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Continuity and Tension in the Spatial and Temporal Horizons
of Liturgy: A Response to *Welcoming Finitude*
by Christina M. Gschwandtner

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A review of:

Christina M. Gschwandtner, *Welcoming Finitude: Toward a Phenomenology of Orthodox Liturgy*. New York, NY : Fordham University Press, 2019. pp. 352. \$35.00.

Early in *Welcoming Finitude*, Gschwandtner cautions that taking phenomenology seriously as a method has never required a turning away from the reality of the world (4). The reduction brackets questions of objectivity, normativity, and existence, yet Husserl came to recognize the importance of the *Lebenswelt*. Heidegger makes a sharp distinction between the ontic and ontological, yet this also opens a way to discover the deep continuities between them. Taking the richness of lived experience seriously – what phenomenology seeks to do, and eminently – is to remain suspicious of easy dichotomies and artificial bifurcations, to let the things themselves speak in their specificity. The promise of phenomenology is that this attentiveness will deepen our understanding and, often, yield surprising discoveries about those things we considered so obvious before.

The analysis of Orthodox liturgy in *Welcoming Finitude* is compelling and fruitful precisely because it makes the most of phenomenology's ability to uncover continuities and make trouble for easy binary distinctions. Gschwandtner proceeds through various aspects of liturgical experience – of space and time, of the body, senses, and emotions, of community with others – largely by pushing back against ungrounded assumptions and unexamined claims about the relationship between the world of liturgy and the world of the everyday, “between liturgical being and

being-in-the-world” (25). For Gschwandtner, these questions can only be answered by turning ever more intently to the experience of liturgy itself. Here she discovers not only surprising continuities, but also tension; that liturgy is not experienced as a simple unity with the real world or the traversal from one world to the other, but often requires standing amid the pull of two apparently opposed ways of being in the world.

This is especially evident in the treatment of liturgical space, where the question is not only how liturgy opens up a world, but the relationship between that liturgical world and the world of the everyday. Heidegger, in both “Building, Dwelling, Thinking” and “The Origin of the Work of Art,” insists on grounding the world-making of human beings on the earth.¹ In the latter work, it is the struggle between world and earth that creates the space for human beings to meaningfully interact with each other – to inhabit their world at all. As Gschwandtner notes, Lacoste rejects this picture entirely for the world opened up by liturgy (68-69). Instead, liturgy is supposed to disrupt our relationship to our world and anticipate the eschaton. Accordingly, Lacoste envisages a liturgical world that is indifferent to space and place, where the function of liturgical architecture is one of displacement and rupture, that “thwarts” the human desire to dwell.

Gschwandtner’s proposal is to begin from a description from *within* the lifeworld of liturgy, rather than imposing theological categories and interpretations from without. Here she discovers elements of both Heidegger’s and Lacoste’s analyses. Churches are dwellings of a sort, where human beings return again and again with a kind of comfort and familiarity. But “we do not ‘dwell’ in a church in the way we dwell in a home” (70). The space of a church is still a way of dwelling, but it cannot be separated from its publicity – a dwelling that is shared and shaped by others – and its historicity – it has been built up over time by people who preceded us. This observation links the liturgical horizon of spatiality with that of temporality, as well as community with others. The work of others past must always precede this world, not just as the participation in a tradition, but in the literal construction and arrangement of the space itself according to that tradition.

To stress the concrete particularity and embeddedness of liturgical space is neither to deny nor downplay its sacrality. The liturgical world remains its own world, and its space remains sacred space. But this sacrality is not merely in the space itself. Gschwandtner pointedly writes of the difference between how a church space functions “on the height of the synaxis during Pascha night” and, by contrast, “when the janitor is vacuuming it on a Friday morning” (76). The church space alone, for all its potential to welcome us into the sacred world of liturgy, does not itself constitute

¹ Martin Heidegger, “The Origin of the Work of Art” and “Building, Dwelling, Thinking” in *Basic Writings* (New York: Harper & Row, 1977).

this world. To claim otherwise would be to misunderstand the nature of a lifeworld, which is constituted not only by the horizon of the space but by the way that space serves to order and direct the intentional acts of those involved. Space provides structure to the experience of liturgy; put differently, liturgy is experienced spatially. But it is not simply the experience of a particular space, and the mere entering of a physical space is not the same as entering the liturgical lifeworld.

This phenomenological observation, which sees the relationship between the experience of liturgy and the space of liturgy as that of experience and horizon, is what reveals the strange continuity and discontinuity of the liturgical world. For Gschwandtner, “the world of liturgy is *this* world, *this* space, *this* place, but it also opens up this place and shows it to be more than purely physical or geometrical” (77). In other words, liturgy is not an escape to some other world – heaven, perhaps – but the widening and deepening of the existing space, such that it becomes more than it was for us. This happens through the ordering of liturgical space and, importantly, through our intentional relationship with that space, such that we ourselves are open to the world that is opened up for us.

As it is with space, so it is with time. Gschwandtner’s analysis of temporality also stresses the strange continuity-with-tension that characterizes liturgy’s relationship with everyday experience. Here it is an experience of time as repetition, which arises out of the cyclical nature of the temporal structures and practices in Orthodox liturgy. Fasts give way to feasts, the church calendar moves through its seasons of anticipation and celebration, and the liturgy itself is made up of repeated phrases, readings, hymns, and prayers. In short, “liturgy lives and breathes by repetition” (50). Like liturgical space, liturgical time cannot be separated from the intentional relationship we have to it. It is not simply the observation of a particular understanding of time – the recall of a past or prediction of a future – but the *enactment* of time, the making present “of the ‘having been’ and the ‘will be’ *within* the now” (4). This enactment takes place through a kind of appropriation, where we always encounter the liturgical horizon from within our contemporary horizon (52).

By describing the repetition of liturgical time in this way, Gschwandtner stresses that the meaning of liturgical experience comes from encountering the same—the same feast, the same prayer, the same hymn – anew, that is, from a contemporary horizon that continually changes. The meaning is generated by this tension between the cyclical structure of liturgical time and practices and our everyday lived experience of time. To borrow Gadamer’s famous phrase, liturgy is experienced not as the retreat into one horizon or another, but as the fusion of temporal horizons. But this opens up a question. The focus so far has been on repetition as a way for us, through our intentional acts, to enter into the cyclical temporality of liturgy. But it also appears that this cyclical temporality itself has meaning only insofar as it appropriates a historical moment, namely the Incarnation

of Christ, and the ensuing historical tradition, including the authoritative biblical text. What is the relationship between the horizon of liturgical time, which we enter from within our own contemporary horizon, and its own horizon, that is, the historical horizon of its own tradition?

To ask this question already runs the risk of a kind of historicism. Kierkegaard—via Johannes Climacus—reminds us in *Philosophical Fragments* that the Christian does not relate to the past by way of historical reconstruction, because there is always a separation between what can be understood through the historical record alone and the “Moment” of faith.² In short, faith requires a fusion of horizons too: the fusion of my present horizon with that of Christ’s present, such that even the second-hand believer can become a contemporary of Christ in the act of faith. But Christ’s present is a historical past, the actual presence of the Incarnate Christ and his life on earth at a past time. The believer enters into this past as a contemporary, and eliminates the temporal distance that otherwise walls the past off from us. It is not surprising that Gadamer himself credits this account of contemporaneity in *Fragments* as influential for his own hermeneutical account of the fusion of horizons, and it mirrors the structure that Gschwandtner describes here in the liturgical experience.³

In *Welcoming Finitude*, however, the structure refers to the ability to enter into the world of the liturgy, of repetition and cyclical time, from our everyday temporality. It explicitly does not refer to our ability to reconnect with the historical reality of the Incarnation. Gschwandtner is rightly skeptical of portrayals of faith that equate it with “an assent to certain statements about linear historicity (for example, that Christ lived, died, and was raised at a particular point in human history)” and instead stresses the present quality of liturgical experience, which “celebrates the events ... as mattering now and always anew” (54). Assent to historical propositions alone treats the past as a dead object and cannot make those events matter for the Christian – this was precisely the critique in *Fragments*. But if the role of linear historicity – the inaugurating event of the Incarnation, the linear development of a tradition in the authoritative biblical text and its interpretations, in the very practices that shape liturgy itself – gives way entirely to the cyclical nature of liturgical time, does it run the risk of becoming unmoored? Without its own attachment to a *linear* temporal horizon, in which historical events transpired and were developed in a tradition, and look forward to a future eschaton, liturgical time would not be able to

² Søren Kierkegaard, *Philosophical Fragments*, trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985), 89-110.

³ Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, trans. Joel Weinshaimer and Donald G. Marshall (New York: Continuum, 1994), 572.

enact the past and future in the present. Its repetitions, however impactful on our everyday lives, would only repeat themselves.

By raising questions like these, and by troubling the easy or underdeveloped dichotomies that often accumulate on religious discourse, Gschwandtner's phenomenology of Orthodox liturgy offers a remarkably rich and nuanced account of liturgical experience. This account reveals productive tensions between the everyday world and the world of liturgy, but also surprising continuities. And just as this attention reveals surprising continuities within its own world, it also has the potential to reveal continuities between other Christian liturgical worlds, just as surprising and perhaps more so. Ironically, this is only possible because of how particular this phenomenology is – a description of specifically *Orthodox* liturgical experience. The basis for productive dialogue is not bland generalization or simplification, but the willingness to open a space between the horizon of one particular tradition, in all its specificity, and another. *Welcoming Finitude* opens a path toward this possibility, and thoroughly demonstrates the promise of phenomenology as a revelatory approach to understanding religious experience.