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Response to Christina M. Gschwandtner's *Welcoming Finitude*

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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.

Christina Gschwandtner's *Welcoming Finitude* takes up the ambitious task of a phenomenology of liturgy that is simultaneously engaged in the broader conversations within contemporary phenomenology of religion as much as it is informed by recent developments in liturgical studies and liturgical theology. The result is certain to be a classic in both fields and succeeds in overcoming the notable paucity of phenomenologically rigorous treatments of Christian liturgy, as well as liturgically attuned phenomenologies of religion. Perhaps even more significantly, *Welcoming Finitude* is devoted explicitly and exclusively to a phenomenological engagement with the Eastern Orthodox liturgical tradition and, as such, represents a much needed intervention within a field that has been almost uniformly dominated by Roman (and more specifically French) Catholic perspectives.

At the outset, Gschwandtner aims to situate her task at the intersection of (as much as in confrontation with) two divergent phenomenological approaches to religion. On the one hand, she argues against certain Husserlian and Heideggerian orthodoxies which consider any treatment of "religion" or "religious experience" to be incompatible with the strictures of phenomenological analysis. Such a perspective presupposes that any engagement with "religious" phenomena would require a tacit affirmation of a transcendent "Absolute," which would necessarily fall either beyond the scope of the reduction or else represent but an ontic mode of self-understanding dependent upon confessional faith. On the other hand, Gschwandtner is equally

critical of the posture of much recent French phenomenology which tends to proceed by way of a presupposed (yet typically concealed) religious perspective and frequently superimposes theological interpretation over phenomenological description. "By purporting to be about fundamental structures of human being instead of concrete religious practices, [these authors] are either unaware, or simply hide the fact, that their analyses are always heavily colored by their own religious background and that they draw on it for presenting these structures" (11). In Gschwandtner's view, both of these approaches distort the phenomenological enterprise by alternately presupposing too much or too little, but in either case transgressing the limits of an attentive concern for phenomena themselves. This does not mean that somehow Gschwandtner is claiming that phenomenology does not imply hermeneutics, but rather that (with Ricoeur) interpretation is always already implied (and underway) in the task of description.

Gschwandtner thus places a wager on behalf of a phenomenology of religion which neither presupposes the neutrality or fundamentality of methodological atheism, nor covertly installs a theological point of view that would structurally determine the character of the phenomenon beforehand. She writes, "as long as [phenomenology] maintains the attitude of the reduction—allowing phenomena to unfold rather than imposing scientific parameters upon them—and investigates the structure and meaning of these practices rather than simply describing particular empirical instantiations, it remains phenomenological" (12). Gschwandtner's aim can thus be understood as a theologically neutral exercise which seeks after the basic structures of the Eastern Orthodox orientation toward the world as mediated by, and originally encountered in, the practices of liturgical participation and community. She does not aim to reduce Eastern Orthodox self-understanding to liturgical practice so much as she attempts to delineate how Eastern Orthodox liturgy unfolds a certain "life-world" (*Lebenswelt*) – a foundational hermeneutical matrix – that enriches, configures, and determines the very structure a distinctive mode of "religious experience." Gschwandtner conceives of liturgy as a context-dependent, "world" which is nonetheless always already prefigured by ordinary experience and therefore always intelligible within the broader horizon of phenomenality.

Like any "world," the whole of Eastern Orthodox liturgy exceeds the sum of its parts and resists reduction to any singular component. Necessarily then, Gschwandtner refuses a linear approach to the phenomenon and the "architecture" of *Welcoming Finitude* (perhaps intentionally?) suggests the distinctively Byzantine structure of an encircling dome whose center can be accessed by any number of entryways. Each of the seven chapters profiles a distinctive facet of the phenomenon, *temporality*, *spatiality*, *corporeality*, *sensoriality*, *affectivity*, *community*, and *intentionality*, which taken together form a unitary *gestalt*. Each chapter approaches its respective theme via a constructive correlation of historical-liturgical theology

and rigorous phenomenological analysis. This allows for a hermeneutically sensitive treatment of distinctive Eastern Orthodox practices to shed light on certain phenomenological questions, as much as it allows phenomenological questions to uncover dimensions of liturgical experience that are frequently left untreated by theologians. Although each chapter contributes to this interdisciplinary conversation on its own terms, the chapters on *temporality*, *spatiality*, and *corporeality* merit particular attention.

Despite the fact that many of the most influential works in the history of phenomenology have been devoted to the question of time, Gschwandtner notes that treatment of temporality has been more limited within contemporary phenomenology of religion. Yet, when the question of time is considered from the religious standpoint—as in the case of Jean-Yves Lacoste, especially—analyses have tended to emphasize a linear or “futural” orientation which enacts a dramatic rupture with ordinary temporality. In contrast, Gschwandtner demonstrates that liturgy unfolds a multivalent sense of time that can be reduced neither to linearity nor to mere repetition. For Gschwandtner, liturgy discloses a “fullness of time,” a distended present which is inherently shaped by the tension between memory (past) and anticipation (future). The enriched present of liturgical time thus “constitutes neither a radical rupture with this world and its temporality nor a completely smooth continuity... it neither perfectly mirrors nor breaks entirely with ordinary time” (50). This fruitful tension of continuity and interruption is characteristic of a way of life constituted by non-identical repetition. Interlocking cycles of worship, fasting, and feasting, contrition and joy, reinforce both a mnemonic and anticipatory relation to the world that is taken up ever anew in the “now.”

The second chapter of *Welcoming Finitude* provides an extensive phenomenology of liturgical space and is perhaps the most groundbreaking of Gschwandtner's investigations. Indeed, it is noteworthy that there has been rather little examination of spatiality from a phenomenological perspective in general, much less from within the narrower field of phenomenology of religion. When examined, authors like (once again) Heidegger and Lacoste have largely approached the question of spatiality in terms of more basic orientating relations of proximity and distance, rather than exploring how these relations might be transformed or deepened by architectural style and the specificities of intentionally ordered space. Gschwandtner unhesitatingly engages the philosophical and patristic concepts that underly the organizational rhythm of Eastern Orthodox architectural style, especially the notion of the human being as an integration of a harmonious cosmos that attains its fulfillment and transformation through Christ. While such straightforwardly theological (and indeed, metaphysical) presuppositions certainly exceed the experientially determined strictures of the phenomenology Gschwandtner employs, she nonetheless compellingly uncovers how they are

experientially translated into the intentional space of liturgy in a manner that serves to broaden our sense of emplacement in the world. "Liturgical spatiality manifests as a more intense, fuller space, a place where our experience of space is 'thickened'... interpreted as God's presence in the real physical space rather than a removal to some other place...there is no way to dispense with the 'earthly' spatial dimension in order to 'ascend' into heaven" (79). By approaching sacred space as a deliberate configuration and refiguration of the ordinary world rather than as an effort to "transcend" or break from it, Gschwandtner quietly inaugurates an attempt to renew the intelligible significance of liturgical spatiality on the basis of concrete experience instead of appealing to the cosmologies of Late Antiquity or the Middle Ages.

The third chapter on corporeality acts as a nexus which bridges the foregoing analyses of temporality and spatiality with the subsequent explorations of sensoriality, affectivity, and community. This is only fitting, insofar as it is precisely the body in its finitude and emplacement which acts as the porous medium by which the world accessed, as well as the site of our exposure to the other. Through her consideration of liturgy as a primarily embodied *practice* rather than as an excessive, liminal event (or nonevent) of disruption, Gschwandtner again demonstrates that liturgy serves to "thicken" and extend the field of common experience. Liturgy is a kind of *training* which habituates and shapes the body. This liturgical habituation serves to reorient the practitioner toward God and the other in the mode of receptivity and self-offering rather than self-sufficiency or autonomy. "In liturgy, bodies are not individual, extended objects in space, but they are dynamically related participants of a common liturgical experience... [which] knits those bodies into one: one voices raised in song, one cup shared in common, become open and vulnerable to the other" (100). This reorientation is crucially, not something which imposes itself upon the practitioner but rather unfolds by way of a voluntary effort that continually recovers a sense of the body in its most basic vulnerability and fragility.

The analyses presented in *Welcoming Finitude* are both profound and suggestive, and for this reason raise further pertinent lines of questioning, perhaps beyond the primary scope of the book itself. I will conclude with two sets of questions that have continued to provoke my further reflection. Both sets of questions arise in response to a certain tension between the imposed strictures of Gschwandtner's methodology, and the broader problem of the relationship (and distinction) between phenomenological insights and explicit theological discourse. While this tension persists beneath each of the book's seven chapters, it is made most evident in the final chapter on intentionality as well as in the introduction and conclusion to the book.

My first series of questions concern the extent to which it is possible ultimately to give an account of a religious phenomenon that excludes the constitutive role that theological interpretation might play in determining the quality of phenomenality.

As noted earlier, Gschwandtner scrupulously differentiates the task of phenomenological analysis from the task of theology. Undoubtedly, this approach has the significant benefit of reemphasizing that phenomenological treatment of religious phenomena need not come at the expense of broader communicability (i.e., with those outside the bounds of particular confessional tradition) or as being utterly discontinuous from a shared horizon. Nonetheless, despite repeatedly emphasizing a basic reciprocity between phenomenological description and hermeneutical interpretation, Gschwandtner seems to imply that an explicitly *theological* interpretation is in some sense exterior, or even inaccessible, to hermeneutic phenomenology proper. She maintains that a philosophical account of liturgy must proceed “without theologically extrapolating to the existence or nature of God” (202). On the one hand, this suggests that theological discourse is somehow inherently discontinuous with lived religion, or a kind of sublime discourse that is more or less unintelligible to philosophy or otherwise incommunicable apart from faith. On the other hand, this also seems to imply that liturgical practice possesses a mode of “pre-theological” significance, which can only be accessed by disentangling the experiential dimension of liturgy from its theological interpretation. Is it not the case, though, that theological discourse (like any discourse) shapes the basic character of the phenomena which we perceive? Must we not also say that Eucharistic theology or Christology are just as irreducible to liturgical intentionality as posture or repetition? If “phenomenology always already interprets what it unfolds” (17), can the phenomenon of liturgy be accessed independently of a Christian theological hermeneutic? Is such a hermeneutic necessarily extrinsic to phenomenological discourse?

My second set of questions concerns the stakes of sharply distinguishing “religion” or “religious phenomena” from other regions of phenomenological inquiry. Again, the employment of this distinction is not without its benefits. It commendably prevents phenomenology from claiming for itself the role of a “master discourse” in excess of its methodologically imposed limitations. By extension, this distinction also prevents the hermeneutically inflected claims of a particular religious-theological lifeworld (in this case Eastern Orthodoxy) from being distorted into a set of phenomenologically given structures undergirding all experience. It seems to me, however, that in locating certain phenomena within a regional sphere called “religious practice” yet another a priori point of view is adopted and superimposed upon the phenomena in question. Is it really the case that by adopting the apparently “neutral” standpoint of a phenomenological analysis of “religious experience” we have escaped the problem of confusing broader, experientially given structures with a hermeneutically contingent point of view? Of course, it is well-known that the construction of the general category “religion” is a historically conditioned and hermeneutically contingent expression of a certain (Western and

secular humanistic, through originally liberal Protestant) lifeworld that is itself foreign to the lived experience or self-understanding of most historical "religions." Indeed, the lifeworld of Eastern Orthodoxy itself hardly seems to suggest merely a localized "experience" belonging to a specific "religion" within a more universal, religiously neutral lifeworld. While the ontological status of a certain community's theological self-understanding may well be undecidable (at least phenomenologically), the question must nonetheless be raised regarding the phenomenological basis for differentiating "religious" experience from other "secular" modes of experience. To posit an a priori difference at the outset suggests its own sort of theological extrapolation. Is it the case that phenomenology can extrinsically obtain to the phenomenon of liturgy without taking up the relevance of theological self-understanding as determinative for the horizon of phenomenality? If it is the case, how does a phenomenological understanding of "religion" ultimately differ from sociological or psychological description?

That a book on Eastern Orthodox liturgy would open up these philosophical questions is itself a testament to the extraordinary breakthrough which *Welcoming Finitude* represents. Too often religiously inflected phenomenologies have tended to emphasize liminal and excessive phenomena or existentially centered questions while ignoring the concrete practices and modes of life which most immediately shape religious community and self-understanding. With surgical precision and attentive rigor, Gschwandtner's account of Eastern Orthodox liturgy instead launches a revolt on behalf of the "things themselves," reclaiming ordinary religious life as both vulnerable and hospitable to the world of common experience, as well as capable of meaningful dialogue with other traditions.