’Metaphysics’ and ‘religion’ are vast, tangled concepts, and problems quickly appear when they engage one another. To begin with, not everything identified in the West as a religion has been continuously self-identified in that way. For example, Hinduism has a deep history of metaphysical speculation about Brahman, taken as the absolute, and in particular about the relations of Atman and Brahman, yet there is no word in Sanskrit that is well translated by ‘religion’. When Hindus today think of their spiritual beliefs and practices as a religion, it is largely a modern notion derived from contact with Europe and North America. Ch’an Buddhism and Taoism have concerns that Western philosophers have no hesitation in calling metaphysical; however, neither religion acknowledges divinities and therefore has no curiosity in the being or essence of God or the gods, which so absorbs the attention of Western thinkers. If we restrict ourselves to the Abrahamic faiths, we find that Judaism, Christianity, and Islam pose questions about essence and existence, form and matter, the nature of the divine being, cause and effect, the necessary and the contingent, the one and the many, and other traditional topics of metaphysics. Yet Judaism, Christianity, and Islam may name cultures, not just religions, from which metaphysics arises; the philosophers themselves might not be believers or might be regarded as unorthodox.

In the same spirit, one should add that the word ‘metaphysics’ means different things in different contexts. We talk of ‘classical metaphysics’, by which we refer to a range of problems discussed chiefly in Plato, Aristotle, and Plotinus, problems whose stems are the Forms, Being, and the One. And we also speak of ‘modern metaphysics’, by which we refer to the subject as elaborated since Descartes; and here there are new issues that come to the fore, including human and divine freedom, the relation of mind and body, other possible worlds, and the nature of space and time. Even in modern metaphysics there are important divisions, especially once analytical philosophy gains confidence and energy. Speculative metaphysics gives way to descriptive approaches (see Strawson 1964: 9–10), as well as, more recently, to the modal metaphysics of David Lewis. And on the continent one speaks in another way (and sometimes in a critical tone) about the subject, of metaphysics as onto-theology (Heidegger) and as the metaphysics of presence (Derrida). So, looking broadly at historical instances where religion and metaphysics cross one another, we shall find some philosophers applauding the speculative metaphysics of a religious system; others using a chastened analytical metaphysics to make clear
and exact, yet comparatively modest, claims about the deity; and yet others exploring middle positions. Medieval philosophers have recourse to classical metaphysics and Arabic commentaries on it, while modern philosophers draw on both classical and modern metaphysics. Metaphysics and religion: a tangle indeed.

Interest in metaphysics among the Abrahamic faiths is uneven at best, with regard to both style and understanding of what ‘metaphysics’ means. In Judaism, we find Philo of Alexandria (20 BCE–50 CE), whose allegorical readings of Scripture identify then mine rich metaphysical veins in Torah. If the Talmud does not seem to address in a philosophical manner standard metaphysical issues to do with being, identity, and cause and effect, deep study of both the aggadah and the halakah can generate intense discussions about metaphysical theses. Kabbalah makes all manner of assumptions and proposals we are likely to call metaphysical, but is not concerned with argumentation. We are closer to metaphysics as usually conceived in the West with Maimonides who, in his Guide for the Perplexed (1190), proposes proofs for the existence, incorporeality, and unity of God, and we are fully there in The Ethics (1677) where Spinoza, after earlier developing a critique of revelation, sidesteps all biblical witness and produces a sophisticated philosophy of substance, attributes and modes (see Spinoza 1994: 10–23, 85–265). This step away from traditional belief in order to do metaphysics is not uncommon in Judaism. There are of course distinguished metaphysicians who are also Jews – Moses Mendelssohn (1729–86), for one – but more often than not their metaphysics is disconnected from religious beliefs, and is very seldom used to bolster such beliefs or to universalize them. With Emmanuel Lévinas (1906–95) we have a Jewish philosopher who writes Talmudic commentaries as well as essays and treatises on ethics. ‘Metaphysics’, for him, denotes the face-to-face relation; it is a unique sense of the word, and one that generates a powerful work of ethics in which God – presumably a non-realist understanding of God – ‘comes to mind’ in moving towards the other person (see Lévinas 1969: 84; 1998: xi-xv).

In Islam, metaphysics flourishes after the translation of Aristotle’s treatises into Arabic in the ninth century. One early sign of sophistication is the engagement with Greek philosophy undertaken by al-Kindī (801–73); another, surer sign is the reflections on the first cause by al-Fārābī (872–950). In the so-called ‘Golden Age’ of Islamic thought (eighth to twelfth centuries) we find two threads of inquiry: Kalām, which seeks to determine theological principles through dialectic, and Falsafā, philosophizing that draws from Aristotle and the Neo-Platonists. Ibn Sīnā or, in Latin, Avicenna (c. 980–1037) and Ibn Rushd or, in Latin, Averroes (1126–98) tie together both threads in their own ways, each producing a rich and subtle system informed by Aristotle. Ibn Sīnā’s The Metaphysics of ‘The Healing’ is a towering work, and it is worth noting that he is clear, right at the start, that the existence of God ‘cannot be admitted as the subject matter of this science [i.e., metaphysics]’ (Avicenna 2005: 3). Metaphysics for him does not simply subsume religion. Yet philosophy was seen to be in competition with revealed truth by some of the faithful. Abū Ḥāmid Ghāzālī (c. 1055–1111) wrote a treatise called The Incoherence of the Philosophers, sharply questioning several teachings derived from Aristotle: that the world is eternal, that God knows particulars only in a universal manner, and that only the soul can be immortal. The work prompted Ibn Rushd to compose a riposte, his Incoherence of the Incoherence. Other schools of metaphysics followed, all braided with Islam: in the twelfth century we find Shihāb al-Dīn Suhrwardī (1154–91) turning from Aristotle to the Neo-Platonists in his powerful The Philosophy of Illumination, and in the seventeenth century there is Mullā Sadrā (c. 1571–1636), who broke with Suhrwardī on the key topic of ‘beings of reason’ and developed instead a metaphysics of acts of being.

Metaphysics abounds also in Christianity, even if it is curbed, suspended, or rejected by some philosophers and theologians. Medieval Christianity and Islam share a heritage in Aristotle and Neo-Platonism, and three philosophers stand out in this period of Christianity: Thomas Aquinas.
(1225–74), John Duns Scotus (c. 1265–1308) and William of Ockham (c. 1287–1347). It should be acknowledged that some Christian thinkers – William of Auvergne (c. 1180/90–1249), Albert the Great (1193/1206–80) and Aquinas, among others – were in close conversation with Islamic philosophy, relying on works such as Ibn Sīnā’s *Metaphysics* and *On the Soul*. They were read in Latin translation half a century before Aristotle became more fully available in the West. Until then, scholars were restricted to only a few texts of The Peripatetic, including the *Posterior Analytics* and the *Topics* (see Goichon 1969: Chapter 3). Nor did Aristotle’s *Metaphysics* enter discussion at all once: books *μυ* and *μυ* were rendered into Latin only in the 1270s. As early as his *On Being and Essence*, though, Aquinas refers extensively to Ibn Sīnā and Ibn Rushd (‘the Commentator’). That metaphysics has been used to clarify Christian beliefs as well as to render them more credible is a constant theme in modern times: at one end of the spectrum we find G.W.F. Hegel’s *Science of Logic* (1816; see Hegel 1969: 50), which boldly claims to present God’s thought before Creation, and at the other end Richard Swinburne’s analytical case for rational belief in God, *The Existence of God* (2004). In order to avoid undue generality, I shall concentrate on Christianity and metaphysics, while making occasional references to Judaism and Islam.

There are several main positions adopted with respect to metaphysics in Christianity. First, there is metaphysics in the service of natural theology, whether in scholasticism or in contemporary analytic philosophy. Second, there are attempts to criticize or bracket metaphysics in theologies, and this takes several forms: apophatic theologies, in which metaphysical propositions about the deity are progressively unsaid; medieval contemplative theologies that prize *affectus* over *intellectus*; Pascal’s affirmation of the ‘third order’ of charity that exceeds all philosophical approaches to the deity; Kant’s attempt to bring religion within the limits of bare reason; and evangelical theologies, such as those of Albrecht Ritschl and Karl Barth, that curtail metaphysical speculation in order to bring out more clearly the coming of the Kingdom or the divine command of God’s Word. And third, there is a restraining of metaphysics, understood in one or more senses, by European philosophers. Nietzsche is a founding father, yet some of his brightest children learn also from phenomenology (Martin Heidegger, Jacques Derrida, and Jean-Luc Marion) and some Christian theologians appropriate their work. I shall touch on all these general positions, lingering longer with some than with others. To say anything about specific issues, such as the problem of evil in its metaphysical register (how good causes produce evil effects) or the metaphysics of human freedom with respect to God, is beyond the scope of this chapter.

**Natural theology**

The word ‘metaphysics’ enters Western thought in the first century of the Common Era with an editorial title given to a group of treatises by Aristotle. Metaphysics, understood as the subject that follows physics in a philosophical curriculum, is deemed by Aristotle to be ‘first philosophy’, the study of ‘being *qua* being’ (Aristotle 1933: 981b, 1003a), although we may also take the philosophical lexicon given in book delta of the *Metaphysics* as offering a vocabulary of intelligibility. We cannot speak rationally without recourse to words such as ‘many’ and ‘one’, ‘cause’ and ‘effect’, ‘substance’, and all the others that Aristotle lists there.

After the seventh century, about the time of Stephen of Alexandria, Aristotle’s works slipped out of focus in the Latin-speaking West. Along with the greater part of his canon, the *Metaphysics* was recovered only from the middle of the twelfth century when Latin translations of Arabic versions started to become available in Europe. The impact on the fledgling University of Paris was immense; the Averroistic interpretation of Aristotle, propounded by Siger of Brabant (c. 1240–c. 1280), led to fierce controversy. On this reading, Aristotle’s views of the finitude of the soul, the eternity of the world, the passivity of the will, and the existence of many
powers set between God and human beings sharply contradicted the teachings of the Church. Accordingly, the *Physics* and the *Metaphysics* were banned in 1215. It was Aquinas who harmonized the teachings of ‘the Philosopher’, as he called Aristotle, and the views of the Fathers, as gathered by Peter Lombard (c. 1096–1164) in his *Sentences*; and an important factor was his commissioning (as it seems) of William of Moerbeke (1215–86) to produce new Latin translations of the Philosopher from the original Greek so that he could deal directly with Aristotle and not through Syrian and Arabic filters of the texts. Aquinas’s grand synthesis of philosophy, doctrine, and scripture included Plato, whose dialogue *The Timaeus* had long been known in the Latin West, and a range of other classical metaphysicians, most notably Plotinus, Porphyry, and Proclus. It also drew from Ibn Sīnā, especially his radical distinction between essence and existence, and from Maimonides’s proofs for the existence of God and his discussion of the divine attributes. To draw from and to agree with are different things, however, and Aquinas tended to transform rather than adopt. Christianity provided the living context for transformation: the finite had to be placed in the frame of the infinite.

Aquinas inherits an idea of God from the Fathers and from earlier scholastics, especially Anselm (1033–1109), which generates what we call ‘perfect being’ theology. Anselm’s God in the *Proslogion* enjoys all possible perfections simply by being God: he does not need to create in order to reach his full potential. This means that God is really distinct from the cosmos, which is quite different from how Aristotle saw things. For him, the gods were the highest beings *in* the cosmos (Aristotle 1933: 1074b 1–14). The Christian God does not appear as God by virtue of creation; rather, he is unchanging by his creative act, and does not contrast with what has been formed from nothing. (Robert Sokolowski (1995: 23) calls this ‘the Christian distinction.’) God is not other than the world; if we wish to specify his mode of being we would have to do so in a more extreme sense of ‘other’. This is precisely what Aquinas does in his natural theology, which presses into use a metaphysics that begins to be formulated in *On Being and Essence* (mid-thirteenth century) and ends only with his unfinished *Treatise on Separated Substances* (1269–73). Yet most readers encounter his teachings in two major, extended works, the *Summa contra Gentiles* and the *Summa Theologiae*. One important moment in the latter work occurs in the discussion of theological language. ‘Now since God is altogether outside the order of creatures’, Aquinas says, ‘since they are ordered to him but not he to them, it is clear that being related to God is a reality in creatures, but being related to creatures is not a reality in God’ (Aquinas 1265–74/1964–74: 1, 75).

We can best understand the force of Aquinas’s point if we follow his treatment of the distinct ways in which God and the world exist. God’s mode of being is *ipsissimae subsistens omnibus modis indeterminatum* (‘subsistent existence itself, in no way determined’) (Aquinas 1265–74/1964–74: 166–68). So the divine being does not rely on anything else in order to be itself, which is not so with *ens creatum* (‘created being’) or, if you like, *ens commune* (‘being in general’): it depends absolutely on God in order to be at all, and must participate in the divine *esse*. Christianity extends the view of God found in the Hebrew Bible while contrasting itself to pagan notions of the deities. These pagan conceptions would make the Incarnation an absurdity, for their gods belong to the world and two natures of a similar kind cannot be in one person. The Christian God, however, is beyond the world. He belongs to no genus, being absolutely singular. And because he is not of the world, he is completely free to enter it *modus sine modo*, in a way without a way, as medieval theologians put it. We might say, then, that God’s transcendence is not in tension with his immanence. We might also say, as Aquinas does, that since God is ‘other’ in quite another sense than in which worldly phenomena can be figured as same and other, we must admit that ‘we cannot know what God is, but only what he is not’ (Aquinas 1265–74/1964–74: 19). For Aquinas, as for others before him, such as Philo, we can know that God is but not what he is (Philo, *On Rewards and Punishments*, 1939: VI, 39–40).
That God exists can be demonstrated in five ways, all turning on the metaphysical procedure of tracing effects back to causes, contingencies to necessity, degrees of perfection to perfection itself; but what God is comes to mind only very partially and only on accepting divine revelation. All we have in hand are analogies for the divine being, like a number of tennis balls that we throw at the sun in the hope of hitting it, while all the time shielding our eyes from it.

In considering contemporary contributions to natural theology in analytic philosophy, I am obliged to present some remarks out of sequence. Analytic philosophy in its early days was decidedly invested in metaphysics: Bertrand Russell (1872–1970) attempted to show that the world may be adequately represented by a language whose structure is given by the logic of Principia Mathematica (1910–13). Yet before long, analytic philosophy, with a backward look to David Hume (1711–76), turned against metaphysics, and contested its very possibility. These things should therefore be discussed in the following section, along with Kant who, after all, also prepared the way for this turn in the eighteenth century by confining metaphysics to the reach of the transcendental analytic of the first Critique. Only by virtue of responding to this contestation of speculative metaphysics in the twentieth century has analytic philosophy been able to articulate its own metaphysics. A principled rejection of metaphysics was performed by Rudolf Carnap (1891–1970) in his Philosophy and Logical Syntax (1935) and then extended and popularized by A.J. Ayer (1910–89) in his Language, Truth and Logic (1936). On Ayer’s estimation, there are two sorts of statements that can bear meaning. The first are analytical: they are all tautologies. (These are the truths of logic and mathematics.) And the second are synthetic: they say something about a world that may be observed in practice or in principle. (These are empirical truths, and must submit to a principle of verification.) Empirical truths are open only to weak verification at best, but unlike metaphysical statements they are meaningful. So by Ayer’s reasoning, all statements about God or transcendence are nonsensical, as are all metaphysical statements. Critics readily point out that the verification principle is itself unverifiable and unverifiable, and so the guillotine of logical positivism gets jammed before it can be used. In later years, Ayer himself softened his position on the cognitive meaninglessness of religious beliefs.

W.V.O. Quine’s undercutting of the analytic-synthetic distinction in his ‘Two Dogmas of Empiricism’ (1951) helped to open a new path to metaphysics within analytical philosophy. That path was taken by his student, David Lewis (1941–2001), who was followed by many others, some of whom depart from his naturalistic metaphysics and express interest in the metaphysics of religious beliefs, especially in Christianity. Peter van Inwagen (b. 1942), for example, formulates not only an impressively clear account of analytical metaphysics but also contributes to discussions of the problem of evil, the resurrection of the dead, and other topics in the philosophy of religion (see van Inwagen 1998a, 2002, 2006). Stephen T. Davis (b. 1940), for another, proposes a unified argument, in the analytical style, for the rationality of Christian orthodoxy as a whole (see Davis 2006). Carnap and Ayer would be very surprised to read an essay such as Michael Rea’s ‘The Metaphysics of Original Sin’ (see Rea 2007). It might seem to them as though analytical philosophy had gone down the wrong track. Of course, for Christian philosophers it has finally got on the right track, and even non-believers applaud regaining the ground of metaphysics, even if it is modal metaphysics, since it allows philosophy to be conducted once again in something like the grand style.

Some criticisms, rejections, and alternatives

Let us return to Aquinas. One might say that he elaborates an apophatic theology that works in concert with a natural theology. In doing so, I refer to the theologia mystica of Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite (late fifth to early sixth century CE), in which there is a progressive denial of what is predicated of the deity on the ground that the predication suits finite phenomena and not a
singular, infinite deity. Aquinas cites Pseudo-Dionysius very frequently, in part because of his presumed apostolic authority as a companion of Paul (see Acts 17: 34) and in part because of the brilliance of his theology. Yet in presenting apophatic theology we must be careful to distinguish epistemic, semantic, and metaphysical issues (see Buijs 1988). Concerns about whether anything about God can be known by human beings are epistemic. Whether theological language makes sense – ‘God transcends all human knowledge’, for example – is properly a semantic issue. What interests us here is principally the metaphysical point, namely, that God’s mode of being (ipsam esse subsistens) is qualitatively different from any other mode (ens commune).

Modern admirers of apophatic theologies sometimes see them as critical of metaphysical descriptions of God because they seek to tell us things about God that, strictly speaking, cannot be told and could not even make sense if they were told. One might see Maimonides as an apophatic theologian who restricts metaphysics: he allows some affirmative predicates of God to be valid, yet only predicates of action, not being (see Buijs 1988: 731). By contrast, Aquinas is an apophatic theologian in the metaphysical sense in what he says of God’s absolutely singular mode of existence, and he is unlike others in his epistemology and semantics. He certainly holds that theological language can make sense; it is the very first thing he discusses in the Summa Theologiae. Unlike Maimonides, he does not deny all predicates that are traditionally ascribed to the divine being; instead, he maintains that we can have positive knowledge of some things about God (that he is essentially form, for instance). Nonetheless, he agrees with Pseudo-Dionysius that ‘words are better denied of God’ and then, characteristically, makes a clarifying distinction: ‘what they signify does not belong to God in the way that they signify it, but in a higher way’ (Aquinas 1265–74/1964–74: 1, 59). So Aquinas holds an apophatic theology in tandem with a natural or metaphysical theology, and he does so without diminishing the mystery of God. The deity is mysterious precisely because of his singular mode of being, and because this mode of being does not contrast with our own. God exists in an entirely different way than we do. His creation is utterly gratuitous, as is his love for it.

If we take metaphysics (in a classical sense) to be a mode of reasoning about the first cause, the one and the many, and all the rest of its standard topics, then it might be said that the Christian does not need to be guided by metaphysics at all. Today we associate the view with Blaise Pascal (1623–62), who is well known for the distinction drawn in his ‘Memorial’ between the ‘God of Abraham, God of Isaac, God of Jacob’ who is not the God ‘of philosophers and scholars’ (Pascal 2005: 742). In accepting Pascal’s distinction we recoil from natural theology. In doing so, however, we jettison a good deal of material that contributes to Christian theology and that can illuminate divinity, and at the same time we do away with the basis of much biblical hermeneutics from Philo to Paul Ricoeur (1913–2005). Even Pascal acknowledged in another fragment that there is no single path to God: ‘We know the truth, not only through reason, but also through the heart’ (Pascal 2005: 142/110). Less bold than the ‘Memorial’, yet more plausible, is Pascal’s division of the three orders or realms of knowledge, each of which commands its own epistemology: body, mind, and charity. The ‘third order’ is charity; it is blithely unconcerned with philosophy; it has its own logic, which is different from and altogether higher than the order of concepts (Pascal 2005: 142/110, 339/308, 680/423).

Not dissimilar, though less generally known, is an earlier view, that metaphysics is not mistaken in itself, it is simply unhelpful in the ascent to God in unknowing (where unknowing is coded by way of dilectio [love] or affectio [affection], by seraphic rather than cherubinic contemplation). Such was the view explored by the Victorines, beginning with Hugh (c. 1096–1141), in his commentary on Pseudo-Dionysius’s treatise on the angelic hierarchy, without of course using the word ‘metaphysics’, which did not appear in the contemplative writings of the day. The Carthusian monk Hugh of Balma (d. 1305) adopts this position. His The Roads to Zion is
embedded in a controversy as to the primacy of *intellectus* and *affectus* in contemplation, which we may take to prize, respectively, metaphysical considerations, on the one hand, and human yearning for God, on the other. The controversy has roots in Augustine, though inevitably the terms are somewhat different: ‘It is true that without some understanding no one can believe in God; but the faith whereby we begin to believe in him has a healing effect, so that we come to understand more. There are some things that we do not believe unless we understand, and others that we do not understand unless we believe’ (Augustine 2003: 426).

More narrowly, as already hinted, the medieval debate turns on different readings of Pseudo-Dionysius. In their commentaries on the Areopagite, Albert the Great and Aquinas affirm *intellectus* as prized in the ascent to God; and a third Dominican, Meister Eckhart (1260–1328), teaches the eternal birth of the Word in the intellect. Jean Gerson (1363–1429) argues for the importance of *affectus* in beginning and continuing the spiritual life; penitence rather than intellectual inquiry is what helps the soul begin to approach God (see Gerson 1998: 133). And yet, he thought with the high scholastics that it is the intelligence that finally allows one to contemplate the deity. Guigo de Ponte (d. 1136), Thomas Gallus (c. 1200–1246), Heinrich of Langenstein (c. 1325–97), and Hugh himself precede Gerson in valuing *affectus*, while Vincent of Aggsbach (c. 1389–1464) and Nicholas Kempf (c. 1415–97) follow Gerson in this regard and distance themselves from his final emphasis on the intellect. Psalm 38: 4 is a traditional touchstone for their view: we taste the goodness of the Lord before we see it, and we recall that seeing God is forbidden (see Exodus 33: 20). (For the tradition of experiencing God through the spiritual senses, see Gavrilyuk and Coakley 2012.) The primacy of *intellectus* or *affectus* is a ‘difficult question’ Hugh concedes, and going through the cases for each option, he decides on balance that ‘The soul who truly loves is able to surge up to God through an *affectus* set afire by love’s yearning, without any cogitation leading the way’ (Hugh of Balma 1997: 170).

We pass into another world when we read Immanuel Kant (1724–1804), for the main thrust of his critical philosophy is to place epistemology front and center and to leave speculative metaphysics to languish in the background. Or, more accurately, his intention is to distinguish the metaphysics that depends on transcendental illusion, and which must be rejected, from the metaphysics that should be cultivated, namely, that which turns on synthetic *a priori* knowledge. The trouble is that Christian hope has traditionally relied on transcendental illusions. It must be put on firmer ground, Kant thinks, and now is the time to do so; for there is a break in the philosophical tradition, one that he has made by himself. Rather than the human mind seeking to adjust itself to truths evident in the world, as the medieval philosophers and theologians thought, it is the world that must accommodate itself to our understanding. Such is Kant’s ‘Copernican revolution’ in philosophy. It is not primarily against the medieval thinkers that Kant directs his critique of transcendental illusion. His immediate argument is with both of the main camps of philosophy in his day. Influenced by Christian Wolff (1679–1754), Kant took issue with the rationalism he inherited from Leibniz and, in particular, for thinking that metaphysical truths can be validly deduced simply from concepts; and, despite his admiration for elements of Hume’s thought, he also tackles the British empiricists (Locke, Berkeley, Hume), maintaining that they presuppose what they reject: the ability to make coherent judgments about objects in the world. Yet he also marks a break with medieval metaphysics, especially by virtue of his powerful attack on God as a possible object of theoretical knowledge.

The *Critique of Pure Reason* (1781: A; 1787: B) poses the primary question ‘What can we know?’ (A805/B833). The answer, Kant says, is only the truths of mathematics and the natural sciences. All our knowledge comes from legislation in the categories of the understanding, not in the realm of reason; and consequently all speculative metaphysics, including proofs for the existence of God and anything to do with the supersensible, does not yield any theoretical
knowledge at all. So Kant rejects *metaphysica generalis* (or ontology). In a much-cited remark he says, ‘[T]he proud name of an Ontology that presumptuously claims to supply, in systematic doctrinal form, synthetic *a priori* knowledge of things in general … must … give place to the modest title of a mere Analytic of pure understanding’ (Kant 1965: A247/B303). He also rejects *metaphysica specialis* (the study of the soul, the world, and God). For metaphysicians inveterately seek to deduce knowledge just from concepts, and this is impossible, for ‘Thoughts without content are empty’ (Kant 1965: A51/B75). Yet Kant argues tenaciously that practical reasoning can justify belief in God. Not all our beliefs, however: they are to be stripped down to a minimum in a rational religion that is centered on the moral law rather than a metaphysics that grounds rational theology. *Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason* (1793) offers a searching critique of revelation in the light of practical reasoning.

Albrecht Ritschl (1822–89) followed the Kantian lead in prizing ethics over doctrine; it is the Kingdom of God as preached by Jesus, and not speculation about Jesus’s ontological relation with God, that is important in Christianity. His essay ‘Theology and Metaphysics’ (1881) is a reaction to Hegelian speculative metaphysics and its adoption in theology. If he frees himself from the great Berlin philosopher, he also seeks liberation from the equally great Berlin theologian, Friedrich Schleiermacher (1768–1834), whose teaching of a feeling of absolute reliance on God appears overly subjective to Ritschl. It is in humility and faith that we accept forgiveness from God, and it is in the cultivation of individual virtue and the following of one’s place in life that one helps to bring on the Kingdom: such is the burden of *The Christian Doctrine of Justification and Reconciliation* (1870–74). The bourgeois hope of this liberal theology collapsed under the devastation unleashed by World War One, and no one marked its failure more surely and more severely than Karl Barth (1886–1968). Barth rebounds from Ritschl’s theology, finding more to admire in Schleiermacher, from whom he also distances himself; and yet he too wishes to curtail metaphysics in his theology. While he finds Ritschl’s ‘distinction from all ancient and modern theoretical metaphysics’ impressive, he notes with alarm that the theologian adds that, ‘God is the power “in and over the world” which man reverences, because it maintains his spiritual self-feeling against the restraints that arise from nature’ (see Barth 1957: 270). Ritschl’s non-metaphysical theology retreats to a theological liberalism that Barth rejects.

Barth seldom engages in polemic against metaphysics in his *Church Dogmatics* (1932–67), yet when the topic comes up, he is clear that Christian theology must not allow itself to be compromised by adherence to any prior philosophical structure. He has no time for the ‘heaven-storming Idealism’ of the early nineteenth century, since that sort of metaphysics seeks ‘to understand God’s revelation and presence as the last and highest result of man’s concern with himself and finally to introduce it as an affirmation’ (Barth 1957: 73). ‘God is God’, Barth declared in his early ‘The Strange New World within the Bible’ (1916): the deity is altogether other than human beings who must be thought in relation to God and not vice versa (see Barth 1978: 48). Even though Barth does not speak in this way in his mature writings, he insists that God is to be grasped in and through his triune revelation, and not by way of metaphysical structures (see Stanley 2010: Chapter 3). This does not mean that Barth eschews a metaphysical vocabulary. As I suggested at the start of this chapter, it would be impossible to set aside Aristotle’s lexicon in book delta of the *Metaphysics*. In fact, as Barth cheerfully concedes, he Hege- lianizes throughout the *Church Dogmatics* and talks of ‘being’ very freely (see Busch 1976: 380).

**Phenomenology and deconstruction**

Philosophers have three main questions to ask: What? Why? and How? It might be said that in seeking to answer either of the first two they are led into metaphysics, at least in a broad sense of
Kevin Hart

the word, for the questions prompt one to seek a general understanding of things as they are. The third question comes to the fore in phenomenology, the school of philosophy founded by Edmund Husserl (1859–1938). In phenomenology we seek to see how we constitute as meaningful the phenomena that give themselves to us. We do so by bracketing the natural attitude (roughly, scientific explanation) and then performing a reduction that takes us back to the transcendental aspect of consciousness. We recognize that phenomena are not simply ‘out there’ (the world) or ‘in here’ (the mind) but lodge themselves on our intentional horizons; and once this has been acknowledged we can unpack their full intentional significance. Another way of putting this is that phenomenology seeks to return all transcendent objects to the immanence of consciousness. Husserl is clear that divine transcendence escapes phenomenological inspection. And yet he speculated on God as the ‘absolute monad’ or ‘all-consciousness’ and believed that the deity was the ultimate concern of the phenomenologist (see Husserl 2006: 177–78; Cairns 1976: 47; Housset 2010). Indeed, Husserl’s work was not restricted to phenomenology; it is often apparent that he posed the question ‘What?’ and so found himself engaged in metaphysics. Some of his followers, most notably Roman Ingarden (1893–1970) and Hedwig Conrad-Martius (1888–1966), believed that with Ideas I (1913) Husserl had taken a regrettable turn towards idealism. One task of contemporary phenomenologists, especially those interested in religion, has been to separate Husserl’s phenomenology from his metaphysics.

Martin Heidegger (1889–1976) took Husserl’s teaching in a new direction. In the 1920s he sought to elaborate a phenomenology of religious life, showing how Paul’s epistles uncover the ‘how’ of radical Christian life (see Heidegger 2004). If continued in the same vein, this phenomenology of Scripture might have developed an account of Christianity without metaphysics, that is, without asking the questions ‘What?’ and ‘Why?’ Yet Heidegger himself changed directions, letting Christianity fade from his view and diagnosing metaphysics as having a particular structure. (Other phenomenologists, including Max Scheler (1874–1928), continued in the phenomenology of religion. See Altmann 1991.) This structure can be approached in two ways. First, Heidegger holds that our forgetting of being produces metaphysics; while we continue to think of beings we no longer think of being. This is the ontico-ontological distinction, and it is important to realize that Heidegger, indebted to Aristotle here, conceives being as finite, not infinite. The second way of construing this structure is as constituted by onto-theology or, more accurately, onto-theio-logy. ‘The essential constitution of metaphysics’, Heidegger says, ‘is based on the unity of beings as such in the universal and that which is highest’, that is, the generality of ὅντος [ontos] and the elevation of the θεόν [theion]. Metaphysics is therefore that discourse which gathers together all beings and refers them to the highest ground (Heidegger 2002: 61). The Greek word here, taken from Aristotle, is θεόν and not θεός, which we find in the New Testament. Metaphysics has an onto-theo-logical structure because of the nature of philosophy, not because of a convergence of Greek philosophy and Christian dogma. Heidegger finds metaphysics in this sense, and in a number of variations, in philosophy from Plato to Nietzsche. Husserl succumbs to it when he becomes committed to transcendental idealism, and Heidegger is the first to identify it, to signal that it is to be overcome, and then to admit that it must be left to complete itself in its own way and in its own time.

The ontico-ontological distinction is of little help in understanding the Christian revelation, for the Christian God is taken to be infinite, while ‘being’ for Heidegger is finite. Heidegger tells us that no theology should properly include the word ‘being’, yet that is because he thinks of theology as a response to human faith in God and not to the primacy of God’s mode of being, as happens in perfect-being theology (see Kearney and O’Leary 2009: 365–68). If we think it necessary to contemplate divine being, ineffable though it may be, we would do better
to turn from Heidegger’s distinction between being and beings to Aquinas’s distinction between *ipsum esse subsistens* and *ens commune*. Heidegger would tell us that Aquinas’s distinction is metaphysical, that the *ipsum esse subsistens* is at once the highest ground of being and being at its most general; and yet, as we have seen, the *ipsum esse subsistens* transcends the worldly categories of same and other and does not contrast with them. All beings are given freely and out of love. To be sure, they rely ontologically on God, but not on God conceived simply in metaphysical terms as *deus ens supremum* [God the highest being]. Simply: I draw attention to the adverb I just used in order to remind ourselves that Aquinas is committed to an apophatic theology in a metaphysical sense. God is absolutely singular in his mode of being. He is infinite in the metaphysical, though not in any mathematical, sense. The metaphysics to which a Thomist is minimally committed seems not to converge with the one that Heidegger detects in Western thought, and if there is something untoward in that metaphysics it needs to be shown that there is also something unacceptable in the notion of *ipsum esse subsistens*. One might say with A.W. Moore that there is a distinction between ‘bad metaphysics’ and ‘good metaphysics’, and a Thomist would say with reason that Aquinas promotes a good metaphysics (see Moore 2012: Chapter 5).

In *Being and Time* (1927) Heidegger sought the *Destruktion* of metaphysics, by which he meant the careful de-structuring of the edifice in order to reveal its animating concerns. Jacques Derrida (1930–2004) twinned *Destruktion* with Husserl’s notion of de-sedimenting, while also learning from Nietzsche’s *Twilight of the Idols* (1895) that philosophy is the history of an error (see Nietzsche 1968: 40–41). Throughout his life, Derrida tirelessly experimented with a plural, deviant mode of phenomenology that came to be known as ‘deconstruction’. It denies the central, organizing role that Husserl grants to pure phenomenological life and insists on the original imbrication of life and death, presence and absence. Derrida subsequently seeks to expose the ‘metaphysics of presence’ in several early works, most notably in *Edmund Husserl’s ‘Origin of Geometry’: An Introduction* (1978) and *Speech and Phenomena* (1973). Derrida observes in his *Introduction* that Husserl’s ‘all-consciousness’ plays an important role in his work; it is an infinite Telos that Husserl will not hesitate to call God in his last unpublished writings and that this ‘absolute Logos’ is placed ‘beyond transcendental subjectivity’ as a teleological pole (Derrida 1978: 45 n, 146, 147). Husserl’s God is therefore transcendental, not transcendent, merely ‘the final fulfillment situated at the infinite, the name for the horizon of horizons, and the *Entelechy* of transcendental historicity itself’ (Derrida 1978: 148). In the years that followed his first writings, Derrida argued that the very idea of God belongs to the metaphysics of presence, since the deity is nothing other than pure self-presence. Apophatic theologies are no help, he thought, in establishing a non-metaphysical theology; they only evoke a deity who is beyond being yet in a super-essential way (see Derrida 2007: Volume 2, Chapter 9). Yet Derrida responds more to philosophical framings of the Christian God than to testimonies of him, especially those in the New Testament (see Hart 2000). As already noted with regard to Heidegger, *OθεOς* does not necessarily converge with *θεοι*.

Towards the end of his writing life, Derrida meditated on what he dubbed ‘religion without religion’. In *The Gift of Death* (2008) he ventures the idea of a tradition ‘that consists in proposing a non-dogmatic doublet, a philosophical and metaphysical doublet, in any case a thinking that “repeats” the possibility of religion without religion’ (Derrida 2008: 50). This tradition includes Kant, Hegel, and Kierkegaard and, more recently, Heidegger, Lévinas, Ricœur, and Marion. What is ‘religion without religion’? In brief, it is the thinking of religion without recourse to a revelatory event in history and the dogmas associated with such events: all that is required of the religion is the eidetic possibility of the event and not the event itself. Christianity, for instance, could be approached as a way of thinking, especially moral thinking, though one that does not commit one to the propositions of the Nicene Creed or to later
dogmas, such as the Immaculate Conception of Mary. Yet what such a dogma would be ‘without religion’ is not immediately clear. What is peculiar is that Derrida seems to be affirming ‘religion without religion’, which he notes is metaphysical, when his entire thought has been directed against metaphysics wherever it may be found.

One reason why Derrida includes Jean-Luc Marion (b. 1946) in his tradition of ‘religion without religion’ is that he is the author of *Dieu sans l’être* (1982), which is translated as *God without Being* but which also has another sense, ‘God without being God’ (that is, the God of the philosophers). In some ways Marion extends phenomenology, as we shall see, yet it is important also to realize that in other ways he keeps faith with Pascal. In no way does Marion deny that God exists; however, he seeks to rethink how we approach God. We must do so outside all idolatry. Even Heidegger commits conceptual idolatry. He may not think God as the *ens sumnum*, according to metaphysics regarded as onto-theio-logy, yet he does so by thinking *Sein* (which he takes to be non-metaphysical) before God. We must practice theology, Marion contends, not theology: that is, we must begin with God, not human beings, with how God reveals himself, and not how we talk of him. So Marion writes ‘God’ as crossed out (‘G˜d’), in the same way that Heidegger writes ‘Being’ as crossed out in order to suspend any metaphysical implications that the word may have for his readers (see Heidegger 1959: 83). Yet there is something else in play with the cross through ‘God’: Marion’s G˜d is love, ἀγάπη [agape], the one true deity who is revealed to us in and through the crucifixion of Jesus of Nazareth. God’s word breaks into the world, and duly Marion thinks of God giving himself, coming to us as pure gift in excess of all talk of being and beings (see Marion 1991: xxv).

In his major work so far, *Being Given* (2002), Marion provides a general account of this ‘pure gift’ by way of a theory of givenness, what Husserl calls *Gegebenheit*. It is givenness and not intentionality that is the fundamental motif of phenomenology, he argues, thereby shifting classical phenomenology from a reliance on the philosophy of mind to the phenomenon itself and, in the process, taking a decisive step away from modern metaphysics. Some phenomena are saturated with intuition, Marion argues. The Kantian categories of quantity, quality, relation, and modality are inverted: taking each in turn, events cannot be aimed at, idols dazzle us, the flesh is absolute, and icons cannot be gazed at (see Marion 2002b: §21). In effect, Marion supplies a narrative history of phenomenology; we pass from Husserl’s reduction (phenomena as present objectivities) and Heidegger’s reduction (from beings to being) to a ‘third reduction’ that allows us to receive givenness (see Marion 1998: 192–9). Divine revelation is understood by Marion to occur by way of saturation to the second degree: a phenomenon, such as the resurrected Christ, is saturated with respect to quantity, quality, relation, and modality (see Marion 2002b: §24). In this way, Marion holds, we can speak of the Christian revelation without metaphysics. We encounter effects before causes, and as long as we keep the question ‘How?’ before us, we remain in that encounter. Of course, once we let our guard drop and start asking ‘What?’ and ‘Why?’ we find ourselves once again in metaphysics. But Marion, unlike Husserl, attempts to suspend both questions.