



Michael D'Angeli

University of Oxford

A Review of Christina M.
Gschwandtner's *Postmodern
Apologetics? Arguments for God in
Contemporary Philosophy*
(New York: Fordham UP, 2013)

Gschwandtner begins by warning that the two “loaded” terms found in the title (*postmodernism* and *apologetics*) are, for many, incompatible. If *apologetics* is, as she contends, a “militant defense” of Christian beliefs (or at least of the existence of a monotheistic God), and *postmodernism* a “militant rejection” of any such worldview, how then can the two be reconciled? What's more, of the twelve twentieth-century philosophers covered in the book's thirteen chapters, how many could rightly be characterized as either postmodernists or apologists, let alone both?

These are the questions that Gschwandtner opens with. If the reader maintains a second-century view of apologetics and a 1960s view of postmodernism, these questions will remain unanswered. If, however, we stretch our understanding of apologetics to the exploration and justification of faith within contemporary thought, and limit our understanding of postmodernism to skepticism towards metanarratives (and of objective, distanced truth claims), we see how the two may relate. And, on these terms, they do.

Postmodern Apologetics? is a compelling study of how twentieth-century philosophy stemming from the phenomenological tradition has impacted on, and enabled, contemporary trends within philosophy of religion. The book is in three parts: “Preparations,” “Expositions” and “Appropriations.” Part 1 (“Preparations”) outlines the foundational contributions of three major thinkers: Heidegger, Levinas and Derrida. While often characterized by their ambivalence towards theological questions and concerns within their *oeuvres*, these three philosophers are seen by Gschwandtner to have set the groundwork for contemporary debates on both religious experience and religious language. Part 2 (“Expositions”) considers how

the phenomenological ideals identified in Part 1 were expounded upon by a variety of contemporary French thinkers, ranging from the late Paul Ricoeur to Emmanuel Falque. Part 3 (“Appropriations”) tracks how key aspects of twentieth-century continental philosophy have recently been appropriated by three philosophers in the United States for the purpose of formulating a modern Christian *apologia*.

PART 1: “PREPARATIONS”

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The focal point of Part 1 is the commentary of Heidegger in the first chapter. Gschwandtner maintains that various aspects of Heidegger’s ontology set the phenomenological context in which all subsequent thinkers operated, “even when aspects of his thought were challenged” (38).

Gschwandtner begins by offering a précis of what she terms Heidegger’s phenomenology of religion. Her emphasis is placed on two fundamental concepts which would be seen to impact on the French and American based philosophers discussed in later chapters. The first of these is Heidegger’s understanding of *onto-theo-logy* as derived from his “deconstruction of the metaphysical tradition.” Here, Heidegger contends that ontology and theology had been problematically conflated from the very origins of metaphysics. By proposing a conceptual distancing of the two modes of thought, Heidegger is seen by Gschwandtner to have “opened a different way to speak about the divine” (30). This, in turn, has enabled much of the thinking of Marion and a host of other, more “religiously motivated,” theorists.

The second crucial concept, stemming from Heidegger’s hermeneutical writings, is his understanding of truth as *aletheia* (or “un-concealment”). Truth, in this respect, is seen as distinct from the objective, verifiable truth sought by the natural sciences. Though an often-neglected feature of Heidegger’s work, Gschwandtner correctly observes that his “existential” understanding of truth (and the concept of *meditative thinking* which follows from it) offers a basis for twentieth-century hermeneutical philosophy. This chapter discusses neither the romantic hermeneutical origins of this line of enquiry, nor how it was later developed by H. Gadamer. It does however convincingly argue that this is perhaps Heidegger’s greatest contribution to critical theory, underpinning the critiques of art laid out by Marion and Chrétien (33), and heavily informing Ricoeur’s conceptual distinction between “verification” and “manifestation” (34).

The remaining two chapters in this section outline the philosophies of Levinas and Derrida, and their contribution to religious thought. Due to the early emphasis placed on the legacy of Husserlian phenomenology,

the reader senses that these two theorists do not offer the same foundational contribution that Heidegger was seen to have. Indeed, as with the discussions in Part 2, much of the analysis of Levinas (and to a lesser extent Derrida) centers on the expansion and/or rejection of Heidegger's groundwork. Of particular interest in Chapter 2, however, is Gschwandtner's expansive commentary on Levinas's "critique of phenomenology," and how it engendered a new and lasting understanding of *alterity* (42-45).

PART 2: "EXPOSITIONS"

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Part 2 is comprised of seven chapters and examines the thought of six twentieth-century French philosophers: Ricoeur, Marion, Henry, Chrétien, Lacoste and Falque. Chapters 4 to 9 are each dedicated to a separate theorist, and follow a similar schema. Each chapter offers a short review of the philosopher's more religiously centered publications. Following this, Gschwandtner provides an in-depth analysis of how their work built upon the theoretical concepts from Part 1 in order to explore the nature and "viability" of religious experience (and its articulation within text, art and contemporary culture).

In line with the focus of this edition of *Text Matters*, let us consider in some detail Gschwandtner's chapter on Paul Ricoeur, entitled "A God of Poetry and Superabundance."

Chapter 4 begins with a general overview of Ricoeur's encounters with religious (or, rather, biblical) texts and criticism. While the chapter touches briefly on his publications from the 1960s on primary symbols (86-88), as well as his work on poetic discourse from the 1970s (88-90), the focus is placed squarely on Ricoeur's late autobiographical reflections from the 1990s, and particularly his analysis of the relationship between philosophy and religion (as presented in *Oneself as Another*, *Critique and Conviction* and *Living up to Death*).

This chapter proposes that Ricoeur's two main contributions to twentieth- and twenty-first-century Christian philosophy were his exploration of biblical discourse and his analysis of the division between *critique* and *conviction*. From his early corpus, Gschwandtner highlights Ricoeur's assertion that biblical language utilizes polyphonic and hyperbolic rhetoric in order to engender a new, revelatory, understanding of the text, God and the world: "Ricoeur calls it 'biblical polyphony' and insists that the multiple voices heard are important and should be homogenized into a single univocal voice. God is named in many ways and this naming is therefore complex and multi-faceted" (90-91).

From his later work, Gschwandtner reflects on Ricoeur's conceptual division between philosophy and theology. In the sub-section "A Controlled Schizophrenia" she examines the reasons why throughout his career Ricoeur maintained a "water-tight division" between his philosophical body of work and his biblical hermeneutics (96). Drawing upon his late autobiographical publications, Gschwandtner argues that Ricoeur came to recognize the stark "and in many ways false" opposition between philosophical analysis and theological reflection. This chapter concludes that Ricoeur was ultimately unable to "resolve the dichotomy" (101) between these two modes of thought. She however proposes that, through his exploration of the relationship between philosophical *critique* and religious *conviction*, Ricoeur provides a platform for contemporary theorists to better understand the nature of biblical discourse (as well as a non-positivist understanding of religious *Truth* which it elicits).

This chapter pursues two, perhaps incompatible, objectives. On the one hand, Gschwandtner seeks to offer an introduction to Ricoeur's weighty contributions to biblical theology. On the other, she is intent on breaking new ground, and exploring how his later publications may be used to augment his earlier understanding of truth as "manifestation."

As regards her first aim, Gschwandtner focuses on several particular facets of Ricoeur's biblical hermeneutics, in lieu of offering a more superficial overview. As a result, she concentrates on his understanding of textual polyphony and "limit expressions." While her commentary on Ricoeur can be lauded for its clarity and concision, it fails to consider how Ricoeur's conceptual understanding of *biblical polyphony* and *parabolic limit expressions* derived from (and is wholly reliant upon) his non-religious/linguistic understanding of metaphor and metaphoric predication. This seems a notable omission, not least as the remainder of the chapter would presume a rigid conceptual separation between Ricoeur's religious and non-religious theories.

The second half of the chapter looks at the relevance of Ricoeur's autobiographical reflections and interviews (particularly those found in *Critique and Conviction*), which have garnered significant attention in recent years. Though the subjects of religious experience and religious truth were rarely the primary focus of Ricoeur's work, Gschwandtner ably demonstrates how Ricoeur's later publications can be used to expand the relevance of his earlier work in this direction.

PART 3: "APPROPRIATIONS"

The third and final part of *Postmodern Apologetics?* focuses on three notable American Christian philosophers (Merold Westphal, J. D. Caputo

and Richard Kearney) who have, in recent years, adopted and popularized elements of the phenomenological tradition. Gschwandtner contends that, as the three are writing to a somewhat skeptical American readership, they are similarly driven to demonstrate the potential value of twentieth-century French philosophy to contemporary American Christian studies. These three chapters open by considering the centrality of Heideggerian ontology and Derridean deconstruction theory within the respective philosophies of Westphal, Caputo and Kearney. Gschwandtner goes on to establish that Westphal and Caputo, in particular, appropriate concepts prevalent within French thought in order to explore the problems of faith in a postmodern world.

This section ends by considering the deeply hermeneutical nature of contemporary continental philosophy of religion, as well as the “similarities and parallels” between the various projects presented in the book’s three parts. Notably, Gschwandtner maintains that, from Levinas to Caputo, there is a shared interest in the use of excessive or hyperbolic language as a means of articulating religious *Truth*:

The one thing almost all of these ways of speaking about the divine and religious experience have in common is that such experience is always depicted in superlative forms. It seems that a defense of faith or even a mere use of religious imagery automatically pushes language to the very limits. (287)

Postmodern Apologetics? succeeds as a general introduction to a number of the main theorists who have instigated, or informed, a wide range of debates within twentieth-century philosophy of religion. Questions remain as to whether the French and American philosophers selected share a coherent (or even connected) *apologetic* initiative. Nonetheless, Gschwandtner successfully demonstrates the legacy of the phenomenological tradition within their works, and how they relate to one another. Her argument that these philosophies share an underlying interest in the boundaries (and superlative expression) of religious experience is also a provocative one, and has important implications for contemporary hermeneutical scholarship.