

HERMENEUTICS, SCRIPTURE, & FAITHFUL PHILOSOPHIZING
AN INTERVIEW WITH MEROLD WESTPHAL

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BG: We're talking about the relationship between philosophy and scripture—a relationship that in many ways resembles the long-standing relation between faith and reason. But at the same time the notion of 'faith' might be general enough to cover, however loosely, a wide variety of faiths. Or, it might allow a variety of traditions to form a consensus around a basic theism. Scripture, on the other hand, introduces the problem of particularity in a more pronounced form, since scripture involves particular narratives and particular doctrinal claims. For this reason it might be better to speak about 'scriptures' in the plural. Is the relationship between scripture and philosophy simply another form of the relationship between faith and reason? Or would you say the relation between philosophy and scripture comprises a particular problem of its own?

MW: I think it's an aspect of the problem of faith and reason. I sometimes use the term 'faith' in any even broader sense than you do, and say that all philosophy is faith seeking understanding. On the one hand that involves my rejection of classical foundationalism, and the idea that you can always give a kind of, certain, final grounding for the criteria or principles on which you are working. I think we're always caught up in a hermeneutical circle. I think of the people who are trying to work out the theory of eliminative materialism, for example, as in the mode of faith seeking understanding—it's obviously not a religious faith, but faith in the sense that it doesn't have the kind of validation from some sort of neutral reason, some view from nowhere that philosophers have often hoped for.

The more usual conversation about faith and reason has to do with that sort of hermeneutical circle when it's specifically religious, when it belongs to some particular religious tradition or is grounded in some particular religious scripture. One of the reasons why that is an appropriate way to speak is that when one appeals to scripture in any normative sense, one is automatically talking about what is understood as not available to the unaided powers of human thought, human reason. The term 'reason' has been sort of co-opted by this notion of unaided human power. So yes, I think that the question of scripture and philosophy is an aspect of a larger question of faith and reason.

BG: Would you say it presents any particular problems or difficulties within that broader dynamic?

MW: In a sense it certainly does. It isn't exactly the problem of particularity, because various forms of contemporary naturalism, for example, are quite particular. They belong not to universal human experience or universal human thought, but to thought as it has emerged from particular sources and traditions at particular times. So it isn't that one is caught up in dependence on something that is particular rather than universal. The distinct problem is in appealing to something particular for which one claims divine origin and divine authority, and that isn't always the case. The people who are working on eliminative materialism don't appeal to divine authority—although they often treat their own rationality as if it *were* a divine authority.

BG: Elaborating on that, to what degree or in what way might scripture be normative in philosophical discourse?

MW: I don't think it can be. There was a time when it could. Back in the patristic period philosophy signified a thought-out worldview, and so some of the early Christian writers talked about their 'Christian philosophy,' meaning their Christian world view. For them, scripture was normative. The term 'philosophy' has come, in the modern context—and there are the beginnings of this in the medieval context, too—to signify precisely that which unaided human reason can accomplish and validate. That notion of philosophy is so strong and entrenched that I don't think it's likely to be in too much danger of being replaced. Understood that way, it's a no-brainer that scripture cannot be normative for philosophy.

BG: To take two examples, Ricoeur and Lévinas want to keep their philosophical discourse in some way separate from their work in scriptural commentary, so that no one can charge them with using scriptural evidence to support the conclusions they are drawing on a

strictly philosophical basis. Would you say that practice is similar to the way scripture operates in your own work?

MW: I think so. The way I like to think of it is something like this: “Here I stand. My view of the world has been shaped by scripture, which for me as a person is normative. As I look at this or that aspect of human experience, it looks to me as if it’s this way.” I don’t try to deny that that understanding of things has been inspired by scripture. On the other hand, I offer it to you, who may not share that orientation toward scripture as an authority, and ask, “From where you stand, doesn’t that look like that is the case?” I think that is what Lévinas does with the widow and the orphan and the stranger. An orthodox Jew, and for that matter an orthodox Christian, could appeal to scripture as an authority saying “God is concerned about the widow, and the orphan, and the stranger.” Lévinas doesn’t do that. He says “Look, when you look into the face of your fellow human beings—even if they be unattractive in the variety of ways in which widows and orphans and strangers are, those you would rather not notice, those you would rather ignore, and in some cases those you would rather take advantage of—do you not see in their face something that issues a categorical imperative, that you must not deface them?” That’s an appeal that isn’t based on the authority of the scriptural source from which it is inspired. I think Ricoeur’s work often has that same character as well. The working presupposition, in my case at least, is not that such appeals are made to a universal reason which inhabits all of us undifferentiated. So it’s not a rhetorical question; I see it as asking “From where you stand, can you see this?” Sometimes, where you may stand you won’t be able to see this, and we’ve got a problem.

BG: You have written extensively on phenomenology of religion, and advocate a distinctly hermeneutical variety, akin to the Anselmian model of faith seeking understanding. There are intimations of this hermeneutical turn even in your earliest work, such as your essay “Prolegomena to any Future Philosophy of Religion which Will Be Able to Come Forth as Prophecy,”¹ where you criticize the transcendental ego that tries to bracket all particularities. But how would you respond to the objection that phenomenology of religion, even in a hermeneutical employment, still harbors certain transcendental ambitions, insofar as it seeks to establish general structures of human experience? Phenomenology might in that case be able to locate some sort of correlation or continuity between these general structures and revelation. But at the same time as you are working in phenomenology of religion, you are also immersed in and influenced by thinkers such as Kierkegaard, Barth, and Lévinas, who

radically challenge—in their own ways—the idea of such a continuity, or correlation of this sort. So what do you think the possibilities and limits of such a phenomenology of religion might be?

MW: I don't identify the transcendental with the universal. That, it seems to me, is one of the things that modernity wanted to do that already with Hegel was undermined in two ways. If you think of the transcendental as the *a priori*, the conditions for the possibility of experience, then already in Hegel you get the notion that *we* are the transcendental ego, that the conditions for the possibility of experience are shared among us in a social context, or if you want to put it linguistically, in a language game. Secondly, the *we* that is the transcendental ego—if one may speak paradoxically—is historically contingent and particular. Now for Hegel that is part of a larger process that's not contingent, and I don't add that to it, but it seems to me that since Hegel much of the best philosophical work—even Husserl against his own will—has been to reinforce these notions that the *a priori* conditions of the possibility of experience are the contingent and particular shared conceptual apparatuses or linguistic rules that a particular society or culture has. So if there is some transcendental dimension to phenomenology, it's not going to be phenomenology as a rigorous science, but a phenomenology that's going to be, like Hegel says, its own time comprehended in thought, or its own community comprehended in thought. So if there are transcendental moves, they aren't moves of the sort that are trying to fulfill the aspirations of classical foundationalism, to give a universal and necessary criterion for knowledge, a first principle for knowledge.

At the same time, when I'm doing phenomenology of religion, for example as in a book like *God, Guilt, and Death*,² it's a hermeneutical phenomenology. I draw on texts from a variety of different religious traditions, and part of the time what I find are structures that have a certain quasi-universality. One can see them, or their first cousins, in a wide variety of different places. They aren't unique in the way in which some religious particularity is unique. On the other hand, there are differences that are fundamental at the level of particular religious traditions, but I have argued for *types* of religious traditions where typical differences are not restricted to particular religious traditions, but can be shared by, or instantiated by, a variety of religious traditions without being fully universal. So it seems to me that phenomenology of religion slides along a spectrum that moves from structures which are *more nearly* universal, to structures which are more nearly particular and unique to a tradition, and that one does this without the philosophical presupposition that one *has* to find only utterly universal structures, or on the other hand absolutely unique structures.

Another way to put that is that insofar as there are transcendental aspirations in my understanding of the phenomenology of religion, they aren't the kind of transcendental structures that Descartes, or Kant, or Husserl—in his programmatic writings—would be terribly happy with.

BG : Following on that, you mention the phenomenological attempt to give purely scientific descriptions of religious phenomena, and in that early essay that is something you critique—that approach that attends to the subjective structures of religion, while bracketing questions about the object of religious faith. Instead of approaching philosophy of religion as a rigorous science, you propose that it take up a certain prophetic calling, which you characterize as being *personal, untimely, political, and eschatological*. In some ways that early paper almost seems like a programmatic statement for some of the developments that you follow in subsequent work. Would you consider that something you have tried to follow through on, that this early proposal was in some way programmatic for your work?

MW: Not consciously. That is to say, I haven't consciously been thinking about that essay as I've been doing my work in Kierkegaard, Lévinas, and so forth. But you've seen something that's important. That conception of the project has worked its way into my muscles, and is at work in my work. I think if you read the work I've done, particularly on Kierkegaard and Lévinas, you can see all of those characteristics—*personal, untimely, political, and eschatological*—noticing of those kinds of structures within religious life, either within a very particular religious tradition or more broadly within some type of religious tradition. I believe that both the occurrence of such structures within religious traditions and their phenomenological description occur within a hermeneutical circle. Because of the presuppositions involved I don't think it's helpful to use the term 'scientific' to describe phenomenology; I think it connotes too easily, and often intentionally, a disinterested, unsituated, observation from outside. I think we're never outside; I think we're always inside somewhere. So the idea that phenomenology could be scientific, much less rigorously scientific, is an idea that I have never been terribly enthusiastic about.

At the same time, I think that what merits the term phenomenology for what we are talking about here is that it is descriptive. One isn't trying to prove that something or other is the case. One is trying to describe certain kinds of experience, which people have or could have, about whose ultimate validity philosophy isn't always in a very good position to decide—philosophy as some neutral arbiter. Individual human beings have to make those kinds of

decisions. That's why I think there's no escaping faith in the broadest sense of the term.

BG: So in speaking about philosophy of religion as prophetic in this way, would you envision it as being something that is somewhat exceptional, or would you say this prophetic calling should apply to Christian philosophizing more generally?

MW: I wouldn't want to limit it to that. The sense in which I'm using 'prophetic' here is the sense of critique, not the sense of foretelling, and it seems to me that there are lots of philosophical traditions who understand philosophy as critique in one way or another. One can go back at least to Socrates. I think that's a healthy thing in philosophy, and that philosophy should be epistemic critique, social, ethical and political critique, and religious critique. It should be asking the untimely questions that the prophets of ancient Israel were famous for asking. Phenomenology can be critique without being dogmatic simply by asking untimely questions, by pointing to the dogmatic exclusions of metaphysics of various sorts or even of phenomenology itself.

BG: But within the context of doing Christian philosophy, I'm curious as to whether you think this is something that should be true of all Christian philosophizing—that it should be prophetic in some way.

MW: Well, I hate to put myself in a position of telling other people how they should do their philosophy. I haven't ever thought about the question of whether all Christians doing philosophy should be engaging in prophetic philosophy. But it does seem to me that it's something that ought to come naturally and frequently, and easily, to Christian philosophers, even if it isn't a universal characteristic of their work. I don't think that needs to be done within the traditions and frameworks within which I operate exclusively. I think, for example, Alvin Plantinga's critique of contemporary naturalism is a prophetic dimension of his philosophical thought. And the critique that he and Nick Wolterstorff and others have launched against classical foundationalism and evidentialism—I think that's a prophetic dimension within the epistemological realm. I think there needs to be a prophetic dimension within the social, political, and religious realms, and that's where I find Freud, Marx, and Nietzsche particularly helpful.

BG: In this case we could see how there would be a need for a prophetic kind of Christian philosophizing if, within the philosophical community, there came to be a philosophic 'Christendom.' Maybe that is somewhat hard to imagine—or maybe you've experienced it in

some ways yourself, but that Christian philosophy could become a sort of *status quo* in certain circles, and become a sort of Christendom that is in need of prophetic critique.

MW: I certainly wouldn't preclude that possibility! What I've said when I'm talking about the hermeneutics of suspicion is that the way to get good at it is to practice it on others, and then you understand the structure. Then the way to get *really* good at it is much harder, and that is to practice it on yourself—personally, collectively. I think every mode of academic life, including philosophy, and including Christian philosophy, succumbs to temptations to absolutize itself and to say in effect, "We are the people. Wisdom will die with us." And so just as in the Reformation tradition one speaks about being 'reformed and ever reforming,' it seems to me that philosophy in general and Christian philosophy in particular needs to be ever self-critical. It is *hard* to be self-critical, and sometimes I like to put it this way: Everyone needs a best friend who will tell you what your best friend won't tell you. And so sometimes critique has to come from outside. This is why I have found Marx, Nietzsche, and Freud illuminating. I think that within the community of Christian philosophers—which is quite diverse, as you well know—there's room for critique of what's going on on the other side of the fence, in every direction. I think we need to hold each other accountable and try to help each other see what we aren't always able to see so clearly ourselves.

BG: To continue with the theme of the hermeneutics of suspicion, in one of your recent essays—"In God We Trust?"³—you push this theme a little further than you have previously. It's one thing to say that believers hold theological beliefs or interpret scripture a certain way because of questionable motives. We are also prone to put them to use in sinful ways. But beyond the role of suspicion regarding our own readings of scripture, you ask "whether we should apply our hermeneutics of suspicion to Scripture itself."⁴ Now, this suggestion isn't going to stir up a lot of controversy among people who don't accept scripture as being normative, or being the Word of God. But for people who believe that scripture is in some way the Word of God, this is a controversial suggestion, and you admit that it makes you uncomfortable. But you do probe the possibility that one could maintain a distinction between divine authorship and human authorship, and you use Nicholas Wolterstorff's theory of double discourse in order to do this. I wonder if you could elaborate a little bit on that strategy.

MW: Well, I'm still uncomfortable with it, and I haven't thought about it a great deal, or written about it since that particular paper and the conference at which it was given. The example that comes to my mind as a possibility is something like this: If you read the Old Testament, you find portions of it which are very pro-monarchy, and other portions that are very anti-monarchy—and that's just a fairly obvious fact that any biblical scholar will point out. Even in the same book of the Bible you find these two strands sort of sitting side by side, as if nobody noticed the tension! The possibility that I raised—and it's only a question, and a suggestion, and not anything that I feel I have a clear answer to—would go something like this: The people among whom the pro-monarchy ideology flourished—Israel seen in the light of a pro-monarchical view—might have been motivated to see things that way, at the level of human psychology and so forth, in ways that are not purely disinterested. They may have had political aspirations for themselves or their communities. The same may be true on the other side; that is, both parties in this particular debate might be like Republicans and Democrats today—they're all self-interested sinners. Notice I say 'they' so I can exempt myself! (laughs) It seems to me at least possible that there is a not-too-beautiful underbelly to the pro-monarchical and the anti-monarchical themes that arose in ancient Israel, and that have ended up in the Bible, and that one could explore those, and engage in a hermeneutics of suspicion to try and understand the situation more clearly.

As for Wolterstorff's suggestion that what God is saying to us in scripture isn't identical with what the authors or the redactors are trying to say... It might well be the case that we need to understand the authority of scripture in such a way that in looking for what God has to say we don't preclude the possibility of discovering this kind of human, all too human character to the origins of the biblical texts from the human point of view. I don't say that dogmatically, but I don't think it can be simply dismissed.

BG: I suspect that—and correct me if I'm wrong—one of the reasons why this still makes you uncomfortable is the difficulty of establishing criteria on which we could exercise this suspicion toward the human authors. We could turn the suspicion on ourselves and say, "How do we know that we're suspicious of what's been written here for the right reasons?" In other words, how do we know we aren't trying to domesticate...

MW: That's my concern. The reason it makes me uncomfortable is that all too easily one falls precisely into that trap of saying that "I have a methodology that can make me the judge of scripture." On the one hand, most of the people who are most eager to practice a hermeneutics of

suspicion in relation to biblical authors are not at all eager to acknowledge the Bible as an authority for faith and practice, but rather are motivated by the desire to discredit it. One can easily fall, I think, into the situation in which critique involves putting oneself in a position of being the judge, and that was it seems to me, the fatal flaw of modernity as far as religion is concerned. In a variety of ways, writers like Spinoza, and Lessing, and Kant, and Hegel took their particular version of “reason” and made it the criterion that religion has to satisfy if it’s going to be acceptable. And that, it seems to me, is the fundamental onto-theological gesture: God and religion can enter into philosophical discourse, but only on philosophy’s terms. So, it makes me nervous. On the other hand, if one really took seriously Wolterstorff’s suggestion that what God is saying to us through scripture needn’t be identified with what the human authors are trying to say, much less their underlying motivations, and that God can take something that is flawed—not only by the fallibility of human beings, but by the fallenness of human beings—and still use it to say what God wants to say to us, this might help. Sometimes I put it this way: God spoke to Balaam through an ass, so God can use various vehicles to say what God has to say to us. I don’t want to preclude the possibility, nor dogmatically affirm the notion that the writers of scripture were somehow less pure in the motivations which led them to see things the way they saw them.

BG: So then if there were criteria for that, they would be situated within the hermeneutical circle, so that it would be done, as you say, “on biblical grounds”?⁵

MW: All of our criteria are always in need of justification that they themselves cannot provide. The problem with criteriology is that you then have to find new criteria in terms of which you can justify the old criteria. The attempt to think biblically doesn’t eliminate this problem.

BG: Let’s talk a little bit about Paul, because Paul is a hot topic these days. There are certainly strong Pauline themes in your work—what we’ve just been discussing, the hermeneutics of suspicion, and the idea of sin as an epistemological category. You identify those ideas as having certain Pauline roots, so I wonder if you could elaborate on what specifically Pauline themes you might see in your thought.

MW: The one that’s most obvious is the one you’ve just mentioned. Romans 1:18 says that “in unrighteousness we suppress the truth,” and I think the biblical narratives, and a whole lot of non-religiously-inspired philosophy and psychology underscores the double fact that desires are often playing a very significant role in what we end up believing, and that sometimes these desires

are such that we're ashamed of them and have to hide them from ourselves. And so our beliefs are anything but pure reason, and are contaminated.

I didn't start with Paul, and say "Let's explore sin as an epistemological category." I started finding out very early on, as early as graduate school and my first teaching, that I kept being drawn to the writings of various atheists, like Marx, Nietzsche, Freud, and Sartre. I was a little puzzled about that, because I wasn't an atheist, and I wasn't finding myself tempted by atheism, or wanting to flirt with atheism. What was it that was drawing me to these texts? It gradually dawned on me. I finally got clearer about what was going on, which was that I was finding in them an essentially Pauline project of trying to treat sin as an epistemological category, if not necessarily in that language. Of course that's an Augustinian, and a Lutheran, and a Kierkegaardian, and a Barthian theme as well; they are all Pauline. One can even make a case for it in Aquinas, although it's a little bit harder to do; but Aquinas doesn't fall outside that realm as easily as some have thought. But that certainly is an important Pauline theme that has shown up in my philosophical work.

Another one underlies my interest in the hermeneutics of finitude, as opposed to the hermeneutics of suspicion, or the hermeneutics of fallenness. Paul says that we see things through a glass darkly, in a mirror dimly. The Greek word is *enigma*. We don't have that pure face-to-face that Plato, and Descartes, and Husserl and a host of other philosophers—Spinoza and Hegel, in their own ways—have aspired to. We hold this treasure in earthen vessels, in clay jars, and there's an epistemic qualification due to our mere creatureliness, our finitude as creatures that combines with the problem of fallenness. So I have been drawn, not consciously in a Pauline way, but I have been drawn to the hermeneutics of finitude, which for me begins primarily with Kant and a whole host of post-Kantian philosophers, and have gradually come to see that I'm trying to think out a certain Pauline motif there as well.

BG: To continue with the question of Paul: In recent years we've seen a growing philosophical fascination with Paul in thinkers like Žižek, Badiou, and Agamben. I'm curious as to your take on this trend, particularly because it seems like at time there's a tendency for these philosophical readings of Paul to set restrictions that are akin to onto-theology, which you mentioned earlier. To paraphrase Heidegger: Paul—or Paul's epistles—can come into philosophy only insofar as philosophy requires and determines that and how Paul enters into it. What do you make of this fascination with Paul?

MW: It puzzles me. I don't quite know what underlies it. Of the three thinkers you mentioned, I'm only familiar with Badiou's work on Paul; the other two I'm not. But it seems to me that he does something that we all do: He takes from Paul what he can use, and he puts it in his context and uses it for his purposes. On the one hand that's perfectly legitimate. We all do that; we take from Plato what we can use, we take from Spinoza what we can use, we pick and choose. That's part of the philosophical craft: We take the raw materials that we've inherited and reshape them in our own ways, and make them better or worse, as the case may be. I do this with some of the thinkers we've been talking about—Marx Nietzsche, and Freud. I don't take their atheism; I take their hermeneutics of suspicion and take it seriously. They wouldn't be particularly happy with what I do with it, and that strikes me as quite legitimate. So I don't have any complaint if Badiou takes Paul's conversion and what happens in the aftermath as an example of what he means by a 'truth-founding event.' He's obviously interested only in the very formal structure; he's not interested in the content of Paul's message, and he doesn't affirm it. In fact, he makes it pretty clear that he doesn't have any use for it. But the structure of an event in a person's life in which that person comes to see things in a very, very different way, and truth comes to have a wholly different shape—an epistemic conversion, and then epistemic evangelism. Since this is the truth, then one expounds, and expresses to others, and preaches and defends and so forth. I think Badiou is right that the truths, plural, that are in conflict in our world—what Ricoeur would call the conflict of interpretations—often have this character, that they emerge as a truth-founding event in the life of a particular individual or a particular community, and Paul is a splendid example of that. Now that would become onto-theology if one were to say "This is the only thing in Paul that's of any use—this formal structure, and philosophy can show that. Some neutral arbiter can sort out the kernel from the husk, and show that the structure is interesting and valuable, but the content is not." It's not clear to me that's what Badiou does. It seems to me that he has a somewhat more humble approach—"This is what I find helpful, and I have no use for the rest of it." But when philosophy or a philosopher sets up as the arbiter and says "What I find useful is all there is, the rest is junk, the rest is garbage"—that's the arrogance of onto-theology, that ought to be avoided.

BG: This is something that Heidegger does, in maybe a quite different way, but to take the formal structure of Christian theology and then turn it into something that is useful philosophically. But this is where this tension between philosophy and theology really comes into play. To what extent can you take these theological ideas and use them philosophically, and expect to maintain that sort of theological

neutrality? Theology is going to say, “Well, it doesn’t work that way—to talk about conversion, *metanoia* in the Christian sense, as something that can be understood formally, to apply to conversion in any number of senses... well, it’s unique.” So this is where we seem to run into this problem. How should Christian philosophers negotiate that? On the one hand, they recognize something about *metanoia*, the conversion event, as unique. But then as philosophers, it’s difficult to make claims about that without appealing to theological norms.

MW: Implicit in your question is the notion that conversion is a fairly broad term. I think one can say that just as for someone like Peter or Paul, the life and death, and in this case the resurrection of Jesus, triggered a conversion event, so for Plato the life and death of Socrates triggered a conversion, and that conversion was a truth founding conversion, or truth-founding event. Those things happen in a variety of contexts—some of them quite trivial. The guy who does Tempur-Pedic mattresses was in business of some other sort, and he ran across the stuff that the NASA uses and so forth, and thought it would be a great mattress, and it changed his life. He quit doing what he was doing before, and he devoted himself to building this mattress company. Philosophically and theologically speaking, that’s a fairly trivial level, but the structure is fairly clear, in terms of what’s important, and how my life is to be lived and so forth. There are these changes.

I’ll repeat what I said before, because I think it’s the crucial point: I have no objections to philosophers taking what they find useful and putting it to use. But with what right do they claim that this is now a universal norm? This is what Heidegger does in that 1927 essay “Phenomenology and Theology”; he says that the formal structures he finds illuminating are the criterion by which theology can be *corrected*—he says that nine times in that essay. If you set up what you have done as some sort of tribunal, to which religious belief and theological discourse *have* to conform, then that seems to me the arrogance of onto-theology, and at that point it becomes self-deluded and confuses finitude with some kind of infinite, absolute authority. That’s what I was talking about earlier when I said that some philosophers who don’t treat the Bible as divine authority treat their own systems as divine authority.

BG: So it would be the way that Heidegger wants to formalize these Christian notions, and then say “These are the ontological structures of Dasein, and any *existentiell* event has to conform to these ontological, existential structures”?

MW: Yes. For example, when you have said “In the call of conscience Dasein calls itself,” you have erected a structure that precludes the possibility

that in the call of conscience *God* calls the self, or as Lévinas would put it, the *Other* calls the self, you have preserved the modern—this is ironic, because this is Heidegger, who is at this point a hopelessly and helplessly modern thinker—in trying to preserve the absolute autonomy of the self. “In the call of conscience, Dasein calls itself.” Period. That’s to take a structure and turn it into a dogmatic criterion for which inadequate warrant has been offered.

BG: In arguing for a Christian appropriation of postmodern thought—an appropriation that is critical, but which also acknowledges whatever is of merit in postmodernism—you’ve encountered numerous criticisms from critics who are anxious about the supposedly compromised authority of scripture. What do postmodern perspectives offer for Christian reading and thinking about Scripture?

MW: I find it puzzling to encounter this kind of objection because the modernity that postmodernity seeks to supplant is the modernity that seeks to posit the autonomous, self-sufficiency of human reason. The minute you appeal to scripture as an authority, you have already compromised the autonomous, self-sufficiency of human reason. You’ve said there’s something that goes beyond it, and if you take Paul seriously when he says that the word of the cross is foolishness to the Greeks, then you have to say that it doesn’t just go beyond philosophical reason, but *against* it—at least in some cases. So if postmodernity is a critique of that kind of rationality, those who are interested in biblical authority might find, at least to that degree, an ally.

Let me suggest three themes that postmodernism might have to offer. One is the theme of alterity. In a variety of ways postmodernism talks about the way in which our horizons, which are sometimes our defenses, are not impermeable. We need to make room for an alterity that breaks through them, and in that hear way a voice that is not our own. Now that’s a formal structure, and the postmodern philosophers for the most part are not trying to make room for the voice of God. Lévinas does want to make such room, although it’s not quite clear that this God is different from the neighbor. But it seems to me that Christians who want to take divine revelation seriously ought to welcome that emphasis on alterity.

Secondly and thirdly, I’ll just mention briefly two things I’ve already mentioned: postmodern philosophy develops a hermeneutics of finitude and a hermeneutics of suspicion, or a hermeneutics of fallenness, that Christian thinkers ought to welcome. As believers in creation, we hold ourselves to be finite; as believers in the fall we hold ourselves to be distorted and corrupted.

Secular thinkers who give analyses of these structures can be helpful, and to that degree allies. These themes seem to me to be crucial to any seriously Christian hermeneutics.

BG: What about the critical aspect of the appropriation? What particular problems or challenges do postmodern perspectives involve?

MW: There I suppose one has to go retail and go thinker by thinker. We probably shouldn't try to do that here. Much of postmodern thought is overtly atheistic—sometimes militantly so, and sometimes it becomes an onto-theological gesture and says “Here's our philosophical analysis, and it precludes everything else.” So it ends up sounding as if, sometimes intentionally, perhaps sometimes unintentionally, as if religious beliefs have been discredited, when in fact they've simply been ignored. I think sometimes postmodern thinkers, and sometimes their most enthusiastic secular supporters, make too big of a claim for what has been shown. In showing what we don't know, they sometimes leave the impression that they've shown that we *know* that something or other isn't so. And that seems to me a mistake.

BG: Can you maybe say a few words about future projects, or what you are working on these days?

MW: I've agreed to write a book on hermeneutics and community. I don't know exactly how it's going to work out, but Jamie Smith has persuaded me to write something that is more specifically addressed to the church rather than the academy. I've tried to do that from time to time, but he wants me to try again, and I've agreed to do so for a series that he edits. So this will be a book about hermeneutics and about community, and it will be addressed to forms of church life which find some of the established forms, whether they're 'liberal' or 'conservative,' less than simply satisfying. We'll see how it comes out. One of the tricks will be to unite those two themes—hermeneutics on the one hand, community on the other. I do think that the interpretation of scripture is a communal task. Spelling out how that might be the case with a theoretical foundation and with any kinds of practical ideas will be a challenge. Sometimes when I come to write a book I've already written it in my mind, and I feel like I'm transcribing, and it's very frustrating because I've already said it all to myself, and the time it takes to get it on paper seems almost mechanical. Other times when I start to write, I'm really starting, and I'm going to make discoveries along the way. This project will involve some of both. I've thought a lot about hermeneutics; I've been teaching hermeneutics in various contexts. I haven't thought nearly as much

about community. So there'll be some transcribing of things I've already thought and said and taught, and I hope some new discoveries.

NOTES

¹ "Prolegomena to Any Future Philosophy of Religion Which Will Be Able to Come Forth as Prophecy," *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion*, IV (Fall, 1973), 129-50.

² *God, Guilt, and Death: An Existential Phenomenology of Religion*. (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1984).

³ "In God We Trust: Biblical Interpretation and the Hermeneutics of Suspicion," *The Hermeneutics of Charity: Interpretation, Selfhood, and Postmodern Faith*. Eds. James K.A. Smith and Henry Isaac Venema. (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2004), 98-108.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p.104.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p.107.