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## Putt - The Benefit of the Doubt - JCRT 3.3

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In recent years, several scholars in the United States have exploited the implications of Continental philosophy for developing new and innovative approaches to religious and theological studies. These thinkers—including, but not limited to Carl A. Raschke, Mark Taylor, Charles Winquist, Edith Wyschogrod, and John D. Caputo—have embraced various expressions of European philosophy, not in order to offer simple commentaries on those expressions but to utilize them as raw material for developing a uniquely American species of philosophical theology. These new American philosophical voices speak critically and constructively to the biblical paradigms lying behind Western theory, to the traditional religious and theological themes developing out of those paradigms, and to the cultural and social transformations that have changed how those paradigms are appropriated.

3. Merold Westphal, Distinguished Professor of Philosophy at Fordham University, certainly belongs in this chorus of voices proclaiming a new post-secular philosophical theology. He continues to add a provocative and, one might say, more conservative counterpoint to the new American Continentalist refrain by articulating an epistemology sensitive to the realities of cognitive finitude and moral weakness and by reminding his readers that wisdom only begins with the fear of the Lord. With a prophetically critical voice he calls for humility and commitment, always confessing that human beings can encounter meaning and truth but only as human beings, never as gods.
4. This present essay results from giving an ear to Westphal's creative voice and seeks to respond by developing a brief introduction to and exposition of his "prophetic" philosophy of religion. It focuses primarily on the wisdom of humility that characterizes his thought and how that wisdom, expressed through the redemptive dynamic of doubt, may contribute to developing a post-secular apologetic for faith.
5. Merold Westphal identifies two traditional approaches to the philosophy of religion that purports to offer a "scientific" perspective on the discipline. First, natural theology and its corollary, evidential apologetics, center on the issues of truth and justification, seeking through logical argument and/or empirical evidence to verify specific religious claims about God and reality. Consequently, they produce various metaphysical arguments for God's existence, proofs of biblical miracles, and models of theodicies.<sup>1</sup> Since the Seventeenth Century, these metaphysical syntheses of faith and reason have privileged the theories of truth accepted by mathematics and mathematical physics, thereby ensuring that philosophy of religion can consider itself a genuine science.<sup>2</sup> As "genuine scientists," natural theologians and evidential apologists allege that they follow a pure method of thought and reach objective truth devoid of any temporal or cultural contaminants, thereby ensuring that philosophy of religion will function as a normative science.

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<sup>1</sup>Merold Westphal, *God, Guilt, and Death: An Existential Phenomenology of Religion* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984), p. 2.

<sup>2</sup>Merold Westphal, "Phenomenologies and Religious Truth," in *Phenomenology of Truth Proper to Religion*, ed. Daniel Guerri're (Albany: SUNY Press, 1990), p. 105.

6. Second, phenomenology of religion seeks to avoid the explicitly objective metaphysical investigations of natural theology and rational apologetics by focusing instead on philosophizing about religious experience. Taking a positive cue from Kant, who claims that epistemological investigations that endeavor to construct metaphysical systems of God and religion exemplify a transcendental illusion, phenomenologists of religion bracket the issues of truth and evaluation, focusing instead on religion as a phenomenon of human existence in order to describe "the life-world of faith."<sup>3</sup> Taking a negative cue from Kant, in rejecting his insistence that objects should conform to the structures of the mind, they follow Husserl's "principle of principles" that a phenomenon should be allowed to give itself according to its own unique structures. As a result, phenomenology of religion becomes the one truly scientific approach to philosophy of religion, since it both reduces its subject matter to empirically observable religious expressions and also adequately brackets all personal or communal prejudices that would hinder objectivity. Consequently, philosophy of religion becomes a descriptive science."
7. Initially, Westphal responds positively to both approaches. On the one hand, he recognizes the necessity at times to raise the truth question regarding the justification of specific faith claims. Certainly, if one confronts an evidentialist atheist who attempts to deny theistic assertions on the basis of rational and/or empirical arguments, the only proper response might well be to respond in kind and produce evidential arguments that make those assertions "rationally respectable."<sup>4</sup> These arguments would constitute, therefore, a type of evidentialist apologetic and would embody a certain metaphysical character. On the other hand, Westphal has himself written one of the most creative and influential phenomenologies of religion of the past two decades, *God, Guilt, and Death*. Obviously, then, he has no aversion to the descriptive science of phenomenology, insisting that placing one's own religious commitments and opinions in brackets and adopting a "detached" stance allows one to get "acquainted with the familiar" in experience' in this case the religiously familiar.
8. Notwithstanding his positive responses to the two "sciences" of philosophy of religion, however, Westphal expresses significant concerns over whether "science" functions as the only appropriate paradigm for the study of the philosophy of religion. His primary hesitation comes at the point of the putatively disinterested methodologism of the sciences. Can one genuinely bracket personal opinions, existential commitments, and religious presuppositions so as simply to enquire into objective questions of truth or to engage in detached descriptions of religious experience? Or, are human beings so immersed in the flux of existence and so prone to un/intentional error that no "pure science" is ever possible? Westphal contends that both attempts at a scientific philosophy of religion fail to acknowledge' or to acknowledge consistently' that human knowing is situation-dependent, always infected by forestructures of culture, tradition, socio-political ideologies, and psychological motives steeped in personal desires and interests, all of which quite often operate surreptitiously. He doubts that philosophy of religion can be done well if reduced to the traditional models; consequently, he advocates a paradigm shift, a shift to a more Hebraic typology, specifically to a prophetic model of critique.
9. Of course, Westphal insists that his contamination of philosophy of religion with Hebraic prophetism should not be construed as an attempt to develop a "kerygmatic philosophy of

<sup>3</sup>Merold Westphal, *Kierkegaard's Critique of Reason and Society* (University Park: Pennsylvania' State University, 1991), p. 7.

<sup>4</sup>Merold Westphal, "Taking Suspicion Seriously: The Religious Uses of Modern Atheism" *Faith and Philosophy* 4 (January 1987): 29.

religion that is indistinguishable from preaching.”<sup>5</sup> A prophetic philosophy of religion can never assert the same authority as the God-called prophet. Instead, it should be construed as a “thought experiment” dedicated to making philosophy of religion more practically therapeutic and more intellectually honest.<sup>6</sup> Through discourses characterized as personal, untimely, political, and eschatological, the biblical prophets brought messages that were not universally grounded but oftentimes were *ad hoc* admonitions fitted to the particularities of a given situation. The prophets admonished their listeners that truth was often absent, not because of a lack of mental capacity, but because of intentional rebellion against the precepts of God. Westphal contends that prophetic philosophers of religion should likewise speak critically against the unattainable absolutism of universal foundations and against the reality of calculated deception and delusion for purposes of oppression and manipulation.

10. In a broader sense, Westphal’s new version of philosophy of religion glosses the philosophical hermeneutics of Paul Ricoeur by fleshing out in a more complete form the dynamics of Ricoeur’s distinction between a hermeneutics of retrieval and a hermeneutics of suspicion. Ricoeur, himself, recognizes that human beings always exist in the interstices between a demand for totality and the realization of limitation, what he terms the “imperialism of truth” and the “vertigo of variation.”<sup>7</sup> This interstitial existence comes to expression in the tension between Kant and Hegel, between the desire for a complete system of knowledge and the critical realization that reason cannot supply that completion. Consequently, Ricoeur chooses to do a “post-Hegelian Kantianism,” which demands that epistemology be a hermeneutics, a wager for the unity of meaning within the constraints of a plurivocity of textuality. This post-Hegelian Kantianism requires that one always choose between hermeneutics and absolute knowledge, which is, indeed, a decision between finitude and absolute knowledge.
11. Ricoeur confesses that he refuses the Hegelian synthesis of absolute knowledge because it absorbs all transcendence into the immanence of the process, because in some way it turns faith into gnosis, and because it makes the Promethean claim of having recapitulated evil within the structures of the *Aufhebung*.<sup>8</sup> He also protests that Hegel’s system does not take seriously the “horizon of unfulfilled claim” with reference to human action. Ricoeur insists that something is broken at the heart of human action that prevents any partial experience of achievement from being equated with the whole field of human action. Consequently, whether totality is presumed theoretically or practically, the “initial lie” is always the arrogant assumption that closure is possible.<sup>9</sup> Whenever, therefore, one chooses absolute knowledge, one engages in a deceptive premature closure, resulting in or from a false consciousness that “is no longer either error in the epistemological sense or lying in the moral sense, but illusion ...”<sup>10</sup> Such illusion demands the type of iconoclastic suspicion one finds in a Marx, Nietzsche, or Freud, who begin their hermeneutics of suspicion with the presupposition that consciousness has deluded itself and must be demystified in order for there to be a new understanding.
12. Although Ricoeur does not develop an explicit philosophy of religion, he does investigate

<sup>5</sup>God, Guilt, and Death, p. 12.

<sup>6</sup>Merold Westphal, “Prolegomena to Any Future Philosophy of Religion Which Will Be Able To Come Forth As Prophecy,” *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 4 (Fall 1973): 141.

<sup>7</sup>Paul Ricoeur, *History and Truth*, trans. Charles A. Kelbley (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1965), p. 42.

<sup>8</sup>Paul Ricoeur, *Freud and Philosophy: An Essay on Interpretation*, trans. Denis Savage (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1970), pp. 526-27.

<sup>9</sup>*History and Truth*, p. 176.

<sup>10</sup>*Freud and Philosophy*, p. 26.

the religious implications of his distinction between finitude and absolute knowledge and the need for a hermeneutics of trust and of suspicion. Actually, for him, there is a definite Christian eschatological concern with the dynamics at work in the liminal tensions between the “not yet” of the desire for unity and the recognition of fragmentation. The demand for the “unity of truth” is a “hoped-for” reality, an eschatological “not yet” that is a “timeless task.”<sup>11</sup> Consequently, hope has “a *fissuring* power with regard to closed systems.”<sup>12</sup> Hope, functioning through the ontologically explorative operations of the imagination, accepts that reality reveals both the paucity and the polysemy of meaning, turning its attention toward the future “in spite of” the present, and embraces the asymptotic flow of history as the flux of freedom. For Ricoeur, this architecture of meaning is a gift that mediates the superabundance of grace and reveals what Kierkegaard calls an “absurd logic” and what the Apostle Paul distinguishes as a logic of displacement in a new creation.<sup>13</sup>

13. This eschatological philosophy of hope, as the proper dialectic between skepticism and dogmatism, is but another translation of the prophetic and kerygmatic message of Scripture. Ricoeur agrees with Westphal that a philosopher should not feign being a preacher, since philosophers always speak in a discourse that lacks the finality of the evangelist; however, although philosophers should not be prophetic preachers, they may indeed be prophetic “poets of religion,” to use again a Kierkegaardian phrase. As prophetic poets of religion, philosophers must always engage the “fundamental gesture of philosophy” ‘an avowal of the historically conditioned character of human understanding and an act of defiance against distorted human communication that conceals dominating and violent intentions.’<sup>14</sup>
14. Although Westphal explicitly cites Kierkegaard and Kant as the two primary philosophical influences on his new structure for philosophy of religion, there is no mistaking that it also bears a definite Ricoeurian configuration. He predicates his new paradigm on biblical categories as does Ricoeur; he uses Ricoeurian nomenclature, such as “believing soul” and “hermeneutics of suspicion;” he concentrates on the tension between the demand for unity and the recognition of limitation; he adheres to Ricoeur’s principle of the liminality of philosophy; and he admits that the epistemological issue rests ultimately on hermeneutics, specifically the hermeneutics of finitude and the hermeneutics of suspicion. Like Ricoeur, his prophetic philosophy of religion might be characterized as *s\_imul fidelis et infidelis*, since he recognizes the positive import of maintaining a healthy doubt with reference to the cultural-linguistic relationalism of all human knowing and with reference to the possibility that knowledge has been intentionally subverted and distorted for ulterior motives. One could also change the *simul* to *semper* and admit that Westphal’s prophetic philosophy of religion does not use doubt merely as a station along some Cartesian itinerary toward certainty or as some thetic moment in a world-historical dialectic toward absolute knowledge. Instead, like the tenacity of the prophetic word of judgment, doubt remains a necessary component of an honest philosophy. Consequently, like Ricoeur, Westphal would insist that the hermeneutics of finitude and the hermeneutics of suspicion express the benefit of the doubt as a means for preserving epistemological humility and noetic repentance.

<sup>11</sup> *History and Truth*, pp. 55, 181.

<sup>12</sup> Paul Ricoeur, “Freedom in the Light of Hope,” in *The Conflict of Interpretations: Essays in Hermeneutics*, ed. Don Ihde (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1974), p. 412.

<sup>13</sup> Paul Ricoeur, “Hope and the Structure of Philosophical Systems,” in *Figuring the Sacred: Religion, Narrative, and Imagination*, ed. Mark I. Wallace. trans. David Pellauer (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995), pp. 205-206.

<sup>14</sup> Paul Ricoeur, “Hermeneutics and the Critique of Ideology,” in *Hermeneutics and the Human Sciences: Essays on Language, Action and Interpretation*, ed. and trans. John B. Thompson (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1981) p. 63.

15. If one traces the family tree of Westphal's prophetic paradigm shift, one discovers that the trunk is the radically Christian critical philosophy of Søren Kierkegaard, while the roots are the biblical conceptual network of poets, prophets, and apostles. In both scripture and with Kierkegaard, one discovers explicit expressions of the hermeneutics of finitude and the hermeneutics of suspicion—the two hermeneutical branches from which extend the limbs of Ricoeur, Kant, Marx, Nietzsche, and Freud.'
16. Westphal contends that Kierkegaard denies the Cartesian *cogito* as a transcendental ego existing outside the confines and constraints of time and tradition. At this point, Kierkegaard adopts a position quite similar to Kant's antirealistic perspectivism. In an intellectually autobiographical essay, Westphal writes of having encountered both Kant and Hegel during graduate studies at Yale and confesses that he emerged from that study more Kantian than Hegelian, having developed what could be his own version of Ricoeur's post-Hegelian Kantianism. What seduced him so strongly in Kant was the hermeneutics of finitude that underlay Kant's distinction between the phenomenal and the noumenal.<sup>15</sup> Kant does not deny that the noumenal exists, that there is a reality separate from and independent of human cognition; however, he does deny that human beings have the objective perspective from which to know that reality in itself. By definition, only God's eternal and perfect intellect can have direct access to that reality. God knows the *ding an sich*, but humans cannot, because they are embedded in the flux of existence, infected by culture, tradition, language, and social and political antecedents. Consequently, Westphal reads the distinction as a specifically theistic antirealism, the Kantian affirmation that humans are indeed not God. In other words, Kant's distinction between appearance and reality analogizes Kierkegaard's assertion that existence is only a system for God. Kant, therefore, contributes another prophetic voice to philosophy of religion, one that sings in harmony with Kierkegaard's, that given the "penultimate (at best) character of our current theories and of the de facto pluralism of perspectives," one should accept "that our best theories to date, including our own theologies, are in their very structure and not just in their details fallible ..." <sup>16</sup>
17. These Pauline and Kierkegaardian themes that constitute the hermeneutics of finitude have found contemporary expression for Westphal in certain types of postmodern philosophy critical of the untenable claims made by traditional modernism. Modern philosophy and theology may be viewed as "the Luciferian project of being 'like the Most High' (Isa. 14:14) ..." <sup>17</sup> The miscegenation of ontology and theology, that is, of philosophical discourse about Being and theological discourse about God, results in an ontotheology that claims to have discovered the self-presence of both absolute meaning and absolute truth. This identity of Being and Thought classically defines God; consequently every metaphysical claim to have discovered any self-attesting foundation for meaning and truth simultaneously claims to have discovered and to have occupied the place of God. As Lucifer in his arrogance sought to usurp that place for himself, so, too, in the *hubris* of human reason, modern philosophy offers perspectives from which to view the world *sub specie aeternitatis*, or, in other words, to "peek over God's shoulder" in order to view the world ahistorically and immediately. Westphal summarizes this ontotheological project, especially in its Enlightenment expression, as one

<sup>15</sup>Merold Westphal, "Postmodernism and Religious Reflection" *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 38 (1995): 131.

<sup>16</sup>Merold Westphal, "Christian Philosophers and the Copernican Revolution," in *Christian Perspectives on Religious Knowledge*, eds. C. Stephen Evans and Merold Westphal (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1993), pp. 167, 176.

<sup>17</sup>"The Ostrich and the Boogeyman," p. 115.

of substitution, specifically, the substitution of *mythos* with *logos*, tradition with critique, and authority with autonomy.<sup>18</sup> These substitutions take place on the basis of a foundationalist epistemology predicated upon the notion that human beings have come of age, have left the former darkness of superstition and historical dependence, have encountered through the light of reason the transparency of ideas devoid of any opacity of doubt, and have established through the incorrigibility of direct perception personal experience as the arbiter of empirical truth. But as Lucifer can take the shape of an angel of light, so, too, can Enlightenment foundationalism be the incarnation of an idolatrous desire to be God.

18. For Westphal, postmodern philosophy attempts to exorcize the demon of *hubris* that results from Cartesian immediacy and Hegelian totality, by reminding individuals that whatever intellectual treasure they possess, is held in "earthen vessels." It attempts to bring individuals back down to earth and to remind them that: (1) they are inextricably caught up in various narratives about reality (*mythoi*) and that no philosophical project has "an exclusive copyright on 'Logos' as its logo,"<sup>19</sup> (2) they cannot escape the influence of tradition, since history and language are the matrix, the womb, within which individuals grow and develop; and (3) they cannot attain any pure autonomy, since they can never cut the umbilical cord that connects them to some authoritative heteronomy. Postmodernism, in other words, is another expression of the hermeneutics of finitude dedicated to reminding human beings that they are not God. In this respect, "positive postmodernism" offers something of a neo-Kierkegaardian critique of reason on behalf of faith. As a matter of fact, Westphal classifies Kierkegaard as a "decisively postmodern" thinker, since he criticizes the foundationalist's claim that one can achieve, through the light of reason, "a pure gaze at naked truth by means of a recollective withdrawal from earthbound situatedness."<sup>20</sup>
19. Postmodernism contributes to a prophetic philosophy of religion by offering another version of the *fides quaerens intellectum*, which for Westphal never should be interpreted as a *fides quaerens securitatem*. Yet, ironically, at this very point he apparently fails to appreciate the fuller implications of postmodernism for a prophetic philosophy of religion. He claims that if the postmodern critique questions the truth of religious discourse, "it might be hard to see how it could have positive import for religious reflection."<sup>21</sup> Within the context of his own prophetic philosophy of religion, however, it really is not that hard to see the benefit of a postmodernist doubting religious truth. Since faith seeks understanding always within the structures of existence, it is a timeless task that should not succumb to the seduction of security offered by the idols of modernity. In other words, faith seeking understanding should come to expression in a prophetic philosophy of religion that always maintains an element of doubt concerning whether truth and meaning have indeed been discovered. Postmodernism, then, as another expression of the hermeneutics of finitude, has the same prophetic import as do Kierkegaard and Kant.
20. Westphal's prophetic, postmodern, Kierkegaardian prophetism illustrates what James William McClendon calls the "principle of fallibility," which states that at worst human interpretations are wrong while at best they are incomplete. In other words, since there is no transcendental subject outside of an "historical and cultural specificity and rootedness," there is always

<sup>18</sup>Merold Westphal, "Positive Postmodernism as Radical Hermeneutics," in *The Very Idea of Radical Hermeneutics*, ed. Roy Martinez (Atlantic Highlands: Humanities Press, 1997), p. 52.

<sup>19</sup>"Postmodernism and Religious Reflection," p. 134.

<sup>20</sup>"Positive Postmodernism as Radical Hermeneutics," p. 61.

<sup>21</sup>"Postmodernism and Religious Reflection," p. 127.

an element of doubt concerning whether truth has been discovered, while there is never a doubt concerning whether *all* truth has been discovered' in the finitism of the flux there can be no holistic grand unified theory. The hermeneutics of finitude emphasizes the plurality of texts, traditions, and interpretations. Ricoeur may be correct that truth is ultimately a unity in itself; however, Westphal contends that "the mirror in which we see it dimly is also a prism that renders our grasp of it irreducibly manifold."<sup>22</sup> The Pauline "glass darkly" becomes a Westphalian "prism darkly," thereby rendering hermeneutics "inescapable." It does not necessarily eventuate in a sophistic relativism or nihilism which would be just another premature closure, the totalization of doubt. It should, however, remind human beings that they are not God and that outside of their own places of dwelling there is only the utopic 'the "no place." This postmodern prophetic word, then, could be a gloss on another biblical poet: "The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom ..." (Ps.111:10 NASB), with the "fear of the Lord" including the concession that human beings are creatures and not the Creator."

21. A jaundiced eye turned toward the "praxicality of truth" quite often allows one to see that knowledge becomes a weapon used against the other or as a shield to protect the arrogant desires and deceitful heart of the self. 'In such cases, a traditional apologetic designed to give evidence of the veracity of specific religious worldviews lacks all palliative value, since the sinful misuse of religious beliefs may occur even when those beliefs are correspondently or consistently true. Sinful thinkers may still use true beliefs in order to "justify ungodly practices of exploitation or domination whether based on race, ethnicity, nationality, class, gender or whatever."<sup>23</sup> Using a powerful Kierkegaardian analogy, Westphal indicts theology (and by extension also philosophy of religion) for being a whore, prostituting itself indiscriminately to whatever will to power meets its desires. This prostitution occurs in one of three ways. First, through Overt Espousal, religious structures may explicitly condone practices such as anti-Semitism, Western cultural imperialism, or male chauvinism. Second, through Vague Generality, religious communities can express their critiques of evil in the abstract while never practically seeking to diminish evil concretely. Third, by use of a Dualistic Hermeneutics, believers may bifurcate reality into the sacred and the profane or into spirit and matter, thereby releasing themselves from having to interrelate the two spheres.<sup>24</sup> ' Regardless of the explanation for the epistemological infidelity, the fact remains that an ethics of belief may be perverted into expressions of cognitive and conative disobedience.
22. Original noetic sin also results in hypocrisy and in epistemological auto-redemption. With reference to hypocrisy, Westphal admonishes his readers not to be blind to the beam in their own eyes while staring self-righteously at the splinter in the eye of the other. This type of epistemological Phariseeism quite often develops whenever religious believers delude themselves into thinking that only unbelievers are victimized by transcendental depravity. Unbelief, however, "is not the only way of suppressing the truth about God ... only the most honest." Believers are just as prone to the cognitive implications of sin as unbelievers and may have evil, self-serving desires inducing them to embrace a particular faith perspective or to eschew living out in love, the practical truth of their faith. 'One might understand Westphal as paraphrasing the Jacobean imperative: "But prove yourselves doers of the word, and not merely hearers who delude themselves." (James 1:22)' ' With reference to auto-redemption, Westphal integrates the hermeneutics of suspicion with the hermeneutics of finitude as both

<sup>22</sup>"Phenomenologies and Religious Truth," p. 117.

<sup>23</sup>"Appropriating the Atheists," p. 25; "Taking St. Paul Seriously," p. 218.

<sup>24</sup>Merold Westphal, "Levinas, Kierkegaard, and the Theological Task" *Modern Theology* 8 (July 1992): 251.

relate to the illusion of foundationalism. Foundationalist epistemologies may be aware of sin as an authentic noetic category; however, they make a Pelagian attempt to neutralize it by their own arrogant methodologism, which is “void of contrition, confession, or dependence upon divine grace.” Foundationalism endeavors to realize an “epistemological sanctification” achievable through the exercise of human cognitive and perceptual instrumentality. “In other words, “foundationalism is not only the quest for certainty, but equally the quest for purity.”<sup>25</sup>

23. Westphal condenses all of the issues targeted by the hermeneutics of suspicion into one fundamental problem: the idolatry of instrumental religion. When God and faith become tools present at hand for individuals to utilize as means to selfish ends, then the resulting religious structures, whether doctrinally true or not, become exercises in self-deception and expressions of not so much a false consciousness as a fallen one. As God disdains ritualistic observances of sacrifice, so too, does God disdain orthodoxy when it becomes a ruse for domesticating the deity.<sup>26</sup> Westphal acknowledges that the temptation toward instrumentalizing piety rests implicitly in the relationship between transcendence and self-transcendence associated with every theology. If faith involves the perception of divine transcendence along with the apprehension of a justifiable self-involvement, then given that all people suffering the effects of the fall are tempted to self-assertion and egocentricity, one can understand the potentiality for making either the “cognitive self absolute” or the “collective self absolute.”<sup>27</sup> The prophetic dynamics of the hermeneutics of suspicion can bring a word of judgment and remind individuals that the proper human response to divine transcendence is “Useless Self-Transcendence,” that is, a redirection of the *incurvatus in se* outward toward God for God’s sake alone.<sup>28</sup>
24. Although Westphal does not explicitly reference Kierkegaard’s *The Purity of Heart*, this work, by his most important prophetic philosopher, illustrates well what Westphal intends by “useless self-transcendence.” Kierkegaard’s text is an extended gloss on the condemnation of double-mindedness in James 4:8: “Cleanse your hands, ye sinners; and purify your hearts ye double-minded.” Kierkegaard declares that a pure heart wills only one thing: the Good, and wills it for no other reason than the truth of willing it. Willing the Good is a good thing as such, but one must always cast a doubtful eye on why the Good is being willed. A false willing of the Good would be any willing predicated upon instrumentality, that is, willing the Good as a means and not an end. For example, willing the Good for the sake of reward is double-minded; willing the Good in order to avoid punishment is double-minded; willing the Good “out of self-centered willfulness” is double-minded; and, finally, willing the Good half-heartedly is double-minded.<sup>29</sup> All of these examples of double-mindedness are examples of instrumental piety, which is the result of transcendental depravity, which in turn should be the object of a hermeneutics of suspicion.
25. The hermeneutics of suspicion turns doubt away from the purely epistemological issues of truth and meaning and projects it toward the ethical issues of personal motivations and social ideologies. It functions as a hermeneutics of the fall, encouraging individuals to admit the reality of transcendental depravity and exercise constant vigilance over desires, interests,

<sup>25</sup>“Taking St. Paul Seriously,” p. 208.

<sup>26</sup>*Suspicion and Faith*, pp. 13, 15.

<sup>27</sup>“Levinas, Kierkegaard, and the Theological Task,” p. 244.

<sup>28</sup>*God, Guilt, and Death*, pp. 138-39.

<sup>29</sup>Søren Kierkegaard, *The Purity of Heart is to Will One Thing*, trans. Douglas V. Steere (New York: Harper & Row Publishers, 1948), pp. 53, 79, 99, 104.

intentions, and expressions of power. The benefit of the doubt *vis-a-vis* suspicion may be a gift of the Holy Spirit, whereby genuine sanctification might take place in the lives of individuals and communities as they are led from epistemological humility, to noetic repentance, to doing truth truthfully. Westphal serves as a prophet himself addressing philosophers of religion and calling them to the prophetic ministry of “personal and corporate self-examination.”<sup>30</sup> Such self-examination can then lead to an affirmation of divine grace as the guarantor of truth and to a redemptively critical faith akin to Ricoeur’s second naiveté.

### Toward an Apologetic for Paralogetics

Human beings always experience reality from finite perspectives, always standing between some protological moment of immediate clarity and some eschatological moment of total realization. Consequently, they live out this finitism through ontological patterns, various attempts at ordering reality into cosmetic world structures that give value to existence. These patterns always falsify to greater or lesser degrees in that they are either opaque to reality and, hence, in error, or offer numerous intensities of translucence, and, hence, promise only incomplete views of existence. Eliot seems to give in these lines a poetic translation of the irreducible manifold previously referred to as Westphal’s “dark prism.”

Since individuals are never born *in vacuo*, they never live outside of various world patterns that have preceded them. These patterns of reality are legacies bequeathed to each generation by their ancestors, those whom Eliot calls the “old men.” Their patterns are the wisdom that offers guidance, stability, truth, and meaning to the community, legitimating the community’s legislating interpretations by embracing systematically and boldly all aspects of culture and nature. In accepting the authority of the “old men” and their wisdom, individuals live out these systems as comprehensive and uncontaminated.

Westphal’s prophetic paradigm seeks this very wisdom and teaches that humility—the fear of the Lord as the consciousness of finitude and fallenness—is the preeminent benefit of the doubt.

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26. T. S. Eliot, in the second of his *Four Quartets* entitled “East Coker,” expresses a poetic hermeneutics of finitude. He writes:[40] Human beings always experience reality from finite perspectives, always standing between some protological moment of immediate clarity and some eschatological moment of total realization. Consequently, they live out this finitism through ontological patterns, various attempts at ordering reality into cosmetic world structures that give value to existence. These patterns always falsify to greater or lesser degrees in that they are either opaque to reality and, hence, in error, or offer numerous intensities of translucence, and, hence, promise only incomplete views of existence. Eliot seems to give in these lines a poetic translation of the irreducible manifold previously referred to as Westphal’s “dark prism.”

There is, it seems to us,  
At best, only a limited value  
In the knowledge derived from experience.  
The knowledge imposes a pattern and falsifies,  
For the pattern is new in every moment  
And every moment is a new and shocking  
Valuation of all we have been (81-87)

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<sup>30</sup>*Suspicion and Faith*, p. 16.

27. Yet, Eliot continues by directing his reader's attention to the sources of these patterns and, in doing so, implicitly broaches the hermeneutics of suspicion:<sup>31</sup>

Do not let me hear  
Of the wisdom of old men, but rather of their folly,  
Their fear of fear and frenzy, their fear of possession,  
Of belonging to another, or to others, or to God. (93-97)

28. With what may be the audacity of ingratitude for what he has been given by his ancestors, Eliot confesses that he has grown weary of listening to what the elders accept, to what is intellectually palatable to them. He now desires to engage what they refuse to swallow, the detritus that their systems cannot digest. He craves to hear of the ideas that have been left out or perhaps to hear from the people who have been left out. He knows that reason can be manipulated and used as expressions of power and control. So, he no longer has an appetite for reason but for folly, for that foolishness that does not fit what the elders prescribe as rational. In other words, he suspects that through "fear and frenzy" something has been distorted.
29. Eliot, in a manner of speaking, has given an aesthetic rendering of Westphal's prophetic philosophy of religion. Westphal, too, believes truth for finite individuals may only come to expression in patterns, and he, too, doubts that the "wisdom of old men" is as pure and comprehensive as they often insist it is. In good postmodern fashion, Westphal quests for what has been left out and why, always questioning theories and motivations as a good prophet should. He agrees with John D. Caputo that reason ("the wisdom of old men") "is a function of the system of power which is currently in place," which has been institutionalized and instrumentalized in order to protect the status quo. Conversely, the irrational ("folly") "is what is out of power," what the ruling authorities have abandoned and ostracized as not adhering to stable structures, that is, to the proper patterns.<sup>32</sup> More importantly, perhaps, he agrees with Jesus when he condemns the Pharisees for including tithing in their system but neglecting (read: "leaving out") justice, mercy, and faithfulness (Matt. 23:23). Westphal as a philosophical prophet keeps constant vigilance on what has been omitted, erased, or ruled out as folly or insignificant by the rulers who wish to manipulate truth and meaning in some profane ritual of instrumental piety.
30. Westphal's provocative paradigm shift from science to prophecy holds compelling didactic implications for the teaching of philosophy of religion, especially in more conservative contexts in which apologetics has dominated. Embracing his twofold hermeneutics of finitude (patterns) and suspicion (folly) does not necessitate the preemption of apologetic approaches but offers a more dialectical methodology that revolves elliptically around two foci: defending the tradition *and* questioning the tradition. Of course, the key term is "tradition," what Eliot calls "pattern" and "the wisdom of old men." The word "tradition" derives from the Latin "*tradere*," meaning "to hand over," which in turn develops out of the Indo-European root "*do*." "*Do*" means "to give" and etymologically gives rise to such words as "donation," "donor," and "endow."<sup>33</sup> Consequently, "tradition" refers to that which has been handed over or handed

<sup>31</sup> *Four Quartets*, pp. 26-27.

<sup>32</sup> John D. Caputo, *Radical Hermeneutics: Repetition, Deconstruction, and the Hermeneutic Project* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987), p. 229. Cf. also John D. Caputo, "Beyond Aestheticism: Derrida's Responsible Anarchy" *Research in Phenomenology* 18 (1988): 63.

<sup>33</sup> Joseph T. Shipley, *The Origins of English Words: A Discursive Dictionary of Indo-European Roots* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1984), p. 73.

down, given from one generation to another. It refers, for example, to the patterns and wisdom of old men and women donated to each new generation, giving them a sense of what the world is, of who they are, of what is good, of what is true, of what is beautiful, and of what is holy. Each generation has a responsibility to be good stewards of this gift of tradition—to protect it, defend it, and then to pass it on, that is, to give it to the next generation. Ironically, however, “*tradere*” also means “to hand over” or “to give” in the sense of treason or betrayal. It is also the root for “traitor.” In other words, tradition might not be a gift but a betrayal, a treacherous act of systematically-distorted patterns and subverted, oppressive “wisdom.” Consequently, certain aspects of tradition might well be a gift to be refused, something to be left out, a present that needs to be consigned to the past and passed up, since it may misrepresent truth and meaning.

31. On the one hand, in philosophy of religion, tradition as gift demands the response of apologetics, of genuine appreciation for and defense of the faith once delivered. The apologist in many ways acts like a priest, one who preserves the history and legacy of the culture. The priest is a maintenance worker, one who conserves the integrity of the community by respecting its rituals and interpretations, communicating them to others, and championing them when they are attacked or questioned by those who do not receive the gift. The priestly philosopher of religion, then, must always be ready to send a word (*logos*) away from (*apo*) the tradition that will justify it, protect it, and, perhaps, persuade others to embrace it. Tradition gives the gift of voice, of a language given to express the community’s inherited patterns of reality and to respond to other voices calling those patterns into question. Given the plurivocity of these finite patterns and the conflict that ensues from their inevitable competition, some form of “priestly” apologetics is a necessity for every particular tradition.
32. On the other hand, since tradition also might be a betrayal, and since priests in their passion for conserving the *status quo* might act as traitors both in omitting ideas and individuals that do not fit and also in striving to propagate misinterpretations that support the powers-that-be in the community, there is the need for another approach in philosophy of religion. If desire and egocentricity often contaminate logic and reason, then that which is illogical or irrational might not be absurd but simply what is left outside the system, that is, what is forced to remain beside (*para*) the acceptable word (*logos*) of the old men. When the logical becomes oppressively ideological, then the paralogical becomes appropriate response. In such cases, the philosopher of religion needs to become a prophet and engage in “paralogetics,” admitting both the hermeneutics of finitude—that reality is a system only for God and cannot be totalized—and the hermeneutics of suspicion—that ideas and individuals often are purged as a result of motives and truths perverted for instrumentally “pious” purposes. The paralogist obeys what Peter Berger calls “the heretical imperative,” that is, a constant sensitivity to the choices (*hairesis*) that must be made with regard to the straight (*ortho*) opinion (*doxa*) that has been authorized by those who have the hermeneutical power in the tradition.<sup>34</sup> Admitting that traditions are never univocal, the paralogist listens for the faint echoes of voices announcing alternative interpretations, voices that have been silenced or drowned out by the shouts of the orthodox arbiters of truth and meaning. The paralogist, suspicious of just how “straight” the accepted opinions of a tradition really are, pursues heresies and heretics in order to discover why the other (*heteros*) opinions (*doxa*) have been rejected and why those that suggest them may have been violated. Consequently, the paralogist consorts

<sup>34</sup>Peter Berger, *The Heretical Imperative: Contemporary Possibilities of Religious Affirmation* (Garden City: Anchor Press, 1979), p. 28.

with alterity in the form of heretics and heterodoxies in order both to query the “wisdom of old men” about its hegemonic claims to truth and to require it to be ethically responsible for how it uses the truth. As Westphal warns, even if the orthodox pattern is true, truth should never be used as “a security blanket to be hugged, nor a trophy to be displayed, nor a *weapon to be wielded*.”<sup>35</sup>

33. The paralogist ironically shares with the apologist a love for the tradition and intends every offensive inquiry into its patterns to eventuate in a defensive affirmation and reception of its gift. Paralogy and apology do not have to contradict each other.” One may indeed be both a priest *and* a prophet within one’s religious world structure and aspire to honor one’s heritage by handing it over to the next generation as a purer gift. The apo/paralogist walks the straight and narrow with something of a crooked gait, yearning to be one of the faithful followers but always with what Jacques Derrida calls “a kind of filial lack of piety” toward the tradition.<sup>36</sup> This “filial lack of piety” leads the apo/paralogist to engage in an immanent critique of the tradition, that is, a critique that, although often dependent upon different idioms borrowed from other traditions, determines to locate the reflexive reversals where the tradition turns back upon itself and is called into question by its own legislating language. Westphal refers to this immanent critique as an “inside job” predicated upon *ad hominem* speech by which prophetic philosophers of religion “are always appealing to the tradition against the tradition ... [and] are always affirming that which [they are] critiquing.”<sup>37</sup> The apo/paralogist (dis) respects the tradition enough to believe s/he can find God in it without idolizing the tradition and mistaking it for God.
34. Of course, the apo/paralogist risks being labeled an ungrateful recipient of the gift and a destructive heretic threatening to destroy the community. Yet, such a risk cannot be avoided, since apo/paralogetics is always an attempt at translation, at finding a different voice through which to defend and purify the tradition. But as in all translation, something is lost in the paraphrase so that for the hermeneutical guardians of the tradition every attempt at transcription becomes an expression of transgression, and the apo/paralogist becomes the traitor’*traduttore, traditore*. Yet, as a prophet, the apo/paralogist should not be surprised at the reception. As Jesus, himself admitted, the prophet is always without honor in her/his own community.
35. As one who once taught philosophy of religion in a confessional context, I am particularly sensitive to the apo/paralogetic tension in Westphal’s prophetic paradigm shift and to the risk involved in admitting doubt into the curriculum. My confessional tradition was Southern Baptist, and I once embraced it as a gift not only from my ancestors but also from God. Through the culture and language of this tradition’through the wisdom of its old men and women’I had patterned for me the good news of Jesus Christ as savior of the world, the centrality and authority of the Bible as God’s infallible word, and the importance of the church as Christ’s spiritual body on earth. I unapologetically committed myself to being an apologist for that tradition and desired to defend it and to communicate it to others, because I was convinced that its idioms, its narratives, and its images appropriately disclose the truth and meaning of God and divine love.

<sup>35</sup>“Phenomenologies and Religious Truths,” p. 109.

<sup>36</sup>Jacques Derrida, *Points...Interviews, 1974-94* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1995), p. 130.

<sup>37</sup>Merold Westphal, “A Philosophical Dialogue,” in *Modernity and its Discontents*, eds. James L. Marsh, John D. Caputo, and Merold Westphal (New York: Fordham University Press, 1992), p. 137.

36. Unfortunately, that same tradition has betrayed me. For example, (un)faithful forefathers used God's word to pattern an unchristian racism, taking the language of God's revelation and distorting it as a means for maintaining white supremacy over blacks. In 1869, Jeremiah Jeter, the editor of Virginia's state Baptist paper insisted that "God had placed between the races 'an instinctive repugnance ... which no training and no philosophy can eradicate, and which divine grace does not.'"<sup>38</sup> In a series of articles in the Tennessee state Baptist paper in 1872, an unnamed author established his condemnation of racial equality on the so-called biblical account of Noah's "curse of Ham," a curse physiologically indicated by dark skin and sociologically indicated by subordinate status.<sup>39</sup> During a college pastorate in North Mississippi in 1975, I heard one of my faithful deacons espouse the same argument in a Bible study class. Little had changed in a century. Of course, there are plenty of instances of Baptists adopting a more truly biblical position on the question of racism; however, my point is that, in my tradition, certain ungodly "truths" were held and propagated specifically as God's transparently revealed position. Perhaps there are other "truths" such as these that cry out for paralogetics, for a hermeneutics of suspicion that does not naively accept the wisdom of old men but, instead, realizes that it is their folly that might be the better gift.
37. Westphal, himself, confesses on the one hand that "no human order ... is entirely void of virtues to be received in gratitude and passed on in celebration." Yet, on the other hand, he also confesses that "no human order ... deserves to be immune from the kind of suspicion associated with the cultural left ..."<sup>40</sup> Consequently, his prophetic philosophy of religion oscillates between affirmation and suspicion, acceptance and doubt, or, in the language of this essay, between apologetics and paralogetics. This tension perpetuates both epistemological humility and noetic repentance in the endless task of coming to religious truth and meaning. In this asymptotic process, one should hope to acquire the wisdom that is as endless as the task. As Eliot writes<sup>41</sup>

The only wisdom we can hope to acquire  
Is the wisdom of humility: humility is endless (97-98).

## Notes

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<sup>38</sup>Rufus B. Spain, *At Ease in Zion: Social History of Southern Baptists 1865-1900* (Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press, 1967), p. 52.

<sup>39</sup>*At Ease in Zion*, p. 120.

<sup>40</sup>Merold Westphal, "The Canon as Flexible, Normative Fact" *The Monist* 76 (October 1993): 437-38.

<sup>41</sup>*Four Quartets*, p. 27.