit your proposal online via <https://theo.kuleuven.be/en/espr2026>.

Keynote speakers will include: Cyro de Florio & Aldo Frigerio (Milan), Petr Dvorak (Prague / Olomouc), Malte Dominik Krüger (Marburg), Julia Jansen (Leuven), Gijsbert van den Brink (Amsterdam), Douglas Hedley (Cambridge), Sami Pihlström (Helsinki), Ivana Noble (Prague).

About the ESPR: The European Society for Philosophy of Religion provides a forum for researchers employing different approaches to the philosophy of religion. See <http://www.philosophy-of-religion.org>

ESPR board: Walter Van Herck, Andrea Aguti, Hans-Peter Grosshans, Victoria Harrisson, Lubos Rojka, Ulf Zackariasson

KU Leuven hosts: Stephan van Erp (Faculty of Theology) & Henning Tegtmeier (Institute of Philosophy)

SUBTHEMES OF THE CONFERENCE

Sub-theme 1

Varieties of contemporary metaphysics: analytic and phenomenological approaches

Arguably, the revival of metaphysics in the second half of the 20th century was chiefly initiated by advances in modal logic and reasoning. Overcoming the anti-metaphysical dogmatism of Logical Empiricism, philosophers started to rethink metaphysics with an examination of the ontological status of natural laws and the varieties of existence and necessity. Traditional questions such as 'How are possibilities grounded in reality?', 'Are there any necessary objects?', or 'What is the relation between essence and existence?' were addressed anew, using new conceptual tools of modal metaphysics. These new tools also helped to sharpen the difference between ontological and epistemological issues that modern philosophy tended to blur. Eventually, Analytic Theology emerged at the borderline between metaphysics and Christian theology, with conservative and revisionist approaches repositioning themselves over against classical theism.

Parallel to the emergence of an analytic metaphysics in theology, there is also a turn to metaphysical realism in phenomenological approaches to philosophy of religion, and in the so-called 'new' or 'speculative' realism that criticizes the reduction of ontological questions to epistemological issues. In theology, there have been recent attempts to claim the field of philosophical theology for continental approaches, and there has been a movement that extends classical metaphysics to a trinitarian ontology that reflects on first principles as relations rather than as being. This raises questions concerning the significance of these parallel developments for future philosophy and theology.

Sub-theme 2**Criticisms of contemporary metaphysics and contemporary metaphysical responses**

Despite its revival, the modern and postmodern critique of metaphysics continues to be taken for granted as the status quo by many. New hermeneutical, practical and empirical approaches in philosophy and theology build on this critique and often explicitly argue against ontological and universalizing positions, because of their tendency towards uniformity and control. But many proponents of contemporary metaphysics argue that these accusations are not only uncharitable but also self-undermining. How has the Heideggerian critique of metaphysics and onto-theology been contested and developed? How has the postmodern critique of grand narratives been questioned and continued? Is the post-metaphysical critique still valid in view of the current metaphysical turn? Are there opportunities for interactions between metaphysical and post-metaphysical positions that go beyond tribal divisions in philosophy and theology? Philosophy of religion could encourage a more transparent dialogue between these divisions.

Sub-theme 3**New universalisms, catholicities, and their opposites in the sciences and the humanities**

As knowledge of reality expands and grows more detailed, the more there is to integrate. How can the metaphysical turn inform other debates on universalism? Are there new universal concepts at play in the natural and social sciences? Does critical thinking in the social sciences make use of universalizing concepts despite its critique of metaphysics? How are universalizing concepts employed by the natural sciences – life, nature, universe, health, particles, etc. – different from philosophical and theological ones? Should they undergo a similar metaphysical critique or could they contribute to a better understanding of the revival of metaphysics in philosophy and theology today? Is there any underlying metaphysics to the intensified interest in interdisciplinarity?

New approaches to catholicity reject reductive divisions between the physical and metaphysical, the practical and theoretical, and between fact and value. This sense of catholic stands in contrast with the latinate sense of ‘universal’, which is often associated with the ‘univocal’, with uniformity and exclusion of those who do not conform to the *unum*. Various theologians and philosophers over the last century have reflected on what the thought-forms or worldviews might be that can enable these conjunctive integrations. Could these dynamic – analogical, paradoxical – forms of catholicity nuance and contribute to debates on contemporary metaphysics?

Sub-theme 4**Ethical and Political consequences of the Return of Metaphysics**

The revival of metaphysics in contemporary philosophy and theology also has ethical and political consequences that vary with the preferred approach. For example, moral realism has gone through a powerful revival during the past three decades both in analytic and phenomenological debates. Moral realists hold that good and evil, that ethical norms and values are not mere social conventions or constructions but responses to the normative infrastructure of reality that are ‘discovered’ rather than ‘invented’ by human agents. Features like virtues and vices are actual properties of human and perhaps even some non-human beings, and the same holds for at least some of the rights and duties they have. The current revival of natural law theory is part and parcel of this reemergence of moral realism, which challenges not only the predominant ethical anti-realism of the first half of the 20th century in its analytic and

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'continental' flavors but also the current naturalistic approaches to meta-ethics that interpret normativity as a mere by-product of human evolution.

This revival raises several pressing questions: Does moral realism presuppose some form of metaphysical realism, or can there be such a thing as an anti-metaphysical moral realism? How can moral realism become an instrument of societal criticism? Which role can it play in ecological thinking? Does it offer us a new key to communication issues and to interreligious dialogue?

Researcher are encouraged to propose papers on the conference topic and subthemes, but paper proposals on **miscellaneous topics** in the philosophy of religion will also be taken into consideration.

In view of publication, papers can afterwards be submitted to *International Journal of Philosophy and Theology* (www.tandfonline.com/rjpt).

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- Faculty of Theology, KU Leuven
- Institute of Philosophy, KU Leuven
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