



Christina M. Gschwandtner. *Ways of Living Religion: Philosophical Investigations into Religious Experience*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2024, xxiii + 347 pp.

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This volume offers a philosophical examination of various forms of religious experiences rather than merely concentrating on beliefs or apologetics. The author, Christina M. Gschwandtner, argues that rather than being isolated acts or one-time occurrences (*Erlebnis*), these experiences are best understood as ways of life (*Erfahrung*). According to her, the philosophical approach most appropriate for this type of examination is phenomenology. However, instead of portraying religion as a singular entity, the book provides chapters on ascetic, liturgical, monastic, mystical, devotional, compassionate, and fundamentalist experiences – mostly limited to the Christian tradition. In this instance, Gschwandtner is more interested in exploring how religious events speak to the human condition in general than she is in highlighting the uniqueness of religion.

In the opening chapter, the author gives a summary of phenomenology as a method for examining religious experience. According to her, it is an approach that focuses on “*how* things appear rather than *what* they are.” Because of this, it is oriented towards “careful and detailed description” as opposed to explanation or normative assertions (p. 7). To exemplify this particular philosophical style, we are briefly introduced to thinkers like Edmund Husserl, Martin Heidegger, Rudolf Otto, Edith Stein, Jean Héring, and others.

Each chapter is dedicated to a different kind of religious experience, beginning with an explanation of its history and setting. For example, the examination of the ascetic experience is preceded by a description of the formation and methods of the desert ascetics in the fourth and fifth centuries. Three components make up an ascetic experience, according to Gschwandtner: withdrawal and abstention, vigilance or discernment, and self-denial or self-abnegation. For example, when it comes to retreating from everyday life, this suggests a certain type of phenomenological minimalism in which time and space are perceived differently (here referred to as “the insignificance of time” and “the emptiness of place”). The author argues that ascetic behavior thus recognizes human imperfection and develops a remedy for it through a variety of self-examination and self-discipline techniques.

Gschwandtner, however, describes the phenomenal features of liturgical experience as “predictability and preparedness” (p. 74). In other words, since liturgical practices typically exist within a tradition, they are experienced as preceding the

people who participate in it. The author claims that in this way, it produces a phenomenality of belonging that aligns with Heidegger's depiction of human existence as being thrust into a meaningful world. Therefore, the liturgical way of living religion allows "a community's ordinary actions, feelings, bodies, spaces, and times to have meaning that goes beyond the individual" (p. 88). Even so, she also highlights the fact that liturgical actions and rites have aspects of mystery and awe that are not always fully comprehensible.

In the phenomenological examination of each form of religious experience, particular attention is paid to the function of spatiality, temporality, individualism versus collectivism and pathos. For instance, in the chapter on mystical experiences, Gschwendtner confronts the widespread belief that mystics, like ascetics, are usually "lone rangers." She notes that certain psychoanalytic readings of individual mystics, for example, are based on this perspective, which ignores the Beguine and monastic organizations' communal nature. As a result, rather than examining the documented experiences of mystics independently (supposedly from a phenomenological perspective), they are hijacked to support a specific theory or idea. A phenomenological description, according to Gschwendtner, would prefer to show how such experiences are "manifested in corporeal and sensory fashion, albeit in ambivalent ways" (p. 151). On this note, she cites Jean-Luc Marion's concept of the saturated phenomena as an illustration of emotional excess. Additionally, the author points out that a phenomenological explanation would also consider how these mystical events are characterized as "givenness," connection with the Divine, or take the form of patterns of growth.

In my opinion, Gschwendtner's discussion of devotional experiences is among the book's most fascinating sections. The author herself notes that "philosophers... have almost entirely ignored devotional practices and forms of living" (p. 181). She believes this has to do with the mundane, regular, and private character of devotion. While endowing a person's ordinary life with religious significance, this kind of practice does not require her to withdraw from regular society. Neither is any adherence to a specific religious tradition needed (while it may indeed coincide with such an affiliation). However, according to Gschwendtner, typically, devotional forms of religion propose a friendship with God. These everyday ways of creating meaning could include, for example, a consistent prayerful conversation with the dependable divine. Because of this, everything is viewed through the prism of the meaningful universe that one's daily devotional activities have created. As a result, devotion fosters favorable conditions for the transformation of a person's entire life.

A crucial component of a religious way of life is the compassionate experience, which is discussed in the next chapter. Among others, the author cites the works of Jacques Derrida, Richard Kearney, John D. Caputo, Jean Vanier, and Emmanuele Lévinas. She notes that this is a drastically intersubjective manner of living as opposed to, say, mysticism or asceticism. This is not the same as denying or minimizing one's self, as in asceticism. Instead, Gschwendtner notes that this is "a self-forgetting that occurs as a matter of course in the very process of being so profoundly preoccupied with and even overpowered by the needs of others" (p. 266).

The fundamentalist experience is the last religious approach discussed in this book. The author concentrates on two organizations who consider themselves to be

fundamentalists. However, rather than merely seeing religious fundamentalism as blind obedience to nonsensical precepts, Gschwendtner views it as a specific phenomenon of a larger human experience. She specifically considers it to be a mode of existence that is distinguished by alternative approaches to navigating time and space. In particular, because they consider themselves to be living in “the end of time,” these groups have a tendency to focus on the future. The author claims that because fundamentalists frequently opt to live on the periphery of society, this is also reflected spatially. Thus, with reference to Merleau-Ponty, Gschwendtner suggests that “the fundamentalist's flesh is not interwoven with the flesh of the world in the same way as another person's, but is in constant tension with the world, within it but not of it” (p. 286).

The ultimate goal in a fundamentalist setting is to make the members' daily experiences so consistent that it becomes hard to imagine living any other way. This is comparable to how ritual “seeks to structure all of life and is highly habit-forming,” according to Gschwendtner (p. 303). Similarly, a comparison of the various ways of living religion is presented in the final chapter. Here, the concepts of temporality, spatiality, embodiment, affectivity, and individuality vs. community serve as the foundation for this examination. These analytical tools are well-chosen because they shed light on the aspects that a phenomenological investigation can capture, as opposed to a limited focus on beliefs or textual sources. This method, in my opinion, is especially beneficial when discussing the devotional experience – which is frequently disregarded in philosophical analyses – and the fundamentalist experience, which is typically discussed in a routine- and one-dimensional manner.

The analytical tools are not quite as useful in some of the other chapters, which is particularly noticeable in the chapter on the compassionate experience. In other words, even though compassion for the needy is a crucial part of living a Christian life, this phenomenon is subject to another level of analysis due to its connection to the ethical discourse. While, for example, Lévinas' “face of the other” builds a bridge between concrete reality and abstract philosophical discourse, some aspects of religious experience, for instance, appear to require a multifaceted treatment (combining phenomenology with the underlying cognitive arguments behind certain behaviors). For this reason, it would be interesting to use Gschwendtner's analytical tools on other religions, where the phenomenon of compassion is motivated by other kinds of belief-structures.

The fact that various religious manifestations frequently overlap rather than exist independently, as one might assume based on the chapter divide, is another characteristic that might be critiqued. But since the author has previously covered this in the book's introduction, it is evident that the division is only a tactic used to organize the material in a reader-friendly way. Instead, Gschwendtner's research emphasizes the complex and interconnected relationships among the phenomena that comprise the religious realm. In this sense, her book offers a refreshing extension of the philosophy of religion's method of approaching its subject. I thoroughly enjoyed reading this book and would recommend it to anyone interested in studying religion as an important feature of human life.

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