

# RECONSIDERATIONS

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EXPLORING A BIBLICAL UNDERSTANDING OF LIFE AND CULTURE

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VOLUME 4, NUMBER 1

## WHEN *NOT* TO REFUTE ATHEISM: MARX, NIETZSCHE, AND FREUD FOR CHRISTIAN REFLECTION

*Merold Westphal*

*Editor's note: This fall the Christian Study Center's Culture Seminar presents two lecture series. One series, "Issues in Contemporary Philosophy," welcomes Fordham University Professor of Philosophy Merold Westphal and St. Louis University Professor of Philosophy Eleanore Stump. In our lead essay, we are featuring a book excerpt by Prof. Westphal. On Wednesday, October 13 at 7:30 p.m., he will speak at the Study Center on "The Christian Uses of Modern Atheism." On Thursday, October 14 at 4:00 p.m. at the Keene Center of Dauer Hall on the University of Florida campus, Prof. Westphal will offer a lecture titled "Heidegger, Aquinas, and Onto-Theology."*

Marx, Nietzsche, and Freud for devotional reading! The idea is strange, even weird. But our trio has at least one conspicuous advantage over the authors we more easily turn to for spiritual edification: Because they write in the language of psychology and sociology, it is easier to see that they are talking about real people in the real world.

But our trio has an even more conspicuous disadvantage. They are atheists. Worse, they are militant atheists. Worse yet, they are among the most influential and widely read atheists of our time. Few writers can claim to have contributed as deeply and decisively to the secular humanism that permeates the world we live in. It is "out there" shaping the way "they" think and act, and it is "in here" shaping the way we think and act, even in our battles with secular

humanism. And they have contributed to the spread of this virus more than almost anyone else. How can we possibly come to think of them as God-given instruments of our own cleansing and renewal as individual Christians and as the church? How can we be enabled to recognize in the diatribes of these enemies of the faith the painful truth about ourselves?

I believe the final answer to this question is found in recognizing the profound parallel between the critique of religion in Marx, Nietzsche, and Freud and the critique of religion found in the Bible. Faith as fraud? Devotion as deception?

These are strong charges, but modern atheism is not the first to make them. What about Amos, whose God cannot stand the music offered in his praise (Amos 5:23)? What about Isaiah (Second or Third), for whom "all our righteous deeds are like a polluted garment" (Isa. 64:6)? And what about Jesus, who considers the most pious people of his day "whitewashed tombs" (Matt. 23:27) and the temple run by

the chief priests a "den of robbers" (Mark 11:17)? We need only recall Jesus' critique of the Pharisees, Paul's critique of works righteousness, James's critique of cheap grace, and the Old Testament prophetic critiques on which these are based to be reminded that biblical faith has built into it a powerful polemic against certain kinds of religion, even if they are practiced in the name of

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the one true God. These biblical diatribes against false religion are addressed to the covenant people of God in their worship (as they think) of the God of the covenant; indeed, in the case of James and Paul, these sharp critiques are addressed to the Christian church. They cannot be neutralized by appeals either to metaphysical orthodoxy or to ritual rectitude and zeal or to the combination of sound doctrine and proper worship.

But perhaps the most frightening critique of instrumental religion in the Bible is the portrayal of Jesus' own disciples in the Gospel narratives. I am not referring here to the prayerlessness that made the power over evil spirits that Jesus gave them useless (Mark 9:14-29), the insensitivity with which they scolded parents who brought their children to Jesus (10:13-16), the overconfidence with which Peter denied that he would deny Jesus (14:27-31), the lethargy that made it possible for Peter, James, and John to sleep through Jesus' agony in Gethsemane (14:32-42), the cowardice they showed when "they all forsook him and fled" (14:50), or even the disloyalty with which Peter eventually denied even knowing the one he had confessed as Messiah (14:66-72).

These are all signs of weakness, evidence that the faith of the disciples had the awkward habit of running out of gas at crucial moments. But there is also evidence that their faith had a venal quality to it, that even when it was present it was corrupted by instrumental interests. We see this on the three occasions when Jesus tried to tell them of the suffering and death awaiting him in Jerusalem:

**Mark 8:27-9:1** Immediately after Peter's dramatic confession, "You are the Christ," Jesus speaks of his suffering and death. Peter rebukes him, but Jesus responds, "Get behind me, Satan! For you are not on the side of God, but of men." The subsequent episodes suggest that it is not cowardice but ambition that speaks here. If Jesus is the Messiah, Peter is in line for a top job in the new administration.

**Mark 9:30-41** Again Jesus tries to tell the disciples what lies ahead, but they are unable to understand and afraid to ask about it. What do they find to talk about in the episode that Mark and Luke record next? They have a debate about which of them is the greatest. Who will have the most pres-

tigious positions in the kingdom? And to keep the inner circle conveniently small, they try to silence a man who is casting out demons in Jesus' name, "because he was not following us."

**Mark 10:32-45** Jesus tries again. James and John respond by coming forward with a painfully honest confession of what motivates their discipleship: "Grant us to sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your glory." The text does not say which of the two brothers wanted to be Secretary of State and which one Secretary of Defense, but it does tell us that the other ten disciples were very upset at this attempt to get an inside track on the spoils of victory.

It is in these texts that Jesus' profoundest teachings about the meaning of discipleship occur. He speaks of self-denial, cross-bearing, servanthood,

losing one's life for the sake of the gospel, and giving one's life for others. The contrast between his understanding of what it means to be a bearer of the kingdom and the disciples' self-centered discipleship is as powerful a critique of instrumental religion as anything to be found in Freud, Marx, and Nietzsche.

But because their critique of religion is so deeply biblical, in spite of their own unbelief, Freud, Marx, and Nietzsche can help us to recover the meaning of the biblical critique of religion

if we will let them. The Spirit that speaks to the church also blows where it will. Is it possible that the Spirit would speak to the church through its worst enemies?

We can more clearly see the powerful parallel between Marx, Nietzsche, and Freud, on the one hand, and Amos, Jeremiah, Jesus, James, and Paul, on the other, if we become more precise about the nature of the atheism being recommended for our devotional meditation. For it is not every form of modern atheism that I have in mind. To focus on Marx, Nietzsche, and Freud requires a simultaneous broadening and narrowing of the meaning of "atheism."

"Atheism" can be used of religious unbelief in a broad and inclusive sense. It thus includes both the atheist proper, who claims to know that God does not exist, and the agnostic, who, with a kind of Socratic ignorance, claims only that we do not or cannot know whether God exists. Further, atheism is no longer limited to the issue of God's mere exis-

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tence, but also includes major claims about the nature and activity of God. Nor are its negations limited to the propositional content of the religious life. They extend from religious theory to religious practice with the claim that the liturgical, devotional, and ethical practices of the religious life are rationally impermissible or at best unwar-ranted, in either case irrational.

There is a narrowness, however, that corresponds to this broadness of usage. Marx, Nietzsche, and Freud represent a type of atheism different from the atheism that has dominated European philosophy of religion from at least the time of Gaunilo through Hume and Kant and that continues to this day to hold center stage in Anglo-American discussion. This atheism we can call "evidential atheism." It is nowhere better summarized than in Bertrand Russell's account of what he would say to God if the two were ever to meet and if God were to ask him why he had not been a believer: "I'd say, 'Not enough evidence God! Not enough evidence!'"

By contrast, Marx, Nietzsche, and Freud have been called the masters of the school of suspicion. What unites them in spite of important and possibly irreconcilable differences is their joint practice of the *hermeneutics of suspicion*, the deliberate attempt to expose the self-deceptions involved in hiding our actual operative motives from ourselves, individually or collectively, in order not to notice how and how much our behavior and our beliefs are shaped by values we profess to disown. While our trio develops and applies the hermeneutics of suspicion with primary emphasis, respectively, in the spheres of political economy, bourgeois morality, and psycho-sexual development, they also each subject the religion of Christendom to the critique of suspicion.

This suspicion is to be distinguished from skepticism, which gives rise to evidential atheism. Skepticism is directed toward the elusiveness of things, while suspicion is directed toward the evasiveness of consciousness. Skepticism seeks to overcome the opacity of facts, while suspicion seeks to uncover the duplicity of persons. Skepticism addresses itself directly to the propositions believed and asks whether there is sufficient evidence to make belief rational. Suspicion addresses itself to the persons who believe and

only indirectly to the propositions believed. It seeks to discredit the believing soul by asking what *motives* lead people to belief and what *functions* their beliefs play, looking for precisely those motives and functions that love darkness rather than light and therefore hide themselves. Where Hume and Kant challenge the soundness of the arguments for the existence of God, Marx, Nietzsche, and Freud seek to show how theistic belief functions both to mask and to fulfill forms of self-interest that cannot be acknowledged.

While skepticism (along with evidential atheism) has its origins in Platonic-Cartesian doubt, suspicion arises from Francis Bacon's critique of the Idols of the Tribe and Cave. "The human understanding is no dry light," writes Bacon, "but receives an infusion from the will and affections; whence proceed sciences which may be called '*sciences as one would.*' For what a man had rather were true he more readily believes." With reference to impatience, hope, superstition, arrogance, and pride, Bacon comments, "Numberless in short are the ways, and sometimes imperceptible, in which the affections colour and infect the understanding." This leads to the advice that every seeker of truth

adopt the rule "*that whatever his mind seizes and dwells upon with peculiar satisfaction is to be held in suspicion...*"

The style is different, to be sure, but Schopenhauer clearly makes the same point when he says that by will he does not mean a power guided by knowledge and under the direction of reason. Instead, he says, we should think of the will by analogy with blind instinct, which uses reason as its instrument. Reason gives fictitious accounts of our behavior for the sake of moral appearances, or, even better, under the guidance of the will becomes entirely unable to notice unwelcome facts about the self. In short, the will is substance and master, the intellect only accident and servant.

In his masterful book on Freud, Paul Ricoeur makes the point with similar generality. Suspicion is necessary to keep before us "the nonautonomy of knowledge, its rootedness in existence, the latter being understood as desire and effort," that is, as the will and affections of which Bacon and Schopenhauer speak. "Thereby is discovered not only the unsurpassable nature of life, but the inter-

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ference of desire with intentionality, upon which desire inflicts an invincible obscurity, an ineluctable partiality.”

As we shall see in more detail, Freud sees dreams and neurotic symptoms as the disguised fulfillment of repressed wishes. He then suggests that religious beliefs are like dreams and religious practices like neurotic symptoms. In both cases the claim is that we can neither understand nor properly evaluate the belief or behavior in question until we discover the hidden drives and motives that shape them. In other words, suspicion easily transfers its critique from beliefs to practices.

The resulting evaluation of the religious life is as a whole devastating for at least two reasons. First, to an even somewhat impartial observer the critique seems *all too true all too much of the time*. The prominence of various self-serving motives in our piety, or at least in that of others, is all too easy to notice. Who can fail, for example, to see the self-deception in the Afrikaner attempt to portray apartheid as a divine mandate or in the “white man’s burden,” “manifest destiny,” and “anti-Communist” theologues that have shaped the colonial domination and even extermination of indigenous populations in North, Central, and South America? Or who can fail to notice the instrumental character of the piety of the politicians, especially at election time? Do they serve God for nought (Job 1:9)?

Second, by its nature suspicion discredits the believer and the believing community even if their beliefs should turn out to be true and their practices in themselves good. Even orthodoxy becomes idolatrous when belief in the triune God serves to sanctify the flaunting of his purposes in the world. The God of the Bible repudiates metaphysical compliments, however orthodox, ritual tributes, however splendid, and moral rectitude, however rigorous, when they are set in the context of instrumental religion, offered to a god we hope to domesticate.

So it is not surprising that almost invariably our first reaction to Marx, Nietzsche, and Freud is to seek to refute or discredit them. It is comforting to think (though at this reference to comfortable thoughts suspicion begins to get suspicious) that Marx can be blamed for the Soviets, that Nietzsche can be blamed for the Nazis, and that American (scientific) psychology treats Freud as beyond the pale.

While this temptation is largely a defensive reaction to the exposé suspicion is likely to generate, it gains the appearance of legitimacy from a failure to distinguish the two kinds of atheism. No doubt the proper response of Christian thinkers to evidential atheism is to seek to refute it. This can be done by

trying to show that there is, in fact, sufficient evidence to warrant religious beliefs and practices rationally. Or it can be done by challenging the way in which the evidentialist demands evidence.

I shall not discuss the relative merits of these strategies here. My thesis here is that an entirely different response is called for by the atheism of suspicion. The first task of Christian thinkers as they face the likes of Marx, Nietzsche, and Freud is not to refute or discredit them. It is to acknowledge that their critique is all too true all too much of the time and to seek to discover just where the shoe fits, not “them” but ourselves.

In short, I am calling on the philosophers, theologians, and above all the pastors and lay teachers of the Christian community (1) to be the prophetic voices that challenge the church to take seriously the critique of religion generated by suspicion and (2) to lead the way in using it as an aid to personal and corporate self-examination. The emphasis of Christian spirituality on personal self-examination and the emphasis of Hebrew prophecy on corporate self-examination make it possible to speak of the *religious uses of modern atheism* when we speak of the atheism of suspicion.

Merold Westphal is Professor of Philosophy at Fordham University. Originally published in *Suspicion and Faith: The Religious Uses of Modern Atheism* by Merold Westphal, © 1998 Fordham University Press. Reprinted with permission.

#### Other publications by Merold Westphal:

*Overcoming Onto-Theology*  
(Fordham University Press, 2001)

*Postmodern Philosophy and Christian Thought*  
(ed.) (Indiana University Press, 1999)

*History and Truth in Hegel’s Phenomenology*  
(3rd edition, Indiana University Press, 1998)

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

# FEATURED EVENTS AT THE CENTER

## THE CULTURE SEMINAR

### **Series One: Issues in Contemporary Philosophy**

Co-sponsored by the Department of Philosophy, University of Florida

#### **“Heidegger, Aquinas, and Onto-Theology”**

Merold Westphal, Ph.D., Fordham University

Thursday, October 14, 4:00 p.m. – Keene Center, Dauer Hall, University of Florida

#### **“Personal Reflections and Moral Residue: The Holocaust and Stain on the Soul”**

Eleanore Stump, Ph.D., St. Louis University

Thursday, November 18, 4:00 p.m. – Keene Center, Dauer Hall, University of Florida

### **Series Two: Christianity and Democracy**

Sponsored by the Pascal Society

#### **“Redefining the American Mainstream: How Immigration is Transforming Christianity in the United States”**

Manuel Vasquez, Ph.D., Associate Professor of Religion, University of Florida

Tuesday, September 28, 12 noon – Anderson 216, University of Florida

#### **“Religious Groups and Politics: What’s Legal and What’s Not?”**

Patrick Shannon, J.D., Ed.D., Associate Dean, University of Florida College of Law

Wednesday, October 6, 3:00 p.m. – Reitz Union, 349, University of Florida

#### **“Theocracy v. Christianity”**

John Sommerville, Ph.D., Professor of History, University of Florida

Tuesday, October 19, 3:00 p.m. – Reitz Union, 347, University of Florida

#### **“The Politics of Jesus: Anabaptist Vision and Mennonite Reality”**

Eve MacMaster, M.A., M.Div., Chaplain to Brethren and Mennonite Students

Tuesday, November 9, 3:00 p.m. – Reitz Union, 346, University of Florida

The Culture Seminar explores the intellectual and cultural resources of the Christian tradition for understanding and responding to the challenges created by contemporary cultural change.

*For classes, reading groups, and other events at the Center, please visit our website at [www.christianstudycenter.org](http://www.christianstudycenter.org)*

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LOOKING INTO THE MIRROR  
OF EVIL:  
A REVIEW OF THE MORAL  
PHILOSOPHY OF ELEANORE STUMP

Michael A. Harper

*Editor's note: On Thursday, November 18, 2004 the Study Center welcomes Eleanore Stump, The Robert J. Henle Professor of Philosophy at St. Louis University. As a highly regarded moral philosopher, Professor Stump will speak on "Personal Reflections and Moral Residue: The Holocaust and Stain on the Soul" at 4:00 p.m. in the Keene Center of Dauer Hall on the University of Florida campus.*

To be a Christian scholar initially requires taking seriously the mandate to love God with our minds, and in the setting of a university or college it centrally involves excelling in the three pillars of academic life: teaching, research/writing and faculty service. Eleonore Stump, Professor of Philosophy at St. Louis University, exemplifies the integration of the former mandate into the latter areas. A review of Stump's work generally, and her article "The Mirror of Evil" specifically, will show Stump to be a compelling example of this integration as we turn our attention to her more recent work on evil and suffering. A glance at her work on evil and suffering will provide insight into her general thoughts on contemporary moral philosophy by drawing from her knowledge of medieval thought and biblical narrative. By doing so we will see that Stump's overall and recent work is worthy of personal reflection into ever-present human problems.

Eleonore Stump has served and taught diligently at the university level for over thirty years. She is considered a prolific writer and is well respected as a Christian philosopher. Her research areas largely have been under the umbrella of medieval philosophy with a keen understanding in tackling contemporary issues in philosophy of religion. Her early work was on Boethius (c. 480-525) and has progressed from that work to become an authority on Thomas Aquinas' (1225-1274) thought. She has written on petitionary prayer, the eternity of God, the simplicity of God, the goodness of God, and God's knowledge and human freedom. The problem of evil has consistently permeated her work since her articles "Knowledge, Freedom and the Problem of Evil" in 1983 and "The Problem of Evil" in 1985. Much of her recent work in moral philosophy has looked closely at human suffering, considering the place

the biblical narrative can serve in helping us understand the problem.

Stump's recent work on suffering was preceded by her article "The Mirror of Evil" where she argues that evil not only shows us the suffering that is external to us, but it also acts as a mirror to show us ourselves. It shows us ourselves in that although we may be only witnesses to evil or, even more removed, as we read about it in some far off place, we cannot completely detach ourselves from it. This is so, Stump says, because as members of the human race, we can relate to all the actions and experiences of this membership. It is exactly this human race, to which we belong, that is responsible for much of the evil that happens. So we cannot easily dismiss ourselves simply because we do not often seem to be personally involved, but instead we must see ourselves as connected through ties to our own species.

Then, in an interesting fashion, Stump asserts that we come to know evil and goodness via some ability or faculty that functions in much the same way that we are able to recognize people's faces. We are able to discern evil in kind and degree via this faculty. When this faculty functions properly, we can tell that something is evil and whether the evil is worse or "less bad" than other instances. The same faculty is able to perform the same function with goodness. Since this faculty enables us to discern goodness as well as evil, she follows by saying that ultimately true goodness – the kind that might bring us to tears or create a yearning for something greater – is God's goodness. She thinks the best source for instances of this kind of goodness is the Christian scriptures. When people begin to see these visions of true goodness in the Bible, they are drawn to God, the one who offers consolation for our grief and sorrow and offers healing from the problems that evil produces.

In her final move, Stump offers a twist in her mirror illustration by saying that evil not only helps us reflect on our own predicament, but also leads us to God. Our experiences with evil can prepare us for tastes of true goodness. Once we have tasted such goodness, Stump says it is alluring and leads to the source of all goodness: "The mirror of evil becomes translucent, and we can see through it to the goodness of God." The intention is that the glimpse of true goodness in God does not dismiss evil, but causes us to see our pains or the pains we see around us in this context, which leads to peace and joy. Stump concludes, "You can be grateful for the good that comes your way, without always contrasting it with the ghastliness elsewhere."

If this summary has been an accurate synopsis of Prof. Stump and some of her work, then I think it is clear that she has much to offer the Christian community and those inquiring into the resources of Christianity. In a culture that tries as it may to eliminate any semblance of suffering, Stump's perspective can help us find rest in the many turmoils that life brings. But her thinking has also been recognized by her peers as she was selected last year to deliver the 2003 Gifford Lectures. The Gifford Lectures are the prestigious annual lectures on religion delivered by invitation only at four universities in the UK (University of Aberdeen, Scotland in this case). Stump's Gifford Lectures not only lead to a forthcoming book (see below), but they also serve as an occasion for her visit to the University of Florida by way of the Study Center on November 18 this fall. We would do well to have our own thoughts on evil and suffering penetrated by the thought of Eleanore Stump. As she continues to look into the ideas of ancient Christian thinkers, perhaps she will help us hear these voices with more clarity as we contemplate the problems that continue to plague us as humans.

*Michael A. Harper is a doctoral student in philosophy at the University of Arkansas*

**Important and related works:**

"Petitionary Prayer," *American Philosophical Quarterly* 16 (1979) 81-91.

"Eternity," (with Norman Kretzmann), *Journal of Philosophy* 78 (1981) 429-458.

"Knowledge, Freedom, and the Problem of Evil," *International Journal for the Philosophy of Religion*, 14 (1983) 49-58.

"The Problem of Evil," *Faith and Philosophy* 2 (1985) 392-423.

*Wandering in Darkness: Narrative and the Problem of Suffering* (Oxford University Press, forthcoming).

"The Mirror of Evil," in *God and the Philosophers*, ed. Thomas Morris (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), 235-245

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# CALENDAR OF EVENTS

**September 28:** "Redefining the American Mainstream: How Immigration is Transforming Christianity in the U.S." – Manuel Vasquez, Ph.D., Dept. of Religion, University of Florida  
*12 noon, 216 Anderson Hall, University of Florida*

**October 6:** "Religious Groups and Politics: What's Legal and What's Not?" – Patrick Shannon, J.D., Ed. D., University of Florida College of Law  
*3:00 p.m., Reitz Union 349, University of Florida*

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