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God, Guilt and Death: An Existential Phenomenology of Religion by **Merold Westphal**. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984. Pp. xiv + 305.

ROBERT C. NEVILLE, State University of New York at Stony Brook.

This handsome book is the outcome of several years teaching a successful course in phenomenology of religion, according to its author, and its virtues as a textbook in phenomenology or philosophy of religion are extraordinary. Although teachers' choices of textbooks are highly personal, Westphal's book is well worth a trial. It presents a clearly focused scheme for organizing religious phenomena and it introduces students to phenomena and texts of the major world religions and "primitive" religions. Most helpful of all, perhaps, Westphal is able to say clearly and precisely what he means, and this model of sophisticated writing is of inestimable value for the undergraduate classroom.

Westphal begins his book with a methodological chapter on phenomenology, distinguishing its descriptive goal from the goals of explanation and critical evaluation. In the long run I believe this distinction fails. Practically, as Gadamer has argued, we need to employ and control for our own prejudices if we are to engage the phenomena themselves, and this means that our own assumptions about how things work (explanations) and our values are inextricably, if critically, bound up with description. Theoretically, the assumption that religious phenomena just sit there as positive facts ready for description betrays a kind of philosophic positivism otherwise uncongenial to Westphal's view. Rather, things to be described, especially religious phenomena, are themselves achievements of value and so even the most objective description contains assumptions about what is valuable in them and why. What Westphal usually means by description is classification according to his scheme, and of course the scheme reflects what he takes to be important rather than trivial, and includes a formal organization that indicates something of why the important is important. That his scheme accurately reflects what is important in the phenomena only underscores the point that description includes explanation and critical evaluation internally instead of standing in external distinction from them. In the short run, however, the forceful distinction of his project from explanation and evaluation allows Westphal to distance his readers from their immediate prejudices and look at religious phenomena afresh as if they were alien and interesting. This is essential in an undergraduate text, and Westphal does not attempt to build upon theoretical claims that extend beyond his short run goal. He recommends that readers might want to skip the methodological chapter temporarily and move first into the discussion of religion.

As his subtitle indicates, Westphal's classificatory scheme comes from the existentialist tradition. With unusual sophistication he weaves a subtle discussion of the 20th century debates on existentialist themes into his phenomenological exploration. A list of the central chapter titles indicates the main themes: "Ambivalence and the Sacred," "Ambivalence, Inertia, and Resentment," "The Existential Meaning of Guilt," "The Existential Meaning of Death," "The Believing Soul's Encounter with Guilt and Death," "Religion as Means and as End," and "Prayer and Sacrifice as Useless Self-Transcendence." Hegel and Kierkegaard, Nietzsche and Freud, Otto and Ricoeur, are continuous dialogue partners throughout this discussion, by name often, and by position even when unnamed. Westphal has a sharp eye and ready answer for any who would employ reductionist techniques to study religion. The text clearly indicates that these are concepts that find illustration not just in biblical religions, the most common source of proof-texts, but in other religions as well. Hinduism, Buddhism, Islam, African, Native American, and Oceanic religious phenomena are treated with the same seriousness that the Christian and Jewish religions of his most likely readers receive. Although the book is a-historical in neglecting the historical development of religions, it understands that such development does take place and merely seeks to find examples of its phenomenological classes at whenever stage of development they appear.

The capstone chapters of the book treat guilt and death in religion by dividing religious sensibilities into three main classes: exilic religion, mimetic religion, and covenantal religion. Exilic religion takes life in the world as such to be an exile from the soul's true home, with salvation being a return from exile. Mimetic religion takes life in the world to be normatively controlled by a right relation to nature, and salvation has to do with a rehearsal, often guided by myth, of the origins and depths of nature. Covenantal religion adds the historical dimension to mimetic religion, giving historical meanings to guilt and death, and to salvation. These categories are used to classify religious phenomena, not whole traditions. Thus, while Hinduism most obviously displays exilic elements, it contains mimetic and covenantal ones as well; Christianity is exilic and mimetic as well as obviously covenantal. Westphal develops this classificatory scheme with abundant illustrations and much greater subtlety than I have the space to indicate here. The unusual clarity and simplicity of this scheme make it a powerful tool for gaining an orientation to religious phenomena. Even if one does not like the scheme or believes that it is not as clear when pressed as when first stated and illustrated, its advantage in undergraduate pedagogy is plain.

Never does Westphal claim that this is the only scheme for describing religious phenomena, or even that it is the best of several. So to suggest some of its limitations is not exactly a criticism, rather an attempt to extend the discussion

to issues that don't surface enough in this book.

The volume contains only one extended discussion of Confucianism, and it focuses on sacrifice rather than on becoming a sage, the central Confucian salvific concern. The reason for this slim treatment, I suspect, is that the Confucian (and taoist) assumptions about the self do not allow for a serious modeling of guilt, or a concern for a guilty death. For Confucians, evil-doing and small-mindedness come from selfish desires that block or distort our natively "in tune" responses to things. This is distorted development, with both social and personal roots. But it is not the kind of ontological or existential contradiction that sin is perceived to be in biblical religions for which human identity is defined ontologically by the covenant and contradicted ontologically by breaking the covenant. From the standpoint of Westphal's categories, the heart of Confucianism doesn't register; maybe it would be taken to be more an ethical than a religious set of phenomena. (From a Confucian's standpoint, Westphal's categories might be accepted as appropriate for analyzing barbarian religions.)

Keeping in mind the usefulness of Westphal's categories, their limitation, I believe, is that they lack the perspectival protection of abstraction. Taking such concrete phenomena as he does, guilt and death, Westphal's attempt to generalize them as pervasive throughout all religions has no control. What if those phenomena are very important in religions close to home, present but not so important in other religions, and virtually absent (death cannot be absent, of course, but it might not have much religious importance) in yet other religions? How would Westphal's phenomenological method allow him to tell about this? Won't he be inclined to ascribe them a false importance in the second group of religions and to deny proper religious status to the third group? What in the methodology would prevent this? He might say that he is not talking about religious traditions, only about religious phenomena which might occur in all religions. But this does not counter the charge that his scheme unwittingly reflects the biases of certain traditions to the neglect or distortion of others. The attempt to describe with a classificatory scheme has no built-in protection against lasting arbitrariness.

By the "protection of abstraction" I mean the following. Suppose that Westphal were to develop a very abstract theory of the self, of being in the world, of time, of existence, a theory so abstract that it applies vaguely to all cultures, so far as we can know. Of course that theory applies differently to the different cultures, and one's philosophy would have to spell out what the differences are between a self defined covenantally, for instance, and a self defined as "one body with the world." The process of moving back and forth slowly between the vague abstractions and their diverse specific embodiments in concrete cultural phenomena would provide checks on the application of concrete classifications. It would provide reasons for the limitations of the classifications, and possibly

also suggestions for alternate concrete categories. Without a self-conscious, historically understood, practice of moving between abstractions and concrete phenomena, it is impossible to avoid the fallacy of misplaced concreteness. Guilt is too concrete, I believe, to be generalizable as an essential characteristic of religion.

To accept the protection of abstraction against bias and dogmatism may well be to abandon phenomenology of religion as a discipline with its own integrity. Westphal makes no exclusive claims for it, and his practice here is very helpful for its purpose. I would hope, however, that he would now turn his considerable talents and erudition to a more inclusive philosophy of religion.

Philosophy of Religion: Thinking about Faith, by C. Stephen Evans. Downers Grove, IL: Inter-Varsity Press, 1985. Pp. 191. \$6.95.

STANLEY OBITTS, Westmont College.

This book is one of the "Contours of Christian Philosophy" series of which Prof. Evans is also the editor. The series describes itself as consisting of "short, introductory-level textbooks," a description which accurately fits this book. Yet the book is far from superficial, is up-to-date, is very readable, and is remarkably thorough for its size.

The thrust of the book is a Christian justification of religious belief. Right from the beginning the stance of the book on the relation of faith and reason is made clear. Fideism is rejected because it denies the common ground with the nonbeliever required for genuine reflection on religion. The presuppositionless approach of neutralism is found equally unsatisfactory for it ignores what weak foundationalism recognizes, namely, that reason is "a willingness to test one's commitments." The approach said to be taken in the book is that of a "critical dialog" with the nonbeliever, always open to his objections.

Little more than an "impasse" is promised in the dialog, however. For example, in Malcolm's version of the ontological argument the weak premise is said to be the one holding that God's existence is possible (not impossible), because the nonbeliever supposedly would not accept it. And since the criterion of rational conviction is "person relative," the dialog breaks down. But is the theistic God's existence impossible? If not, then it must be possible, which is all Malcolm's argument needs. If the nonbeliever refuses to admit this, then at least he should be made to feel the onus of breaking off the dialog for no good reason. Perhaps the success of an argument should not be so tightly linked with its being convincing to a given individual. One could be so intent on maintaining the posture of