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## WEAK THEOLOGY

**T**HE TASK OF THEORIZING THEOLOGY IS UPON US. Indeed, unbeknownst to many, it has been the defining motif of philosophical theology for at least a generation.

Theology has long since moved past the early twentieth century concern with the proper theological method. This concern, characteristic of the early Barth, and carried forward by such visionaries as Bultmann and Tillich, presumes a common religious heritage. Such a presumption is clearly out of step with today's increasingly interconnected and religiously diverse world. As a result, theology has been the subject of its own dissolution.

This is a dissolution from within that we can trace to a certain theological genealogy in which the contemporary theological tradition has expanded and deepened its immanent critique. First, in the wake of World War I, Barth announces the moral bankruptcy of modern liberal theology and the impotency of the historical critical method of biblical scholarship. This neo-orthodox strategy of retrenchment coincided well with the prevailing mood throughout Western Europe during the time—namely, that World War I had brought a final end to the pretense of Enlightenment optimism. Second, in the wake of World War II, and specifically in response to the Holocaust, Tillich and Bultmann provide a theological strategy of engagement with the world of secular culture and thought which coincides with the realization of the final end to the pretense of Christendom. Third, reflective of the religiosity of late modern and postmodern Western society, death of God theology is wedded with deconstructive philosophy, thereby completing this dissolution by stripping theology of its very content by calling into question such supposed fundamentals as God, religion, revelation, and faith.

Whatever theology might have meant and been before—and whether critics such as Russell McCutcheon, Ivan Strenski, Donald Wiebe, et.al. were correct to

identify a certain strand of theology as being inherently ideological, value-laden, stabilizing discourses unfit for an academic context—by the logic of its own immanent critique and internal dissolution, it has since become something different.<sup>1</sup> As the late Charles Winquist would suggest, and as argued in a recent essay by Tyler Roberts, theology now is more “interruptive and critical rather than systematizing and stabilizing . . . ; it is no longer ‘queen of the sciences’ or even a confession of faith but, rather, . . . an intervention that resists the totalizing and repressive tendencies of dominant discourses.”<sup>2</sup> In other words, we have misread the purpose of theological formulations of extremity when we interpret them as claims to absolute truth. As Winquist writes, “It [theology] may be an experiment with truth, but it is more importantly an experiment of desire.”<sup>3</sup> The legacy of this theological genealogy, therefore, when it concerns the task of theorizing theology, is to read theology as an expression and experiment of desire, as a heuristic device for the purpose of critique.

Two additional things must be said: First, theology is no longer constrained by ecclesiastical authority. This is not to say that ecclesiastical, confessional, or dogmatic theologies no longer serve a purpose. Rather, they do not (indeed, they never have) exhaust the full range of theological possibility. Second, the modern exclusion of religion from the public sphere has been compromised, if not dissolved, by the (sometimes violent) return of religion. This calls into question the antiquated notions of religion and secularism upon which the modern secular state was constructed. In other words, religion is more than merely a private and individual concern; it is, and always has been, deeply intertwined with history and politics, discipline and power.<sup>4</sup> Regarding secularism, as recent events have demonstrated, the simplistic secularist equation whereby it was thought the more modern we become, the less religious we would become is, in the words of political columnist David Brooks, “yesterday’s incorrect vision of the future.”<sup>5</sup>

But this “incorrect vision of the future” is only one, rather limited, understanding of secularism. There are alternatives. For instance, Edward Said locates secularism as a third way between and beyond the pitfalls of imperialism and nationalism, and correlatively, between and beyond the pitfalls of “Orientalism”

<sup>1</sup> For a more extensive discussion of the role of theology within the academic study of religion, see Jeffrey W. Robbins, *In Search of a Non-Dogmatic Theology* (Aurora, CO: Davies Group, 2003), especially Ch. 2, “Theology in the Ruins,” 21–40.

<sup>2</sup> Tyler Roberts, “Exposure and Explanation: On the New Protectionism in the Study of Religion,” in *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, Vol. 72, Issue 1 (March 2004), 165.

<sup>3</sup> Charles E. Winquist, *The Surface of the Deep* (Aurora, CO: Davies Group, 2003), 102.

<sup>4</sup> See Talal Asad, *Genealogies of Religion: Discipline and Reasons of Power in Christianity and Islam* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1993).

<sup>5</sup> David Brooks, “Kicking the Secularist Habit: a Six-Step Program,” in *The Atlantic Monthly* (March 2003), 26.

and “reactive Occidentalism.” Said’s notion of secularism, because it “goes back to actual living human beings” wherein “men and women produce their own history,” insists on worldly or secular solutions to human problems.<sup>6</sup> The return of religion within the political and cultural sphere does not render this political strategy somehow incorrect. On the contrary, it places the so-called religious resurgence within a broader political spectrum, and thus, relativizes and demythologizes the fetishization of national identity that so often accompanies it.

Similarly with the cultural philosopher, Gianni Vattimo, who has contributed as much as anyone to the conversation on the return of religion; yet, at the same time, he remains convinced of the need for a strictly secular interpretation of the postmodern age of “Babel-like pluralism.” For Vattimo, secularism is not opposed to religion; rather, as he writes in *After Christianity*, secularization “is our way of living the return of religion.”<sup>7</sup> It is the distinct consequence or product of the religious, philosophical, and political heritage in the West. It provides a theory for putting together the supposedly disparate themes of Nietzsche’s proclamation of the death of God, Heidegger’s pronouncement of the end of metaphysics, the end of colonialism, and the relativization of the Christian faith—all of which are chapters in the larger story which Vattimo calls the “weakening of thought.” As Richard Rorty observes, for Vattimo, weak thought is not a term of derision, but a positive term of praise that can be used as a tool for political emancipation and a more democratic philosophy. It produces “a desirable humility about our own moral intuitions and about the social institutions to which we have become accustomed. This humility will encourage tolerance for other intuitions, and a willingness to experiment with ways of refashioning or replacing institutions.”<sup>8</sup>

The consequence of this when it comes to the task of theorizing theology is that we must somehow simultaneously attend to what appears at first glance as the opposing trends of the return of religion and secularism. The one does not cancel out the other. To return to the arguments made by Winquist and Roberts, by speaking of theology as a “strategy of intervention” or an “experiment in desire,” it may serve both the political strategy of a Said who is invested in secularism as a corrective to reactionary nationalisms and fundamentalisms, and a Vattimo whose commitment to “weak thought” provides a model for an interpretative, hermeneutical theology befitting a religiously diverse world.

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<sup>6</sup> See Edward Said, *Power, Politics, and Culture: Interviews with Edward Said* (New York: Vintage Books, 2001), especially, 129-131.

<sup>7</sup> Gianni Vattimo, *After Christianity*, trans. Luca D’Isanto (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002), 25.

<sup>8</sup> Richard Rorty, “Foreword,” in *Nihilism and Emancipation: Ethics, Politics, and Law*, ed. Santiago Zabala (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004).

This theoretical approach to theology is clearly an alternative form of theological thinking than that which is condemned by the ideological critics who, in their efforts to legitimate the academic study of religion, have adopted a strict social scientific model for religious studies. It is also an alternative to the traditional seminary model of theological education. However, this Deleuzian model of a “minor intensive use of a major discourse” has been central to the founding vision of *The Journal for Cultural and Religious Theory*. As such, we welcome the ongoing conversation about the critical methodological and theoretical issues in “religion and its study,”<sup>9</sup> and we commit to furthering this conversation by continuing to publish the most cutting-edge theoretical works.

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<sup>9</sup> A reference to a cluster of essays that was published in the most recent issue of the *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, Vol. 72, No. 1 (March 2004), 141-220.