

Article

# Passing through Customs: Merold Westphal, Richard Kearney, and the Methodological Boundaries between Philosophy of Religion and Theology

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**Abstract:** Continental philosophers of religion and the theologians who engage with them have recently begun to blur the lines between the disciplines of philosophy and theology. This is particularly true after the so-called “theological turn” in phenomenology. I argue for an appreciation of their approaches but will also express that these explorations must remain interdisciplinary. Far too often philosophers and theologians alike appropriate freely within their interdisciplinary research little regard for the presuppositions and methodologies latent within their appropriations. This article will demonstrate these appropriations through an exploration of Merold Westphal and Richard Kearney’s use of hermeneutical phenomenology, and will claim that their use of this methodology falls upon two distinct discourses, a theological one for Westphal and a philosophical one for Kearney. The upshot of this exploration is an argument for a renewal of methodological restraint when appropriating from other disciplines and a respect for the difference between academic disciplines.

**Keywords:** Richard Kearney; Merold Westphal; Paul Ricoeur; fundamental theology; philosophy of religion; interdisciplinary research

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## 1. Philosophy, Theology, and Merging Borderlands

One of the current trends between theology and philosophy appears to be a merging of both disciplines into one; this is especially true concerning the foundational principles of faith and religious belief. After the so-called “turn to religion” in phenomenology, this has become readily apparent and the first, or at least the most famous, acknowledgement of this turn can be found in Dominique Janicaud’s essay, “The Theological Turn of French Phenomenology” [1]. Published in 2000, Janicaud basically argues against this turn, believing that it has developed phenomenology into a crypto-theological enterprise, whose presuppositions run contrary to the foundations of the phenomenological method developed by Edmund Husserl ([1], pp. 18–22).

Of course, the historical division between philosophy and theology is not as neat as Janicaud and others may wish it to be. This is especially true when reading medieval and early modern scholars. Even though this historical legacy tempers this divide somewhat, it is interesting that philosophers call this turn a theological one, not as if it were a recovery or *ressourcement* of theology and philosophy’s shared history, but as if philosophy rediscovers theology in a different way; effectively creating a new (but not particularly original) dialogue between the disciplines. Janicaud, amongst others, points out that this turn might not be so philosophically innocent, that this turn is a movement of philosophy becoming a branch of theology and thus ceasing to be an independent discipline; something that modern and postmodern philosophers have worked so hard to establish.

In spite of Janicaud’s efforts, theology still turns within phenomenology and has become a key source in the hermeneutical detours that phenomenologists so-often love to take [2,3]. In theological

discourses, this turn has been welcomed with a philosophical one of its own, in which theologians have renewed their engagements with philosophical reasoning [4]. This renewed discussion has been invigorating for both theology and philosophy as each discipline has rediscovered a fruitful dialogue partner with whom it can critically engage and thereby gain a better understanding of problems contemporary and ancient. For example, following Heidegger's critique of the onto-theological constitution of metaphysics, theology has found a way to reflect upon how the self conceives of and relates to God. Philosophy, through a hermeneutical retrieval of religious texts and traditions, has found new avenues to discuss how the self constructs, conceives, and relates to the world at large and to other selves in particular. Likewise, French thinkers, perhaps in response to Janicaud, have re-emphasized their engagement with theology, often to the point of preserving little distinction between philosophy and theology. One can see this in the work of the theologian Jean-Yves Lacoste, whose phenomenological theology attempts to maintain a Husserlian rigor while also presenting a theological project.<sup>1</sup> In addition, through the work of Emmanuel Falque, one can also see a philosophical attempt to cross over into theological thinking, thereby reducing the distinction between the two [9].

Consequently, the current philosophical-theological partnership within academia there presents a temptation to conflate theological and philosophical discourse into one genre of thinking and speaking; where one not only overlaps into the other, but both become indistinguishable from the other. Although these philosophical/theological (theosophical?) contributions are fruitful and have progressed both a theological and philosophical understanding of how one comports herself to the world, the blurring of the methodological distinctions and presuppositions of these disciplines often creates individual cults of personality amongst academic theologians and philosophers. This, of course, is nothing new as academics have often adhered to schools of thought that are centered upon one dominant thinker, or group of thinkers. However, this contemporary model is more and more likely to create individual fiefdoms where the rules and customs—or, the methodologies and presuppositions—of each province have little in common with others. Without the clear distinction between what stands as a philosophical or theological discourse, it appears that many thinkers have chosen to create their own amalgamative discourse upon which these fiefdoms are built. Thus the dissolving of the borderlands between philosophy and theology has left smaller, more individual domains where one has to “buy-into” the accepted customs of each province in order to productively participate, basically. In other words, one has to already reside in a particular fiefdom in order to meaningfully engage in a given discourse or, conversely, use a certain text as a critique of the particular fiefdom itself.<sup>2</sup> These fiefdoms can especially be seen when it comes to the jargon (particularly in regards to neologisms or the reinvention of existing terms) employed within these domains, where one has to readily accept the presuppositions packed within these terms in order to progress through the argument in question.<sup>3</sup>

Often the consequence of such dialogues is that if one wishes to engage others then one must choose a side. In other words, one has to already reside in the “Caputian” fiefdom in order to meaningfully engage in this discourse or, conversely, use the text as a critique of the Caputian fiefdom

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<sup>1</sup> See, for example, [5] or [6]. For a comprehensive review of how Lacoste's work straddles between theology and philosophy, see [7,8].

<sup>2</sup> As we shall see, Merold Westphal's work is a prime example of a tacit appropriation of philosophical resources in order to do theological work. John Caputo, often considered Westphal's counter-point, stands out as a theological-philosophical thinker whose work deliberately obfuscates the distinction between the disciplines. In this regard, followers of both Caputo and Westphal have continued to blur these lines in building up their allegiances to their respective thinker/fiefdom [10]. For Caputo, see, among other examples, [11,12].

<sup>3</sup> A great example of this can be found within Katharine Sarah Moody's recent text [13]. In her introduction, she states her thesis thus: “I counter Žižek's fundamental misreading of Caputo's theology of the event as a form of theological materialism in which God is reinstated as an event that constitutes the metaphysical exception to the material, and demonstrate the true materialist potential of Caputo's deconstructive theology by illustrating his path from radical hermeneutics and weak theology to what can be called his hyper-realist materialism” ([13], p. 27). Consequently, one can see how the reader must have already accepted some of Caputo and Žižek's basic arguments and terminology in order to understand and follow her argument.

itself. This follows the often entertaining debates held between Caputo and Westphal, whose verbal jousting at conferences and in print have been the source of great inspiration for others, but with little collaborative dialogue. Save for B. Keith Putt's attempt to create a "Capuphalian" philosophy—yet another fiefdom—one chooses sides [14].

It is important to recall that adhering to a particular school of thought is not new in either theology or philosophy, yet the issue here is that these schools seemingly are becoming more and more separated in both disciplinary and interdisciplinary discourses with some fiefdoms outright rejecting the others. Going back to Janicaud's critique as an example, there are some who blatantly disregard the phenomenological work of others, say of Jean-Luc Marion, as "not real" phenomenology, or at least not rigorous enough to be taken seriously. One can see this especially on the academic conference circuit and in the ever specialized realm of academic societies, where academics set up their own networks and platforms to provide a venue for voices that adhere to their style of philosophical and theological work. Although these conferences and societies are important for academia, one rarely sees a crosspollination between these fiefdoms at these specialized conferences.

I argue, and intend to show in what follows, that this does not have to be the case and that theological-philosophical discourse can forego an academic feudalism through a greater respect of methodology and a declaration of one's fundamental presuppositions. Thinkers should be able to travel freely in one discourse or another but, when they do, they should openly declare what their intellectual intentions are and what they have appropriated in their travels. Crossing over from one discipline to another should function much more like passing through the customs office where one is free to travel but also must declare what one brings with them when travelling, and, upon return, what one has taken. The metaphor is apt, I find, since it does not restrict movement but, rather, provides a more transparent account of one's movement.

I will present this argument through a dialogue between the philosophers Merold Westphal and Richard Kearney. I have chosen these two philosophers since both are deeply influenced by Paul Ricoeur and each employs Ricoeur's work to different ends: Westphal's reading of Ricoeur gives him license to theologically develop his Christian faith, whereas Kearney's reading of Ricoeur gives him a method for exploring intellectual and ethical possibilities appropriated primarily from Christianity. Kearney, I find, is a better dialogue partner with Westphal than Caputo because of this rigorous fidelity to Ricoeur's phenomenology. Westphal's reading and development of Ricoeur's thought, I will show, crosses from a philosophical discourse to a theological one, whereas Kearney's thought strictly maintains its philosophical consistency throughout. Moreover, I have chosen two philosophers for this dialogue, rather than a philosopher and a theologian, in order to show how this distinction between discourses is not a divide between faculties or expertise but one concerned with how a thinker engages a religious tradition.

The relevance for us today is not so much to distinguish one academic as a theologian and the other a philosopher, though we will do this in the course of our exploration. We will do so, however, in order to show that when a thinker engages in interdisciplinary work, she must remain mindful of the separation between these disciplines and how one's own thinking might best inhabit a particular discourse. In my conclusion, I will present through the metaphor of the customs office a possible pathway to keep the borders between philosophy and theology distinct yet still porous and passable. Passing through customs thus strengthens one's rigor within a chosen methodology (and thus, one's "home" discipline) and it reveals what one has appropriated from other disciplines' methodologies, presuppositions, and so on. Again, the goal with such an appeal is not to restrict interdisciplinary work, but to make it just that: interdisciplinary. This renewed attention to disciplinary rigor will allow philosophical and theological inquiries to be better understood across all disciplines and, when the thinker in question appropriates from other disciplines, it will be easier for others assessing his or her work to break down their arguments, understand them, and converse with them. The upshot of this is that thinkers from all disciplines can strengthen their engagement and create better pathways to understanding the self and the world, or perhaps reinvigorate existing ones.

## 2. Foundations: Working Definitions and Paul Ricoeur's Hermeneutical Phenomenology

Fundamental theology and philosophy of religion can have many definitions. For the sake of simplicity, fundamental theology is understood as a theological discipline which operates through two movements: First, an inward, reflective exploration of the foundations of Christianity as a faith that is based upon God's revelation. Here, it seeks to understand Christianity's reception of revelation through Scripture and Tradition. Secondly, it operates through an outward, dialogical exploration of understanding revelation (and subsequently, doctrine) by engaging sources and disciplines which do not adhere to revelation as a basic principle. While this outward engagement often holds an apologetical line (and indeed fundamental theology has its historical roots in apologetics) it need not always be concerned with a rational defense of the faith [15]. Even though fundamental theology is primarily a Catholic theological enterprise, I find that this definition works for similar forms of theology which engage other disciplines, such as "Christian philosophy" or "philosophical theology."

However, from this definition and the one below, one might question: Whose revelation? Which reason? This again points toward the historically interrelated origins of these two disciplines, as well as to the doctrinal, denominational, and otherwise intellectual developments within them. It would be too unwieldy for our present endeavor to go into these developments and distinctions; instead my present attempt is to provide a platform to discuss these developments further in future research. As we shall see in the conclusion, my attempt in discussing the borders between theology and philosophy is to give each discipline a place for self-definition and introspection. The goal, then, is not to (too neatly) define theology and philosophy, but to set a table for discussion between those residing in each discipline in order to establish these borders; hence why these are 'working definitions'.

Importantly, philosophy does not adhere to revelation as its founding principle and, consequently, it bases its discipline on the primacy of human reason. Different philosophical methodologies articulate this primacy of reason in different ways. An analogy between theology and philosophy might be construed thus: as revelation is primary in fundamental theology, and its reception/development is seen through Tradition, so is reason primary in philosophy and its reception/development is seen through methodology. Therefore, the basic foundation of philosophy of religion might be understood as adhering to the principles of reason, broadly construed and defined by the philosopher in question and articulated through that philosopher's chosen method. In postmodern thought—which holds any founding principles as highly suspect—scholars scrutinize how reason is employed in philosophizing (or thinking), critiquing onto-theological metaphysics and the notion of thought's presence of itself to itself. Consequently, postmodern philosophers of religion have begun to reconsider the theological tradition and its reflection on faith in revelation—something which surpasses reason—and this movement within the academy has been fashioned as a so-called "turn to religion," or "theological turn."

Paul Ricoeur's hermeneutical phenomenology relates to this theological turn yet he maintains phenomenology's methodological rigor and veers away from becoming directly theological.<sup>4</sup> In order to maintain this consistency throughout his hermeneutical detours, Ricoeur founds the concept of the sympathetic imagination and the hermeneutics of suspicion as the guiding principles of his methodology. The sympathetic imagination is a concept that he develops in order to walk alongside the other in order to see from his or her perspective, and in an observation of this person's religiosity, he calls this other "the believing soul."<sup>5</sup> Even though Ricoeur uses this concept for more than understanding religious belief, we will continue with the descriptor, "believing soul," for simplicity's sake and since it directly follows our own inquiry. The phenomenologist, then, sees the world "as-if" she were the believing soul herself, "re-feeling" the believing soul's experiences

<sup>4</sup> It is interesting to note that Janicaud's critique of the theological turn actually exempts Ricoeur's work, as he argues (albeit briefly) that Ricoeur maintains the rigor and limits of phenomenology, see ([1], p. 34).

<sup>5</sup> Paul Ricoeur uses this term often within *The Symbolism of Evil*, see ([16], pp. 10–19) for examples.

and understandings, and then retrieving important hermeneutical observations relating to how the believing soul understands the world.<sup>6</sup> However, when engaging in this sympathetic imagination, entering the mode of the “as-if,”<sup>7</sup> it is important that the phenomenologist never directly inhabits the space of the believing soul. Ricoeur, thus, attempts to maintain a distinction between allowing the believing soul to speak and directly inhabiting the space of that soul. In the former, one maintains the *descriptive* modus operandi of phenomenology. If one moves into the latter, then one begins to speak *as the believing soul*, thus eliminating the essential bracketing of one’s own beliefs and understandings. In this latter mode, one is no longer a phenomenologist, describing phenomena or hermeneutically retrieving a description performed by others; one essentially becomes, along with other believing souls, the subject of the inquiry. As we shall see, this latter stage is where Westphal crosses over from phenomenologist to theologian.

This was not always the case for Westphal, and his earlier work strictly follows Ricoeur’s concept of the sympathetic imagination. In *God, Guilt and Death* [22], Westphal’s first book-length phenomenological exploration of religion, Westphal rigorously follows Ricoeur’s methodology (also drawing on Maurice Merleau-Ponty) in order to distinguish his project as being phenomenological and descriptive rather than an apologetics or an advocacy on behalf of religion [22].<sup>8</sup> Furthermore, in some of his later work—primarily when speaking *about* Ricoeur rather than employing Ricoeur’s methodology in his own projects—Westphal accurately argues how one might use Ricoeur’s phenomenology as a description of religious belief:

Even if the phenomenologist is a believing soul, seeking to articulate the meaning of religious experience and belief, to describe the world in which the believing soul lives is not immediate experience, belief, and life. To write an essay on the phenomenology of prayer is not to pray. To describe confession is not to confess. So the phenomenology of religion is not the religious life itself, and the phenomenologist need not be a believing soul engaging in the beliefs and practices being described (though that may be helpful) ([23], p. 114).

As we shall see in the next section, Westphal abandons this fidelity in his own project concerning a “phenomenology of faith.” However, for now, one can see that Westphal clearly comprehends Ricoeur’s own intentions and that this will later reveal the ways in which he has appropriated Ricoeur to do theological work. Richard Kearney’s work, in contradistinction, maintains the sympathetic imagination throughout as one can see in his recent texts, *The God Who May Be* [18]; *Strangers, Gods, and Monsters* [24]; and *Anatheism* [25]. In *The God Who May Be* [18], for example, Kearney develops what he calls a “phenomenology of persona,” which explores how one can perceive the complete alterity of an other without collapsing this alterity into a homogeneous mass—as if all otherness were lumped into one giant other ([17], pp. 10–11). From this he will develop an argument that God can best be understood through *posse*, or possibility, rather than being and, in so doing, he will hermeneutically retrieve accounts of God as possibility through the stories of Moses, Jesus’ Transfiguration, Nicholas of Cusa, and others. Importantly, he calls his recounting of these stories “hermeneutic endeavors to

<sup>6</sup> More exactly, Ricoeur calls this a “reenactment in sympathetic imagination” where the phenomenologist, in the process of hermeneutical retrieval, reenacts the events or descriptions within the text as if they are standing alongside the author or character in question. In *The Symbolism of Evil*, explains it thus: “The philosopher adopts provisionally the motivations and intentions of the believing soul. He does not ‘feel’ them in their first naiveté; he ‘re-feels’ them in a neutralized mode, in the mode of ‘as if.’ It is in this sense that phenomenology is a re-enactment in the sympathetic imagination” in *The Symbolism of Evil* ([16], pp. 10, 19).

<sup>7</sup> See [17], in his chapter, “Phenomenology of Persona” [18], he employs a phenomenological mode of “as if”; see also ([19], pp. 20–21, 101–8), here Kearney basically describes his understanding of Ricoeur’s use of the term, see ([19], pp. 45–46), for his description of the sympathetic imagination. Additionally, the “as-if” relates to Ricoeur’s poetics of being, which is a larger project in which he further describes the relationship between language and understanding. In order to maintain the scope of our present inquiry, I will only explain it as it relates to Kearney and Westphal’s appropriation. See also [20]. For a shorter introduction, see [21].

<sup>8</sup> Westphal explains this methodology in his introductory chapter, which follows a Ricoeur’s methodology as well as an existential phenomenology as developed through Maurice Merleau-Ponty.

sound out some of these narratives” and how they might relate to an eschatological God who may be ([17], p. 8). Kearney openly accepts that these texts may not directly relate to the eschatological concept in question, and he does not appropriate them for theological ends ([17], p. 5).

Kearney avoids this form of appropriation through a strict fidelity to Ricoeur’s concept of a hermeneutics of suspicion. Ricoeur’s hermeneutics of suspicion is, I argue, the second pillar of his hermeneutical phenomenology and we will close this section through an exploration of it and how Kearney and Westphal use it to different ends. Kearney, who was a student of Ricoeur’s, often refers to such a hermeneutics as an opening confession of one’s biases at the outset of phenomenological work. Referencing his teacher, Kearney begins his own philosophical projects with a “standard hermeneutical question: Where do you speak from? (*d’où parlez vous?*)”, where he explains his own personal beliefs and how he has tried to, as best as he can, bracket them out or at least employ them in a phenomenological manner.<sup>9</sup> Ricoeur’s hermeneutics of suspicion is not principally an aspect of phenomenological inquiry. Rather, in the thought of Freud, Marx, and Nietzsche, a triumvirate that he called the “masters of suspicion,” Ricoeur discovered that nothing is philosophically pure and that all sentiments, narratives, myths, *et cetera* must be open to critique, particularly regarding ideologies and narratives which legitimize them (i.e., master narratives).<sup>10</sup> With respect to methodology, this implies that the phenomenologist must also open herself up to critique in order to remain philosophically descriptive. In other words, philosophers must “lay their cards on the table,” so that their own biases and prejudices can be considered alongside their work. In *On Paul Ricoeur* [19], Kearney describes it thus:

A common task of critical hermeneutics, atheistic or theistic, is to debunk ideological inversions of the original relationship between the real and the imaginary. But it is not the only task. Ricoeur proposes to go further than the masters of suspicion in arguing that critique must itself be subject to critique. This extension of the hermeneutic critique makes it possible to recognize, in the symbolizing activities of ideology, the possibility of a more positive function obscured by the falsifying function. The hermeneutics of doubt may in this way be preserved and also supplemented by a hermeneutics of invention ([19], p. 78).

In Kearney’s view, the hermeneutics of suspicion ought to be employed as a critique of ideology, and this critique goes all the way down to one’s chosen methodology. Westphal also acknowledges the importance of such a hermeneutics and agrees that its scrutinizing doubt allows for invention and even affirmation, arguing that a “hermeneutics of recovery” must be coupled with a hermeneutics of suspicion ([23], pp. 110–11, 116–18; see also [29], pp. 85–88, 138–46, 296–301).

Yet Westphal, unlike Kearney, will not only use this suspicion for more than just a corrective guide to doing philosophical work. In *Suspicion and Faith* [30], Westphal appropriates Freud, Marx, and Nietzsche’s suspicion of religion and religious praxis to create an “atheism for Lent,” where their critique is intended to guide the believing soul to becoming a better Christian (and the work specifically focuses on Christian praxis) ([30], pp. 3–10). The work itself goes through each respective thinkers’ critiques of Christianity by showing that they are “all too true, too much of the time.” ([30], pp. xiv, 15). Here, Westphal’s concept of the hermeneutics of suspicion is *aufgehoben* within Christianity itself, where belief and its praxis passes through these critiques in order to correct itself and better affirm the

<sup>9</sup> Regarding his project in *The God Who May Be* [17], Kearney writes: “So how do I respond to the standard hermeneutic question: Where do you speak from? . . . Philosophically, I would say that I am speaking from a phenomenological perspective, endeavoring as far as possible to offer a *descriptive* account of such phenomena as *persona*, transfiguration, and desire, before crossing over to hermeneutic readings . . . Religiously, I would say that if I hail from a Catholic tradition, it is with this proviso (he continues, explaining his ethically informed sense of religiousness) . . . But regardless of labels, I would like to think that the kind of reflections advanced in this book are vigorously ecumenical in terms of interfaith dialogue” ([17], pp. 5–6).

<sup>10</sup> Ricoeur is well known for coining the phrase “masters of suspicion” in his text *Freud and Philosophy* [26], though it is also present in other works, such as, among others, “The Critique of Religion”, which can be found in *The Philosophy of Paul Ricoeur: An Anthology of His Work* [27], and “Science and Ideology” in *Hermeneutics and the Human Sciences* [28].

core principles, or true intent, behind the Gospel message. Written for the lay reader, Westphal even goes so far as to jokingly accuse “Young Karl” of biblical plagiarism by showing how his critiques are also found within religious sources ([30], pp. 203, 213, 265).

Westphal’s use of the hermeneutics of suspicion thus becomes not just a philosophical critique of a hermeneutics of retrieval, it also becomes a theological enterprise as he has now employed it within his own religious community.<sup>11</sup> Furthermore, he continues to do so in his later, mature projects as seen in *Overcoming Onto-Theology* [29], *Transcendence and Self-Transcendence* [31], and especially in *Whose Community? Which Interpretation?* [32] In this last text, Westphal essentially lays out a guideline for biblical interpretation through Gadamer’s hermeneutics. It is a work intended for the lay reader within his community and its aim is to seek a path for better biblical interpretation, thus leading to a better understanding of one’s own faith and, subsequently, better doctrine and religious praxis ([32], pp. 13–15).

Although Westphal’s use of the hermeneutics of suspicion to do theological work is one of his many appropriations, it is here that I claim that he crosses the divide between philosophy and theology. He goes from walking alongside the believing soul in a re-feeling sympathetic imagination to directly inhabiting the space of the believing soul, speaking to his community as one of their own.

In the following section I will give an overview of this “crossing over” while highlighting Kearney’s fidelity to phenomenology. The intention of this final comparison is to show how aligning each reader to a particular discipline, or discourse rather, allows their thought to be better understood. Both seemingly inhabit the subfield of philosophy of religion, though Westphal has at times called himself a “Christian philosopher.” However, Westphal’s work mainly appropriates from philosophy to speak as a believing soul rather than performing a purely philosophical exploration. Kearney, in contrast, presents only a descriptive possibility of how one can understand the concept of God and religion itself; maintaining that his hermeneutical recoveries speak to new possible understandings of both, but not in a theological vein.<sup>12</sup>

Again, the point in this comparison is not to call out either Kearney or Westphal as the “victor”; labeling one as the “true” philosopher or what have you. Even though I place Kearney and Westphal into philosophical and theological discourses, my point is not to explicitly disregard either’s work as not rigorous or as unserious academic work. Nor am I stating that each cannot be important for either discipline. Through this comparison, just like with our working definitions, I am attempting to tease out the necessity of understanding the genre discourses and assumptions underlying theology and philosophy; asking whether a clearer border between these disciplines might open up future discussions between academics. I am using Westphal and Kearney’s work as an example of what discussions might come from these borders. Thus, what follows is not about leveling one thinker’s work as “not real” philosophy *à la* Janicaud’s critique; but, rather, it is to question if each thinker’s work can be better understood through a discipline that is more accurately defined. In other words, does this blurring between disciplines help or hurt each thinker’s projects? My answer is that it hurts them somewhat, and a better distinction between the borders of philosophy and theology might provide an avenue of understanding that has been heretofore lost in academia.

<sup>11</sup> It is important to note that Westphal, in his own *d’où parlez vous?* of sorts, openly confesses his Christian faith. See ([29], pp. ix–x; [30], p. xiii; [31], p. 6).

<sup>12</sup> In *Anatheism* [25], Kearney makes this very explicit: “Let me say, lastly, that my own hermeneutic stance in this work is philosophical rather than theological. I say this for two reasons. First, to identify the particular kind of philosophy I speak from: one nourished by the modern theories of phenomenology and existentialism, one the one hand, and by postmodern ideas of poststructuralism and deconstruction, on the other . . . The second reason I stress the philosophical character of my reading is that I have no scholarly expertise in theology and little concern to legitimate my reflections with respect to one particular orthodoxy or another (with no disrespect to any)” ([25], pp. xv–xvi).

### 3. A Phenomenology of Faith and the May-Be God: Westphal and Kearney's Projects in Brief

Westphal always understands God through the prism of theism. However, it is a theism that has passed through postmodern critique—a critique which has often tried to pronounce the death of the theistic God. In *Overcoming Onto-Theology* [29], Westphal attempts to address both postmodern thinkers who wish to do away with this God, and his theistic friends who find postmodernism to be nothing but “warmed-over Nietzschean atheism” which provokes an anti-Christian relativism where “anything goes” and leads to moral nihilism. Westphal sets out to show both sides that this may not be the case and that, indeed, Christian theism can exist, thrive even, within a postmodern milieu ([29], p. ix). The work, itself comprised of several articles that range from addressing Heidegger's critique of onto-theology to the Christian theological uses of Nietzsche, inhabits a quasi-apologetical space where Westphal attempts to build a bridge between postmodern critique and the Christian faith. What is interesting for our purposes is that Westphal, here, has surpassed a phenomenological description of the Christian faith into giving a theological prescription to both believers and non-believers alike: the believer needs postmodern critique to better follow the Gospel message written and received through revelation, and the postmodern atheist needs to take Christian theism seriously as a response to the possible nihilism that tempts any thought that is suspicious of foundations.

One can see this in his appropriation of Nietzsche as a theological resource. Following his use of Nietzsche in *Suspicion and Faith* [30], Westphal is convinced that Nietzsche and the other masters of suspicion are correct in their critique too much of the time, but, if one were to merely listen to critique and not couple it with affirmation, then one feeds on “a diet of ex-lax” that helps purge the system but “it satisfies no spiritual hunger, and our spiritual bulimia guarantees that we remain malnourished as well.” ([29], p. 141).

Westphal then turns to Kierkegaard—whom he calls Nietzsche's equal as a “proto-postmodern,” and even a “proto-phenomenologist”—in order to be able to pass through this purging while also satisfying one's spiritual hunger ([29], p. 291).<sup>13</sup> Earlier in his career, Westphal established Kierkegaard as a writer whose concept of faith was a task to continually accept the promise and command found within revelation. This command, particularly understood through the Love Commandment, fashions faith as both a task and a critique of society's legitimizing, reasonable foundation.<sup>14</sup> Here, one can see how Westphal maintains his coupling of the hermeneutics of suspicion with a hermeneutics of affirmation, and it is important to note that Westphal always ends with the affirmation. Nietzsche's suspicion thus helps Christianity, but it never obliterates it. For Westphal, Nietzsche becomes *aufgehoben* within the Christian faith.

If one were to strictly adhere to a scholarly reading of Nietzsche, this type of appropriation may be untenable, impossible even. By a strict scholarly reading, I am referring not to those who appropriate Nietzsche but to scholars and thinkers whose work wishes to maintain an exact rigor to what Nietzsche said and did not say. This type of scholarship can be, at times, seen as a safeguard for Nietzsche who has often been appropriated for projects that run contrary to his own thinking and writing. Yet Westphal, as a “theologian” who does not reside inside this particular sort of scholarship, appropriates Nietzsche; speaking as a believing soul who has learned a great deal from him. His seminal work, *Transcendence and Self-Transcendence* [31], follows the same style by addressing Heidegger's critique of onto-theology and how it clears away bad concepts of God, theistic and pantheistic versions alike, and sets the

<sup>13</sup> See, for example [33–36]. In regards to Marx, Nietzsche, and Kierkegaard, and how Westphal situates this discussion in a postmodern context, see his essays “Positive Postmodernism as Radical Hermeneutics” [37] and “Deconstruction and Christian Cultural Theory: An Essay on Appropriation” [38] in *Overcoming Onto-Theology* [29].

<sup>14</sup> This is the overarching thesis behind Westphal's *Kierkegaard's Critique of Reason and Society* [36], but it can be found in subsequent articles such as Merold Westphal, “Johannes and Johannes: Kierkegaard and Difference” [39]. Westphal's latest work, *Kierkegaard's Concept of Faith* [40] is a sort of retrospective of his prior findings on Kierkegaard and is a good source for an overview of Westphal's reception of Kierkegaard.

stage for a stronger concept of faith in a theistic God who commands and promises the believing soul through revelation.

*Transcendence and Self-Transcendence* [31] has a three stage trajectory: Westphal first addresses the critique of theism through an exploration of cosmological transcendence via onto-theology and then addresses Hegel and Spinoza's pantheism. Once he clears away onto-theological theisms and pantheisms, he then focuses on how one can come to know God in spite of one's finitude under the heading of "epistemic transcendence." Here, he appropriates the concepts of *via negativa*, *analogia entis*, and *analogia fidei* from Augustine, Pseudo-Dionysius, Aquinas, and Karl Barth, respectively. In the first part he establishes that one can come to know God through knowing what God is not, and in the second part how knowing God can be analogous to elements of human experience and how God speaks to humanity through revelation. Now, within the third part, Westphal is ready to take up both the critique of cosmological transcendence and the possibilities of epistemic transcendence into an ethical transcendence, where he argues for an ethical understanding of faith as praxis. This final movement is what he calls ethical and religious transcendence, and he articulates this through a dialogical reading of Kierkegaard's concept of faith as a task which fully trusts in revelation, and Levinas' ethics as first philosophy which articulates the possibility of revelation in the encounter with another self. His final argument is that it is through the task of faith that we come to understand and accept revelation and, thus, come to know God; albeit only through our finite reasoning. Taken as a whole, faith as an ethical task is, for Westphal, a paradigm for understanding God and living a religious life that is prerequisite for this understanding. Although Westphal acknowledges that his concept of transcendence through self-transcendence can be applicable to other religions and definitions of faith, he openly states that he is articulating his own faith from within his own community.<sup>15</sup> Looking at the structure of the work alongside his reading of Nietzsche, one could again see how, philosophically, a project such as this may stumble over its own ambition: in one work, Westphal addresses Heidegger, Hegel, Spinoza, Augustine, Pseudo-Dionysius, Aquinas, Barth, Levinas, and Kierkegaard! There would be no possible way for him to adequately do justice to each thinker and then incorporate them into a cohesive whole. However, speaking within the space of the believing soul, Westphal articulates how each thinker has contributed to the way he perceives the relation between God's transcendence and the human soul. Theologically, Westphal has pulled together disparate thinkers in order to better understand how his own community can pass through critique to become better Christians. Westphal perfectly summarizes the theological importance of the work in his final sentence: "Where divine transcendence is preserved in its deepest sense, the affirmation of God as Creator is not merely the attribution of a certain structure to the cosmos but above all the commitment to oneself to a life of grateful striving." ([31], p. 231).

"*The affirmation of God as Creator*" reveals, in bright neon lights, how theologically situated Westphal's argument is (or at least has become). *Transcendence and Self-Transcendence* [31] argues for the theistic possibilities hidden within a postmodern critique. For Kearney, the affirmation of God as Creator does just the opposite: it denudes God of any possibilities. Kearney's *The God Who May Be* [17] and *Anatheism* [25] are works that attempt to conceive of God beyond theism through two philosophical thought experiments. One can see throughout both works that Kearney has taken the critique of theos within onto-theology seriously and, commenting upon the issue in response to Westphal himself, Kearney claims that theism is a "recipe for war" and destruction [41]<sup>16</sup> Although it

<sup>15</sup> Westphal states thus: "I write as a Christian theist engaged in a personal journey of faith seeking understanding and growth in faithfulness. My hope is that my shared reflections will help both believers and unbelievers avoid misunderstandings that theism is heir to [sic] and thus to think more clearly about the God they affirm or deny. Thus the same analysis has an apologetic intention for readers who do not believe and a pastoral intention for readers who do." ([31], p. 2).

<sup>16</sup> Kearney says this in response to Westphal's critique between the 82–85 minutes mark. See also Kearney and Westphal's essays in *After God* [42].

is beyond our scope here to give a comparison of Westphal's theism and Kearney's rejection of it, what matters for our purposes is how Kearney argues for a different understanding of God.<sup>17</sup>

Kearney presents both *The God Who May Be* [17] and *Anatheism* [25] as hermeneutical projects that attempt to retrieve a concept of God from religious texts that can adequately respond to how the self can better understand otherness and alterity through faith. In *The God Who May Be* [17], Kearney presents a God of possibility, a poetic God whose presence comes through the desire of the impossible, where the faith that the impossible can happen through God compels the believer to enact the command and promise within revelation ([17], p. 81).<sup>18</sup> In Kearney's hermeneutical retrievals, he finds a religious insight into how this possible impossibility, the promise of God—made first with Moses, deepened with Christ—continues and is partially realized in the self's participatory relationship with God “until the Kingdom comes—and with it a new heaven and earth.” ([17], p. 81). This happens, for Kearney, in a messianic time that “supersedes the linear, causal time of history moving ineluctably from past to present to future.”<sup>19</sup> Even though Kearney claims that such a concept of God is tenable and possibly fruitful to religious praxis and theological reflection, he never posits it as a replacement for traditional or orthodox belief. What he has done here (and continued in *Anatheism* [25]) is walk alongside other believing souls, particularly within biblical and theological texts, and has “re-felt” their belief, describing a hidden possibility that might have been obscured by the pronouncements of theism. He never affirms God as Creator or the like; his retrievals do not presuppose the affirmation of anything, he is merely pointing toward their possibilities. Though he may wish that theism would eventually disappear from theology, he only presents another path and never outright prescribes his concepts to orthodox or traditional believers. In this way, Kearney's work hovers above theology and the religious tradition; he observes it but he is content to never enter into it.

I argue that this is partly due to a fidelity to his methodological training. Though Ricoeur entered into religious discourse from time to time, particularly with the works *Thinking Biblically* [43] and *Figuring the Sacred* [44], he primarily maintained his position as a philosopher first and Christian believer second. Moreover, like Kearney, Ricoeur was able to bracket his own beliefs in the course of sympathetic re-imagination. Even in this re-feeling, he opened himself and his work to a hermeneutics of suspicion as a means of correcting his biases. What ultimately separates Kearney from Westphal is that Kearney uses Ricoeur's hermeneutical phenomenology as a method for philosophically describing aspects of religious belief that could lead to a better understanding of the world itself, whereas Westphal appropriates hermeneutical phenomenology and its insights, particularly from Ricoeur, to better understand his own religious belief. Kearney is a thinker who engages religion, and the Westphal is a religious thinker, *tout court*.<sup>20</sup>

<sup>17</sup> The fact that some philosophers would accept that theism has a valid and right place within philosophy points expressively to the issue at hand: that philosophers need to explore whether or not such open claims are an act of addressing one's presuppositions or if it bends their discourse toward a theological one.

<sup>18</sup> “Possibilized” is Kearney's neologism for describing the event of the impossible becoming possible.

<sup>19</sup> Kearney calls this messianic time, whereas theologically understood, it is often called chiromatic to distance it from chromatic (or chronological) time, described by Kearney as causal time. Early in Chapter One, concerning chiromatic/messianic time, Kearney says: “We cannot think of the time of the *persona* except as an immemorial beginning (before the beginning) or an unimaginable end (after the end). That is precisely its eschatological stature—the messianic achronicity which breaks open the continuous moment-by-moment time of everyday chronology” ([17], p. 17).

<sup>20</sup> Regarding Kearney, this is especially true in his work, *Strangers, Gods, and Monsters* [24]. Though space precludes us from entering it into the discussion, this work, written between *The God Who May Be* [17] and *Anatheism* [25], explores the concept of alterity and how alterity can be better understood through the legends, myths, and scriptures passed down through religious and secular traditions. It should also be noted that Kearney fashioned both of these works, along with his earlier text, *On Stories* [45], as a trilogy in which he explores “philosophy at the limit,” with each text dealing separately with “the enigmas of the narrative imaginary and the task of naming the unnameable.” He completes this trilogy through *Strangers, Gods, and Monsters* [24] where he explores the “diverse experiences of human estrangement by means of a hermeneutical retrieval of selfhood through the odyssey of otherness” ([24], p. 19). Thus, Kearney's project inhabits a broader, philosophical issue and is less interested in theological pronouncements.

#### 4. Conclusions: Passing Through Customs, the Freedom of Movement via Transparency

Going back to our concern about fiefdoms and the blurring of philosophical and theological methodologies, one can see how Westphal's project, ostensibly a philosophical one, might encounter a philosophical critique that obscures its theological importance. I have argued in another article that this is why Westphal's project is best understood theologically as an eschatological project [46]. Lieven Boeve, among other theologians, has likewise argued that Kearney's hermeneutical retrievals ignore the significance of these stories and that they are already part of a hermeneutical, theological tradition [47]. Thus one can see how a cross-discipline critique can reveal how each thinker's approach might best reside within a particular discourse. Westphal's appropriations seek to better understand revelation and faith, two concepts which he presupposes, or at least generally accepts and then articulates through a philosophical framework. Though he argues that revelation, via Levinas, can happen in the encounter with the other, he ties this to Kierkegaard's Christian concept of revelation and that God can and has revealed God's self to humanity. In a parallel fashion, Kearney's hermeneutical retrievals sometimes ignore the theological significance of the texts themselves, effectively removing the same idea that God can and has revealed God's self through these religious texts. Although Kearney does a better job of openly displaying his methodology and rigor, both he and Westphal are open to these respective critiques. The difference, however, is that Kearney's adherence to his chosen methodological principles allows one to see that his project is different from a theological one; although it fails to be validly theological, it was never meant to be theological in the first place. Westphal, by contrast, does sufficiently present a theological understanding of God but he wrongly situates his project within philosophy.

Such misplacement has not stopped many philosophers from accepting Westphal's work as philosophy, creating a fiefdom within the discipline where one who accepts his Christian presuppositions may feel at home. One could say the same thing about Caputo's recent excursions into theology: does his religion without religion, or his weak theology, ever sufficiently pass as a theology? Answering this question would take us beyond the scope of our project. For now, one can see how these individual fiefdoms have arisen in the wake of the blurring of the boundaries between philosophy and theology. Without the distinction between these disciplines, the reader often loses sight of what methodology is being used, which presuppositions and terms are acceptable within the discourse in question, and what type of question the author is attempting to address. Following our fiefdom metaphor, one who wishes to explore the Christian faith through philosophy might take up allegiance with Westphal and thus "buy into" his particularly prescriptive notion of phenomenology. Likewise, one who wishes to explore the idea of God without the religious traditions undergirding such an idea might hold allegiance with Caputo and thus "buy into" his concept of faith with/out belief.

Kearney's methodology might offer a different path since he openly expresses his intentions and his methodology. I imagine that, through maintaining a distinction between philosophy and theology, one might be able to better comprehend and critique the thought of those who cross between the borders of these disciplines. Rather than creating individual fiefdoms where one has to accept the presuppositions which undergird that group's thinking—often the thought of one dominant thinker—one accepts a larger set of methodologies and givens which allows a broader discourse. In this way, interdisciplinary work keeps its interdisciplinary character by publicly declaring what each thinker has retrieved or appropriated from other disciplines.

Crossing the border from one discipline into another would work like passing through a customs office where one declares what items they are bringing from one country to another as they travel. This allows for a thorough appraisal concerning whether it is possible to bring such items across the border or if certain modifications, reductions, or restrictions are needed. The basic idea of the customs office is not to restrict movement but to give it accountability, thereby enhancing the freedom of movement from one land into another. I could see a similar process working within philosophical-theological projects, where the thinker in question openly declares what they are attempting to find within another discipline, how she intends to find it, and how she ultimately

intends to use it in her own project. The goal of this, again, is not to restrict the development of new intellectual ideas that might spring up between these disciplines. Rather, it is to give such ideas more transparency so that they can be evaluated, critiqued, and be better understood by others who may not accept the presuppositions of other disciplines.

In this metaphor, the “customs officer” would come from the respective discipline that one is entering—such as Lieven Boeve critiquing Kearney’s hermeneutical retrievals—and as such it would allow that discipline a degree of self-determination. Thus, each discipline may openly review and critique what other disciplines have retrieved or appropriated. This would allow for a greater understanding of how each discipline understands its own methodologies and presuppositions. In this way, not only does the “customs office” help academia understand what other disciplines have appropriated/retrieved from others when doing interdisciplinary work, but the “customs officer” also continues or facilitates an intra-disciplinary discussion of what distinguishes her discipline from others. Without the metaphor, one could say that when a thinker (e.g., Lieven Boeve) critiques someone’s appropriation from his discipline (e.g., Richard Kearney), he not only critiques this appropriation but he launches/continues a discussion concerning the important and essential concepts that shape his own discipline. Yet, in order for this critique to happen, others need to be more transparent in their appropriations and retrievals. This occurs by openly declaring what one has retrieved, how one has done so, and for what intents and purposes.

Though both disciplines have covalent interests in comprehending how the self understands and interacts with the world and the other, theology is not philosophy, and vice versa. Kearney, through declaring his interests behind his hermeneutical retrievals and by declaring (and sticking to) his chosen methodology, adequately opens himself to being thoroughly evaluated and critiqued. Though theologians may argue with the nature of his retrievals, at least they know the method behind them. This, I find, gives a transparency to his thinking which enhances interdisciplinary work and cross-disciplinary critique.

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