

Faith and Philosophy: Journal of the Society of Christian Philosophers

Volume 22 | Issue 3

Article 2

7-1-2005

Methodological Postmodernism: On Merold Westphal's Overcoming Onto-Theology

John D. Caputo

Follow this and additional works at: <https://place.asburyseminary.edu/faithandphilosophy>

Recommended Citation

Caputo, John D. (2005) "Methodological Postmodernism: On Merold Westphal's Overcoming Onto-Theology," *Faith and Philosophy: Journal of the Society of Christian Philosophers*: Vol. 22 : Iss. 3 , Article 2.

Available at: <https://place.asburyseminary.edu/faithandphilosophy/vol22/iss3/2>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at ePLACE: preserving, learning, and creative exchange. It has been accepted for inclusion in Faith and Philosophy: Journal of the Society of Christian Philosophers by an authorized editor of ePLACE: preserving, learning, and creative exchange.

METHODOLOGICAL POSTMODERNISM: ON MEROLD WESTPHAL'S *OVERCOMING ONTO-THEOLOGY*

John D. Caputo

I characterize Merold Westphal's synthesis of Christian faith and postmodern philosophy as an "epistemological" or "methodological," postmodernism, one that sees postmodern thought as describing certain limits upon human understanding while leaving open the question of how things are in the nature of things, that is, how things are understood by God. Postmodernism (unless it waxes dogmatic) is not denying God, but only that we are God. In a characteristically postmodern way, Westphal has found it useful to limit knowledge in order to make room for faith, in the tradition of Kant, where these limits are historical and linguistic rather than ahistorical and apriori. In the second half of this paper, I advance the notion that postmodernism cuts deeper than epistemology and makes questionable certain features of the self and God.

One of the joys reserved to us who have chosen to do philosophy in a continental rather than an analytic mode is that reading Merold Westphal is a part of our regular diet. This is not to say that analytic philosophers of religion are not invited to the same banquet. As a matter of fact, if you look closely at Westphal's style, and you had not been tipped off in advance as to the sort of things he usually writes about, you might be a little puzzled about how to classify him. He is far too clear to be continentalist and far too witty and interesting to be analytic. He writes a kind of sensible American prose, a little like William James, perhaps. He seems to have decided simply to ignore the distinction between obscurantist continentalese and the withering aridity of analytic philosophy's unnatural untalk, neither of which sound like a language than any earthling could ever actually speak. He walks calmly beneath the fire that is exchanged overhead between these two warring parties and simply talks sense without sacrificing substance. What a perfectly novel idea—it is astonishing that no one has thought of it before! It is also very courageous because, in making himself clear, he has deprived himself of the philosopher's handiest and readiest line of defense against a serious objection, "but that is not what I mean!" That line is true enough as far as it goes inasmuch as most of the time we do not what these philosophers mean but only hoped that in criticizing their position we would hit upon something that they did mean, like poking a stick down a hole to see if there is anything alive down there. But Westphal goes out of his way to expose himself to the hazards of being understood.¹



Methodological Postmodernism

Overcoming Onto-Theology is filled with judicious appraisals of postmodernist thinkers like Nietzsche, Derrida and Foucault, defending them against the extreme distortion and demonization (176 ff.) to which they are subjected by both the Christian and the secular right. Against such misguided critiques he shows that postmodernism need not take the form of a denial of God or religious faith, but need simply "make it clear that we are not God." (187). The demand for absolutes on the part of the Christian right is, he says, in one of his keenest observations, a "flight from incarnation," from the concession that we are linguistically and historically embodied users of signs. This flight is ironically "carried out in the name of the Word who became flesh and lived among us." (188)

I take Westphal to be defending a post-modern day post-Kantianism. We get a good insight into his general philosophical orientation in the essay on Kant that appears midway through this collection. Westphal is defending Kant against the charge of Alvin Plantinga and the "Christian Realists" that Kant has nothing to offer Christians—or worse that Kant is going to take something away from them. That is because Plantinga charges Kant with feeding lines to those secular subjective humanists who threaten to steal God's good world right from under our nose, turning created stuff into epiphenomenal fluff, turning the world that is a sign of God into a frivolous play of signifiers, and turning truth into illusion. I myself grew up with that argument, where it was forthcoming not from Reformed Epistemologists but from equally anxious Thomistic Realists, two groups which today are forming something of an alliance, as Westphal also notices (105).² Against this, Westphal replies, rightly I think, that Kant's position is fundamentally Christian, or at least theistic, because everything in Kant turns on distinguishing The (capitalized) Truth from truth, that is, the world as it is known by God (noumenally) from the world as it is known by us (phenomenally). Kant is not denying all creatures great and small but simply saying that you can't deny that "in the absence of human cognition, the world as apprehended by human minds would disappear," which is after all a tautology (97). We human beings do not get to occupy the divine standpoint but have to settle for a created one. Seeing the world on Kant's view, says Merold, is like seeing things on an old black and white TV set, where it is only God who gets to see the real game being played in the colorful real world. Back in the early 1950s we were all very grateful to watch the World Series in black and white, because without it we could not see the World Series at all. So we lived within its limits, while regarding seeing the real Series in color as a Regulative Ideal to be asymptotically approached, which is rather like what Kant is saying. God, on the other hand, does not have to live within any such limits. So we should not be ungrateful. The conditions under which we have access to the world at all are simultaneously the conditions which limit our access. Nor should we despair: from the fact that we must settle for (uncapitalized) truth, we cannot conclude that there is no Truth, no more than from the fact that the jury is hung, that the defendant was neither guilty nor innocent (100). Or from the fact that our knowledge is not divine we are not rashly to conclude that

there is no divine knowledge. Or, once again—and this I think is a Leitmotif of Merold's work—as Johannes Climacus says, from the fact that the world is not a system for us, it does not follow that it is not a system for God. The truth is, there is no Truth (for us), but that does not mean there is no Truth—period, flat out, *simpliciter*, *schlechtin*. Or, as Westphal says, “only some mushrooms are poisonous.” (100) *Différance* does not imply that there is no God, but only that we are not God. The finitude of our knowledge does not spell trouble for the infinity of God's being. Our knowledge does not “lose its relativity and its finitude by being about God, any more than we become purple by thinking about grapes” (172).³

Westphal would have us guided by two principles, each of which constitutes a Warning Against Arrogance, the first against Philosophical Arrogance, the second against Theological Arrogance (272). The days of Absolute Knowledge, or Absolute Monarchy, or Absolute Authority, are over in philosophy and the philosophers would do well to lend an ear to the “other” that is theology, to listen to the words of the Scriptures, for example, by which Kierkegaard and Levinas, to name two very good examples, have been profoundly instructed. Philosophy has learned a great deal about “existence” and the poor existing individual from the one and a great deal about the “wholly other” and the critique of autonomy from the other. The great mistake of philosophy is to confuse its own concepts with the things themselves, for which the shock of biblical alterity is an irreplaceable antidote. But by the same token, the days of Absolute Knowledge, or Absolute Monarchy, or Absolute Authority, are over in theology as well, where we must take care not to convert our theologies into idols, images of ourselves, of our preconceptions, and of our personal politics. The great mistake of theology is to confuse God with the church, theology or religion, for which postmodern hermeneutics is an irreplaceable antidote.

That careful, sensible, relentless sorting out of the limits of our human point of view from a possible unlimited divine point of view goes to the heart of what I am calling Merold Westphal's “methodological postmodernism.” The “postmodern” signifies the most recent and felicitous way of casting the finitude of human understanding, which means that for Westphal postmodernism is a continuation of Kant by another means, viz., by following a pluralist rather than a universalist model of human finitude (103). The “methodological” signifies that these limits are not substantive, that is, that they do not at all impose limits on how things are, which means for Kant, for Johannes Climacus, and for Westphal, how God knows them. This methodological postmodernism is to be opposed to a secularizing or reductionistic postmodernism, which is a dogmatic position that concludes that our limits are also the world's limits, or God's. “God, *s'il y en a*,” is how a latter day Derridean might put it. And there is nothing about postmodernism to say that there is not a God, unless you twist postmodernist epistemology into a metaphysics, or postmodern method into a dogmatic substance, which would brush quite against the grain of postmodernism itself, which claims to have sworn off the metaphysics of presence once and for all.

When all is said and done, postmodernism for Westphal is hermeneutics, and hermeneutics has an epistemological status as a description of

the possibility and limits of our knowledge. I would only make a terminological point here, which is that it is significant that Gadamer opposes "hermeneutical" consciousness to "epistemological consciousness," the latter being for Gadamer a foundationalist inquiry that turns on a strict subject/object distinction (128), but I will come back to epistemology in the final section of these remarks. All contemporary hermeneutics is radical for Westphal⁴ and this because it has broken with the aspiration for ahistorical objectivity, which is the form the Copernican revolution takes for us (170). Hermeneutics is the contemporary historical-linguistic version of the Copernican revolution, which reconciles itself to the idea that we see things from the point of view of our linguistic and historical situation. This differs from Kant's version, where our point of view enjoyed timeless, supra-historical, and pre-linguistic universality, which means that his post-Kantianism has a post-Hegelian twist. Postmodernism for Westphal is a post-Hegelianism for poor existing spirits, a project that, as Keith Putt has shown, has been significantly impacted by Paul Ricoeur's "post-Hegelian Kantianism."⁵

But finitude, Kant and Hegel are not the whole story. From a religious point of view, postmodernism fills in the details about our fallen nature and makes plain the distance that separates us from God, which can be attributed not simply to finitude but also to sinfulness, which gets us from Kant and Hegel to Kierkegaard. Kant teaches us that human understanding is irreducibly finite, but "Hegel helps us to see that it is worse than that. Human understanding is not timeless, unchanging, and universal. It is always some contingent, particular point of view, shared by a certain group of people at a certain time." (155) But Hegel should have stuck to making that point instead of allowing himself to lay the audacious and self-congratulatory claim to a capitalized Reason which unites all possible perspectives within the Divine Totality, which has pitched its tent in Prussian departments of philosophy. After Hegel is the "story of Hegelians without the absolute," above all, for Merold Westphal, Kierkegaard, who thinks there is an absolute perspective but that it is, alas, not available to us, and Nietzsche, who thinks there is no such thing at all.

Allow me to cite the single passage from *Overcoming Onto-Theology* which, in my view, expresses perfectly the spirit and the substance of this book, and which formulates a point of almost perfect convergence between Merold Westphal's project and my own work in postmodern religious theory. In this passage, Westphal is saying something nice about Derrida and deconstruction—which is not the only reason I have chosen it. For "Derrida" and "deconstruction" you can very easily substitute "postmodernism" generally. He is discussing "the possibility of appropriating post-modern insights in the service of a Christian interpretation and critique of contemporary culture." Westphal writes:

[D]econstruction is the denial that we are divine. At the heart of the metaphysical tradition Derrida sees a Heracliteaphobia...a flight from flux and flow as endemic to the speculative impulse of Greek and Hellenized Christian thought, a flight rooted in anxiety in the face of a world...too changeable to be under our control. The longing for

Absolute Knowledge, which presents itself as the love of Truth, is less a desire to submit one's thought to the way things are than a desire to compel the world to submit to our conceptual mastery. The attempt to bring a halt to the play of the world or the play of our structures of signification is the attempt to find a location for our own discourses out of that play that is primarily, but not exclusively, the flow of time. This is a theological issue because the identity of Thought and Being, that is both required and promised as Absolute Knowledge is one of the classical definitions of God...[M]etaphysics is the not terribly subtle desire and demand to be God: and deconstruction is the continuous reminder that we are not God. In fact, it claims, we cannot even peek over God's shoulder. (189)

Deconstruction is the continuation of Kantianism by another means, by a quasi-transcendental rather than a straightforwardly transcendental means. Deconstruction serves as a permanent reminder that our theologies, our churchly institutions, and the word of God are always couched in human terms, a point on which Derrida and Karl Barth are very much in agreement (192-93):

We do not become God by purporting to base our discourse on divine revelation. Nor are we anything but confused when we act as if our attempt to point to the Absolute somehow made our point absolute. This confusion is perhaps the great temptation of Christian intellectuals. And there stands St. Jacques, working his hardest to protect us from Wormwood and Screwtape. (193)

The Christian Right puts us in the untenable position of having to choose between relativism and playing God (196), and Derrida protects us from that. You do not have to go all the way to laying claim to the divine standpoint, to being God, to avoid relativism, no more than you need to commit suicide in order to lose weight.

Kant points out the limits of our finite minds (the hermeneutics of finitude or creaturehood) when they are working properly, while the Protestant tradition from Luther to Kierkegaard points out that they rarely are (hermeneutics of suspicion)! (178, 182) That is also an argument familiar to me from my earliest years when I like most everyone else I knew was a Thomist. St. Thomas, we would say, was describing the natural man to which the more Augustinian types among us, who were very much in the minority (until I came to Villanova) would reply, "but there is no natural man, we are all fallen." That is why Catholics call St. Thomas the "angelic" doctor, because he was capable of such serene, detached, undisturbed and cherubic argumentation, and that is why what St. Thomas said was often so very positive and hardly ever grim. Having never been lured down the primrose path of sensuality, he was never led to say that sexual love is made in the dark (he may not even have known that!) because it is so shameful, which alas, Augustine, love him though I do, did say. Now assuming that from a strictly phenomenological point of view, we cannot really use the theological idea of "sin," we can say that what the tradition

from Augustine to Kierkegaard has seized upon is the way that the human heart can corrupt our best laid plans, that there is no such thing as a disinterested consciousness, or pure cognition, that the darkness of our desire, the darkness of our hearts, can corrupt the possibility of pure cognition and undermine the pretense of disinterested judgment, a point also noticed by Freud and Nietzsche. We can at least use the hermeneutics of suspicion to explain what theology calls sin and make of it something of a commentary on Paul (182). If the Thomistic perspective is angelic, the Augustinian-Kierkegaardian perspective is certainly not diabolic, but simply sensitive to the "human, all too human" (192), having drunk deeply from the well of human darkness. From Kierkegaard's point of view Thomas was like the Greeks, a little too beautiful. The constraints on the human condition described by hermeneutics squares with revelation not if we think that revelation means human apotheosis, being lifted out of the human condition and up to the third heaven to see God face to face, but if we think that revelation means divine kenosis, that God "kenotically enters our world and speaks to us under the conditions of our encavement," which means "to see in a mirror dimly" (174-75).

Something about Derrida

I have two series of remarks to make about this wonderful book, the first concerning Derrida, the second about the possibility of what I will call a more radical postmodernism.

Merold Westphal's book contains in general a model treatment of Derrida, exemplarily sane and well balanced, which I would recommend to anyone. I would offer only two refinements.

After referring us to one of Westphal's guiding texts from the *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, Climacus's observation that while reality is not a system for us it very well may be for God, Westphal says that Derrida goes on to simply assume that God does not exist and that there really is no such thing as the word of God. Derrida's atheism is not a hypothesis, he says, but more or less dogmatic; for Derrida the truth of atheism goes without saying. There I beg to differ. Deconstruction is not only the denial that we are God; it is also the denial that we would ever have the authority to deny that there is a God. For Derrida, God is at the top of the list of things that deserve to wear the little epaulet *s'il y en a* on its shoulder. It is not true that Derrida is an atheist but it is true that he associates himself with atheism. I think that if he were pressed to give reasons for that association they would be more or less psychoanalytic, but this atheism, such as it is, is very much monitored by his notion of undecidability. While Westphal would certainly prefer that Derrida associate himself with theism, I think that Derrida's atheism seems to me to be exactly the sort of atheism that Westphal should approve of, if per impossibile he must approve of any, and that Derrida's formula of "rightly passing for" an atheist might have been penned by Johannes Climacus himself, who like Derrida hesitated to say he is—in this case—a Christian, but who said that he was trying to become one. That I think means that in the mean time the most Johannes Climacus could hope for was to "rightly pass" for a

Christian, which seems to me a splendid formula for anyone who wants to rightly pass for any such and such.⁶

But if Westphal thinks that Derrida is an atheist, he also thinks that he is a natural law theorist, and this on the grounds of the resistance that Derrida puts up to reducing the law to positive law, his insistence that positive laws are always deconstructible in the name of undeconstructible justice. This is a lovely essay that is one more sharp and shiny nail in the coffin of those who, even at this late date, are still confusing themselves with the notion that Derrida is a relativist. We deconstructionists very much appreciate the generosity of this Westphalian peace treaty, with the attempt to make us respectable, but on this point it is perhaps better that we decline the kind invitation to join the majority party, or at least to state clearly the terms on which we accept. Deconstruction is like the loner cowboy hero who, after having chased the outlaws out of town, can never accept the generous invitation from the townsfolk to make himself respectable and plant his roots there. He always has to ride on into the setting sun. So here's the qualification. "Justice" does not supervene upon positive law because it is a law of *nature* for Derrida, and that is because justice is not transcendent but transcendental, and again, it is not a transcendental Ideal, but a quasi-transcendental non-ideal. Justice is the sheer open-endedness of the promise that is inscribed in words like "justice" or "democracy," promises that are never delivered upon or realized in any actual law or democracy. "Nature" would imply some kind of natural reality or essence or being and that brushes against the grain of Derrida's anti-essentialism. He is continually unmasking the claims of convention to be nature (226), but not in the name of a positive idea of nature. Another way to see this is to see that it is not nature, which implies universality, that is being suppressed by bad laws, but singularity. Let us take the case of homosexual rights. Derrida does not think that homosexual rights rest on nature, but on singularity, on the right to be different, to push against the limits of what the majority calls nature, so it is more like the right to be "unnatural," thank you very much. Justice is more likely to be found where something is being denounced as "unnatural." Nature would always mean somebody's present or determinate idea of nature, however ideal. In deconstruction as soon as someone opens their mouth about "nature" (the ninety-nine), the idea of "justice" will send us off in search of what this idea of nature has omitted (the one hundredth lost sheep).

Unless of course—and here's my proviso—by "nature" you just mean "singularity," and you are saying that the "nature" of human beings lies in their "singularity," which would be a lot like saying the "the 'essence' of Dasein lies in its 'existence.'" Or it would be like Kierkegaard's remark in *Works of Love* that if one upright individual cannot do the opposite of what another upright individual would do under the same circumstances, then the God relationship—which is one to one—would be abolished.⁷ If every human being would be judged by a universal criterion, then everything would be completed in our public secular social life. Then everything would be easy and empty, having removed the depth that comes of the one to one relation with God. We are all equal, but all equally different, before God, like so many points on the circumference of a circle, all equi-

distant from the center, yet each point with its own defining, singularizing, uniquely proper one-to-one radius to the center. Derrida's idea is like that, but without God or nature. The most you could get him to say is that our nature is invent new ideas of what our nature is and never to accept any fixed or present idea of nature. Any such idea would always be as Westphal says "perennially penultimate" (228), at best but a temporary pause in human history where we stop to catch our breath and tally up the results thus far and at worst a barrier to innovation. Contrary to what Westphal claims, for Derrida one cannot "articulate the idea of a higher law to which every human code is answerable in a conceptual framework not constituted (or constricted by those ideals)." (224). Not because there is nothing higher than these human codes, but because what is higher cannot be articulated and certainly cannot be articulated in any conceptual framework, past, present or future. Justice is not a future present ideal. It is the inarticulatable, unforeseeable, unconceptualizable, unframeable open-endedness of any code of law, past, present or future, to what it is leaving out, to what is "to come" (*à venir*). Justice is the 100th odd sheep who wanders off, while natural law is the 99. Perhaps my objection to Westphal's idea is that it is rhetorically wrong. There is more juice in saying that Derrida is not a Natural Law theorist but an Unnatural Law theorist, not a Legal Positivist but a Legal Affirmationist. Not a Seventh Day Adventist but a Legal Adventist, by which I mean an *à-venir*-ist, one who affirms the coming of the other. Or even a Legal Messianist, by which I mean a Messianist without a Messiah who actually shows up, one who prays and weeps for a justice to come, which is always to come, whose very idea is to come, as long as we are in the soup of time and history and language.

More Radical Postmodernism

But leaving Derrida aside, I have a concern about the "methodological" or "epistemological" in Westphal's postmodernism, or indeed about any "methodologism" or "epistemology."⁸ Postmodernism for Westphal is a post-Kantian epistemology in which we postmoderns have found our way of denying knowledge in order to make room for faith. Now we know that what happens in Cartesian methodological doubt is that after subjecting everything to methodological doubt, what ends up being clear and distinct to Descartes is nothing other than the finite soul substances, the finite material substances, and the infinite creator God, that is, all the principal furniture of pre-critical medieval metaphysics. And we know that after Kant subjects God, the soul and the world-totality to critique, what ends up being restored in the second critique as objects of practical faith is nothing other than this same God, soul and immortality of pre-critical Rationalism. In Descartes and Kant, the old metaphysics is not false, it was just hasty or precritical, and the way things were in the old metaphysics ends up being reasserted but now in critical garb instead. In a similar way, the upshot of Merold Westphal's postmodern delimitation of onto-theology is that, when all is said and done, we are free to believe everything that onto-theological arguments, in all their clumsy woodenness and misplaced absoluteness, were getting at. We are perfectly free to believe in the God of

metaphysical theology: that God is an infinite eternal omnipotent omniscient creator of heaven and earth. Onto-theology is overcome by being postponed and chided for being so precipitous, presumptuous and impatient to shuffle off these finite, mortal and temporal coils. What onto-theology is talking about comes true in eternity, but here in time we should make more modest proposals. Postmodernism is the methodological requirement of the day, enjoining epistemological modesty and hermeneutical patience, but at the end of days, when this methodological veil is lifted, classical metaphysical theology steps on to the stage, wholly unable to suppress a bit of an "I told you so" smirk on its face. "We told you so," metaphysical theology says, wagging its finger at us postmoderns, the world really is a system! We told you!

My chief objection concerning *Overcoming Onto-Theology* is that it turns on a classical and classically Greek metaphysical distinction between time and eternity, even as it evokes a parallel distinction between an epistemological self and a noumenal world (and hence between epistemology and some sort of ontology). So I would like to press Westphal a little harder in the direction of what I might call a more robust postmodernism, or what I usually call a more radical hermeneutics, where these distinctions are not so settled. I am pushing a little harder on three things that Westphal and I hold in common. (1) The notion of undecidability is permanent; it is first, last and constant, and faith does not somehow lift us up above undecidability. Westphal affirms this idea but I think this point cuts a little deeper than he does. (2) Westphal claims that postmodern critique shows us how deeply linguistic and historical conditions bleed into and shape our beliefs and practices, and that that is what makes all hermeneutics radical. That is true but I want perhaps to squeeze more juice (or blood) out of that than does Westphal. (3) Westphal's guiding notion is that we would turn postmodern critique into a metaphysical dogmatism if we tried to use it to say that Christian faith, or any faith, is false or illusory. True, but I think that this is one of the lesser or weaker implications of postmodernism, constituting a thin postmodernism, and if it is a radical hermeneutics, it is not a very damn radical hermeneutics (138), because it is content to "make room" for faith, that is, to save the name of faith by making it "safe."

Let me sketch out or adumbrate the pressure that I would thereby apply to three ideas—that of faith, of the self and of God—in which Westphal and I share a common interest.

Faith. In a way, Westphal's epistemological or methodological appropriation of postmodernism proves too much. This "free to believe" approach makes too many things safe. There are very few things that one could actually prove to be false or illusory. Postmodern critique does not prove that eternal recurrence is false, or reincarnation, or that we cannot commune with the spirits of the dead through a medium who is a regular on the Oprah Winfrey Show, or a host of other beliefs. There is nothing in Derrida that could silence Shirley MacClaine. There are a lot of things that we treat as more or less perfect nonsense even though we can't prove them false. We are free to believe quite a lot of things.

But that point aside, the main idea behind postmodernism as regards faith is not so much to make faith safe as to give us a shocking and salutary

reminder of the contingency of our beliefs; it is not out to prove their relativity but to exhibit their radical contextuality. Postmodern critique insists—but I do not hear this in Merold Westphal—that there is an undecidable fluctuation among what I am doing when I engage Christian beliefs and practices and what someone else is doing by engaging Jewish or Islamic or Hindu beliefs and practices, and someone else by engaging beliefs and practices that are not overtly “religious” at all. One way to be equal before God is to say that when I affirm the name of God I also admit that the constancy of the name of God goes under many names.⁹ Or, as Kierkegaard said, if one upright individual cannot do the opposite of what another upright individual would do under the same circumstances, then the God relationship—which is one to one—would be abolished.¹⁰

In the spirit of Karl Barth, Westphal quite rightly warns us that our theologies and our churches can become idols, images of ourselves, not pathways to God. But I take that to imply not simply that, in a kind of standard form Gadamerian hermeneutics (as opposed to a more radical one), the essential truth of Christian faith can be expressed in many ways no one of which is definitive. It also means, in what I would call a more radical hermeneutics, or a more robust postmodernism, that faith itself takes many forms, Christian and non-Christian, religious and non-religious, with or without Christianity or biblical religion, with or without religion, so that one finds oneself radically non-privileged. (It is a little presumptuous, e.g., for Rahner to call the others “anonymous” Christians.) To fess up to the radical hermeneutical situation is to fess up to the radical translatability of what one cannot simply call “divine revelation.” For there many such revelations. One can speak of God’s revelation in the Lord Jesus or in Lord Vishnu, of God’s revelation in the Torah, or in the Prophet, or even God’s revelation in the death of God, which means that the kingdom of God has come down from heaven to reveal itself in and empty itself into the form of the love of peace and justice on earth. Postmodern faith means one holds one’s faith in earnest *and* with a certain irony, knowing that were I situated elsewhere I would be equally earnest about something entirely different.

In the radical hermeneutical situation, the truth is, none of us knows The Truth or has broken through to the Secret, to the Absolute Secret. There is no way to settle the undecidable fluctuation among the several faiths, or between the several faiths and a non-religious view of things. In other words, postmodern critique does not merely deny knowledge in order to make room for faith, but it bleeds into faith itself, and without relativizing it, without reducing it to an arbitrary fancy, recontextualizes it, so that the terms of our faith are struck with a certain contingent, contextual, and symbolic sense. Postmodernism is stronger stuff than a methodological buffer in time that makes room for faith in the eternal. Everything about postmodernism implies that the languages of the several faiths are what the young Heidegger called “formal indications” of something I know not what, that these several discourses signify something whose Secret I cannot probe. Something is getting itself said in these several faiths, I know not what. Is it some dark unconscious desire? Some evolutionary impulse that has surfaced in an odd way? Or the voice of God drawing me mysteriously down dark corridors to Godself? *Je ne sais pas*. I

do not know. It is not even a matter of knowledge.

Self. Next, as regards the self, everything about postmodernism implies that we do not know who we are, *quaestio mihi factus sum*, that at best we can "rightly pass" for a believer or a non-believer. Every time I say "*credo*" there is a voice within me that contradicts that faith and insists it does not believe a thing. Even so, those who say they disbelieve or do not believe must confess that they are haunted from within by another voice, one that fears that unbelief has forever closed itself off from the depth of things, from a wisdom both ancient and beautiful. "I" am a multiplicity of voices competing within me so that what I call the "I" is at best a shorthand for the one who does the talking, like a committee chairperson who speaks for the committee and gets to put his own slant on things and who in the process conceals how much dissent and how many competing voices there are back on the committee. Being at odds with ourselves is not so much part of being a self, or something we just have to put up with; it is pretty much what we mean by a "self," whereas a dull mono-vocal settled self-identity is pretty much what we mean by a post.

God. Finally, while it is minimally true that postmodernism need not take the form of a denial of God, but "makes it clear that we are not God" (187), it is also making a more radical invitation than that. To begin with, it shows us how exposed we are to the possibility that no one is God, including God, that even God is not God, that the name of God goes under other names. It does not dogmatically proclaim that the name of God reduces to other names, but it exposes us to that endless translatability. Postmodernism is not simply an epistemological way to delimit human knowledge here in time in order to make room for the world as it is eternally known by God; it shows us more mercilessly how exposed we are to the possibility that the world is not known comprehensively by anyone and that no one knows us we are here. It does not dogmatically proclaim that, but it exposes us to that. Deconstruction is not only the continuous reminder that we are not God (189) but it is the claim that the name of God is endlessly translatable into other names, like justice, and that we are in no position to stop this fluctuation.

To be sure, as Westphal says, the finitude of our knowledge does not mean that there is no infinite knowledge, but postmodernism exposes us more radically to the possibility that nothing is infinite, that God is otherwise than infinite, otherwise than omnipotent and omniscient, and that the discourse of metaphysics is wrong-headed. Postmodernism is not simply a caution sign held up before onto-theology, telling it not to speed, that the highway to God up ahead is still under construction, warning it that this is still the church militant and the church triumphant is reserved for another time. It is not saying that the main lines of onto-theology are more or less right but it is none of our business now, in this temporal vale of tears, to try to get a such conceptual handle on eternal things. Postmodernism issues a more radical invitation to theology to think God non-metaphysically: to think God outside the metaphysical categories of finite and infinite, time and eternity, sensible and supersensible, body and spirit. One finds this in current attempts to think God not as pure actuality (*actus purus*) or a necessary being (*ens necessarium*) but as "the impossible," or to rethink the idea

of divine omnipotence. What is interesting about this is how closely the invitation issued by postmodernism to redescribe God in non-metaphysical terms can converge with a more Scriptural way of thinking about God. Postmodern theology is closer to the way Abraham Heschel described the God of the Scriptures as a God of pathos, in defiance of Hellenistic metaphysics, than to the way Kant delimited knowledge in order to make room for faith in classical metaphysics.

In short, it is perfectly true that postmodernism proves that we are finite but it does not prove that nothing is infinite; or that it proves that we are contingent, but not that nothing is necessary; or that we are temporal but not that nothing is eternal. But to settle for that is to cash in one's chips and leave the game too early, while the night is still young. When postmodernism's game really gets going far into the early hours of the morning, it exposes our faith to an irreducible plurality of faiths, and our voice to a multiplicity of voices, both within and without. Moreover, it does not simply contend that the settled categories of metaphysics have been stored up for eternity but are not available for use here in time. Rather, postmodernism exposes us to the possibility and the prospect that things are otherwise than we thought. Postmodernism is an invitation to think in terms that are otherwise than temporal or eternal, otherwise than finite or infinite, otherwise than possible or necessary. In so doing, postmodernism does not undermine faith but makes more emphatic the extent to which faith is really faith.

Je ne sais pas. Il faut croire.

Syracuse University

NOTES

1. This exchange was part of a panel at the annual meeting of the Society for Phenomenology and Existential Philosophy in Boston, in November, 2003, on Merold Westphal's *Overcoming Onto-Theology: Toward a Postmodern Christian Faith*, Perspectives in Continental Philosophy No. 21 (New York: Fordham University Press, 2002). All page numbers in parentheses in the body of this article are to this book.

2. For a discussion of Catholicism and postmodern philosophy see John D. Caputo, "Philosophy and Prophetic Postmodernism: Toward a Catholic Postmodernity," *American Catholic Philosophical Quarterly*, 74: 4 (Autumn, 2000): 549-568.

3. Take the example of the *causa sui*. Westphal does not want to deny that God as the creator *ex nihilo* is indeed the uncaused cause of the world, but his methodological postmodernism tells him: 1) that is not anything one could establish by a conclusive argument, 2) even if one could pull off such an onto-theological feat that is not all that God is. That would get us only to some sort of energy source for the universe, and not bring us into a religious relationship to God, which is the God to whom we pray. (175)

4. Here Westphal is putting it to me, very politely, I would say, for having written two books entitled respectively *Radical Hermeneutics: Repetition, Deconstruction and the Hermeneutic Project* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987) and *More Radical Hermeneutics: On Not Knowing Who We Are*

(Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2000).

5. Keith Putt, "The Benefit of the Doubt: Westphal's Prophetic Philosophy of Religion," *Journal of Cultural and Religious Theory*, Vol. 3, No. 3 (August, 2002). www.jcrt.org

6. See Mark Dooley's interview with Jacques Derrida, "The Becoming Possible of the Impossible: An Interview with Jacques Derrida," in *A Passion for the Impossible: John D. Caputo in Focus*, ed. Mark Dooley (Albany: SUNY Press, 2003), p. 32. Dooley asks Derrida (I put Dooley up to it!) why Derrida says he "rightly passes for an atheist" instead of just saying "I am" an atheist. See Derrida, "Circumfession: Fifty-nine Periods and Periphrases" in Geoffrey Bennington and Jacques Derrida, *Jacques Derrida* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993), p. 155.

7. *Kierkegaard's Writings, XVI, Works of Love*, trans. and ed. Howard and Edna Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995), p. 230.

8. Remember that Gadamer objected to "epistemological consciousness" because it divided the subject from object while "hermeneutical consciousness" emphasized their fusion or solidarity in "being-in-the-world."

9. Derrida, "Circumfession," p. 155.

10. Faith is not a univocal term. There are *many* faiths, each of which has its own validity and integrity, and this because God is God, and we are all equal before God. But to be equal before God means God does not give privileged access, or a privileged revelation to some people that is denied to others. Each revelation is special or unique, but none is privileged; everyone enjoys equal if different access, which means that there are multiple accesses.