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## Postmodernism and Theology

Despite the very frequent observations on how vague or slippery the notion of postmodernism is, it seems that the term has been generally accepted by the academic community. As Paul Lakeland in his *Postmodernity: Christian Identity in a Fragmented Age* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1997) puts it, postmodernity is “a way of saying ‘our time, not some other’” (1). And our time is different from the cultural emphases that characterized modernity. This semester I am offering a course on Postmodernism and Theology which attempts to address the following issues: (1) Postmodern Theology as a Discipline; (2) Postmodern Theology (God-talk); (3) Theology, Deconstruction, and Ontotheology; (4) Postmodern Theological Anthropology; and (5) Postmodern Christology. This article will highlight significant aspects of these issues.

### *(1) Postmodern Theology and Theology as a Discipline*

The major concern here is to distinguish postmodern from modern theology. Modern theology replaced traditional theology’s “hermeneutics of authority” with a “hermeneutics of experience.” The modern “turn to the subject” in philosophy (Descartes and Kant) was appropriated for theology first by Friedrich Schleiermacher who grounded the discipline of theology in the interpretation of the religious aspects of personal experience. This shift to religious experience was paramount as well in Catholic Modernism, the abortive attempt to modernize Catholic theology in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. Successful modernization of Catholic theology was delayed for decades until the reception of such theologians as Karl Rahner and Bernard Lonergan, a reception quite influential on Vatican II. Rahner’s universalization of the experience of grace as the Self-communication of God

in the Spirit was received by many recent and contemporary Catholic thinkers as both liberating and exhilarating after their protracted dogmatic slumbers [For a current appreciation of Karl Rahner's theology of Mystery as "postmodern" and "non-foundationalist," cf. Fergus Kerr, *Immortal Longings: Versions of Transcending Humanity* (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 1997) 159–84].

But just as Catholic theologians embraced the modern liberal way, postmodern thinkers discerned a crisis in the conception of theology as hermeneutical [cf. Francis Schüssler Fiorenza, "The Crisis of Hermeneutics and Christian Theology," in Sheila Greeve Davaney, ed., *Theology at the End of Modernity* (Philadelphia: Trinity Press International, 1991) 117–40]. In broad strokes one might say that "the linguistic turn" has shown the historicity of both modern religious subjectivity and traditional theological authorities. The "turn to the subject" no longer provides the pre-cultural (*a priori*) foundation for theology once we recognize the linguisticity and historicity of the human subject embedded in social, cultural, and political contexts.

## (2) *The Postmodern God*

Blaise Pascal would be pleased to see that the postmodern God is the biblical God, not the "god of the philosophers." Of special note here is the work of Jean-Luc Marion [cf. his *God Without Being* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1991)]. Marion recalls Plato's insistence that the Good is beyond Being and moves in a postmodern, postmetaphysical path to think of God outside the horizon of Being altogether but inside God's Self-revelation as *Agape*. He explores the apophatic tradition (with focus on Pseudo-Dionysius), relates it to the cataphatic tradition, and proposes a "third way," a doxological path to God. Marion is in close conversation with Jacques Derrida whose "religion without religion" has brought him to a rigorous exploration of both negative theology and the prophetic/apocalyptic strands of the Bible [cf. John Caputo, *The Prayers and Tears of Jacques Derrida: Religion without Religion* (Bloomington, Ind.: University Press, 1997)].

The foreword to Marion's book was written by David Tracy who claims that all of the modern options for theology were determined by the *logos* of modernity, its powerful notion of intelligibility. Tracy concurs with Marion that postmodern speech about God must become *theology* over against modern *theo-logy*, while he insists that postmodern advances must not merely jettison the genuine achievements of modern theology: the notion of panentheism and the relational God-talk of Hegelian, process, trinitarian, and modern feminist theology. The central meaning of postmodern contemporary thought on God is its radical interruption of the modern *logos* as it allows for the return of the

eschatological God, the hidden-revealed God of the memory of suffering, the suffering of all those ignored, marginalized, and colonized by the grand narrative of modernity, the narrative of modern man's progress in an idealized Western civilization. Postmodern theology with its new forms of language, rendering excess, gift, desire, prayer, has mediated the return of the reality of God to the center of theology [cf. Tracy, *On Naming the Present: God, Hermeneutics, and Church* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1994) 36–46].

Currently of special interest are those thinkers who hold that a proper postmodern theology must be "post-secular." The secularization of the West was a consequence of the privatization of "religion" since the seventeenth century. As reason was placed on a secure and universal foundation, religion was dismissed because it was "local"—a matter of historically contingent traditions. Recall Lessing's "ugly ditch" between "the necessary truths of reason" and "the accidental truths of history!" With the end of modernity we find that there is no ditch, that modern universal reason is another tradition [cf. Nicholas Lash, *The Beginning and the End of Religion* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996)]. The postmodern becomes the post-secular. Post-secular theologians make use of postmodern thought in tactical or pragmatic ways but refuse any possible contamination by secular thought. John Milbank's "neo-Augustinian" vision is a good example. Theologian Graham Ward goes as far as to claim that "only theology can complete the postmodern project. Only theology can truly occupy the postmodern condition" [Graham Ward, ed., *The Postmodern God: A Theological Reader* (Malden, Mass.: Blackwell Publishers, 1997) xxxiv].

### (3) *Theology, Deconstruction, and Ontotheology*

If postmodernism is a slippery term, deconstruction is even slippier! Here the major figure is, of course, Jacques Derrida, who has written, as we have seen, on negative theology, but whose chief contribution through his deconstructive thought is to offer an answer to the theological demand for a "non-metaphysical theology" [cf. Kevin Hart, *The Trespass of the Sign* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1989)]. Hart follows Derrida in interpreting the Adamic myth as a sort of explanation of the genesis of philosophy. He presents metaphysics as an infralapsarian phenomenon. Although Adam's sin was chiefly moral in character, it was also a trespass of the linguistic sign—a desire for unmediated knowledge. Accordingly, a discourse is metaphysical to the extent to which it claims that presence to consciousness absolutely precedes representation. For metaphysical discourse the concept is fashioned as a moment of pure presence with the sign representing the presence in its absence. Here we find a clarification of one of Derrida's

more (in)famous remarks: "There is nothing outside of the text." Derrida is insisting that there is no knowledge, of which we can speak, which is unmediated. Deconstruction comes into play theologically when God is used to ground our accounts of phenomena, which happens when we regard God as the highest being and the ground of being. Deconstruction offers a critique of theism, to be sure, but it is directed to the 'ism' rather than to the 'theos'; it offers a critique of the use to which 'God' is put, but does not make any claim whatsoever about the *reality* of God. This clarification is useful in any discussion of "ontotheology."

The literal meaning of the word "ontotheology," the conflation of the philosophical notion of Being and the Self-revelation of the God of the Bible has roots all the way back to patristic theology. While Tertullian cried, "What has Athens to do with Jerusalem?" Augustine and most of the early Fathers identified God with eternal, immutable Being. But the current, pejorative use of this term stems from Heidegger's identification of modern metaphysics with ontotheology. As critique, ontotheology does not aim at those theistic theologies which affirm that there is a Highest Being and that nothing can be properly understood apart from this Highest Being. Ontotheology names those attempts that permit God to enter the scene only in the service of the human project of mastering the whole of reality—what Augustine would call *uti Deo*. The critique of ontotheology is directed not at *what* we say about God, but at *how* we say it, to what purpose, in the service of what project. As a project of intellectual mastery, ontotheology presupposes and practices the primacy of theoretical reason. But the goal of theology is never a theoretical system; its goal is concrete Christian existence, the *praxis* of the believer as a distinctive mode of existence. Authentic theology is a practical discipline. Ontotheology is *hubris*, the idolatry of trying to put God at our disposal. The critique of ontotheology would have theology be *theo*-logy [cf. Merold Westphal, "Overcoming Onto-Theology," in John Caputo and Michael Scanlon, eds., *God, the Gift, and Postmodernism* (Bloomington, Ind.: Indiana University Press, 1999)].

#### (4) *Postmodern Theological Anthropology*

Both the philosophical and the theological postmodern critique of modernity begin with a massive assault on the "turn to the subject" with its cognate issues: universal reason, historical progress, and androcentrism. Some of these postmodern thinkers employ a rhetoric of hyperbole evident in such phrases as "the death of the subject" or "the end of the self." Their target, of course, is the foundational subject of the Cartesian *cogito* or the Kantian transcendental self. Their critique appears at times "innocent;" they jettison modern concerns without re-

mainder, without caring to salvage the grains of truth and value in those concerns.

A postmodern theological anthropology must retrieve the biblical notion of the self as person, the responsible self in relation to others. This retrieval has much to gain from the postmodern critique of the modern self which found its center in consciousness, in thought, in private interiority. Perhaps the most common characteristic of postmodern anthropology is its insistence on the linguisticity of human existence. Premodern anthropology (e.g., that of Thomas Aquinas) explored the essential structure of human being in terms of "human nature" with its specific powers of intellect and will. Instructed by the contemporary emphasis on language as the key to understanding the human, we might say that human nature is the given potential for human existence, but this potential must be nurtured by a linguistic induction into the human community. It is language that makes human knowing and doing possible. Aristotle got it right—we are animals that have the *logos* (word *before* thought, making thought possible), and his social anthropology follows—as linguistic animals we are political animals (we need others to talk and to listen to). Speech makes intersubjectivity the matrix of personal subjectivity.

In his project of retrieving human subjectivity in the wake of the postmodern critique of the monological, autonomous self philosopher Calvin Schrag explores the notion of the "decentered self" within the context of communicative praxis. This "decentered self" is, of course, the Christian ideal of losing oneself to find oneself. The "self-centered self" is the classical definition of the sinner. In a postmodern approach that refuses merely to jettison human subjectivity, the modern question, "What is the Self?" yields to the question, "Who is the Self?" The "what" question is the metaphysical search for the unchanging, essential core of the human being. The "who" question invites a story for an answer, a temporal narrative filled with changing situations. It is the social process that is responsible for the appearance of the self as a kind of "multiple personality." In this process the "who" emerges in its different roles, its different relationships, its different responsibilities. These "different selves" of our different involvements in language and life against the background of multiple social memories, various customs, habits, and institutional practices revolve around a "responding center," a personal sphere of interest and concern whence things are said and done. The "who" is a shifting center of initiative and response in the ongoing human "conversation."

But conversation requires tongues, and tongues come with bodies. For postmodern anthropology, embodiment together with temporality is an essential characteristic of the "decentered self." Through the emphasis on the linguisticity of human existence the human body is

rediscovered as basic symbol. The body is the self-manifestation, the self-expression of the human person, the concrete “medium” through which the human person becomes a reality in the world. In the sacramental economy of Catholicism “to express” is “to effect.” By bodily self-expression the human being enacts itself in a lifetime. Body is the basic human sacrament through which the human person effects itself in freedom through interdependence with the embodied selves of other human beings in their common commerce with the world.

This “common commerce with the world” raises the question of ethics, and postmodern thought has often been charged with ethical relativism. An “innocent” critique of modernity would dismiss the Enlightenment’s tradition of human emancipation through reason. While we can no longer presuppose a “universal reason,” other approaches to the search for the human good are available. A dialogical approach to the search for truth and goodness should replace the monological methods of modernity. Relativism is not inevitable. It is quite difficult, however, but we must learn to live in critical openness to the cultural and religious pluralism of our time. We will learn that it is only through engaged encounter with the “other” that we will come to a more profound understanding of our own tradition. “Postmodern thinking, if it means anything at all, means a philosophy of ‘alterity,’ a relentless attentiveness and sensitivity to the ‘other’” [John Caputo, “The Good News about Alterity: Derrida and Theology,” *Faith and Philosophy* 10 (1993) 453].

Perhaps the most radical formulation of the problem of “the Other” comes from the French Jewish philosopher Emmanuel Levinas [cf. Robert Bernasconi and Simon Critchley, eds., *Re-Reading Levinas* (Bloomington, Ind.: Indiana University Press, 1991)]. His vocabulary immediately reveals his postmodern distance from autonomy, the great ethical ideal of modernity which he replaces with “heteronomy”—ethical living is constant openness, constant obedience, to the summons of the other—especially to the oppressed, the excluded, the marginalized (“the widow, the orphan, and the stranger” of Exod 22:21). Against the Western tradition which emphasizes reciprocity, likeness, and symmetry in “personal” relationships, Levinas emphasizes the lack of reciprocity, unlikeness, asymmetry wherein I, in responding to “the other” (*l’autrui*), am always responsible for (to) “the other” (*l’autrui*), regardless of the other’s response to me. A supererogatory ethics, indeed!

##### (5) *Postmodern Christology*

In his *Jesus Symbol of God* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1999), Roger Haight has produced a postmodern christology. Claiming that “christology in the second half of the twentieth century has moved away

from christology from above, away from placing a doctrine or a theology of the Trinity at the source of christology" (330), Haight interprets current movements in christology as evidence of a gradual appropriation of a postmodern consciousness of historicity and pluralism: Jesus research and narrative christology, liberation, political, feminist, and inculturated christologies, and christologies addressing religious pluralism.

Central to Haight's approach is his insistence that Jesus is the subject matter of christology; all statements about Jesus Christ must have some connection with Jesus of Nazareth. This insistence becomes especially interesting when Haight considers the Logos as a symbol for God, effective in the world, in reference to Jesus (e.g., in the Prologue of John). It seems obvious that the Logos has been interpreted in trinitarian language as a "real being," distinct from God—alongside God, under God. This hypostatization of the Logos has been responsible for the most serious problems in christology and in trinitarian thought. "Once the Logos is hypostatized, one has the problem of the second God" (476). Personally, I agree with Haight, but this interpretation is likely to provoke significant discussion!

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