
Theology and Postmodernism: Is It All Over?

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Do the social and cultural changes over the opening years of the twentieth century mean that we have to say postmodernism is over? And have theologies still responding to that postmodern condition already passed their sell-by date? This article examines four of the new trends impacting postmodernism and concludes that though we have certainly moved elsewhere, postmodernity is not quite making its final gasps. This is primarily because the economic force behind postmodern culture, neo-liberalism, remains dominant. We then look at three examples of theological response to the new inflexions in postmodernity, pointing up how they have changed from earlier postmodern theologies. We end by raising the question of whether a major challenge to neo-liberal and global economics is about to announce itself with national bankruptcies and the increasing pressure on key international currencies. If that challenge materialized, then postmodernity would be over.

THE END OF POSTMODERNITY?

IT IS TEMPTING TO WRITE that postmodernity is over; therefore, postmodern theology is over or, more precisely, the cultural conditions for the production of theologies responding to postmodernity is over. And so, theologies still treading water in the vanguard of a retreating context are becoming increasingly obsolete. It is tempting to begin this

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article in such a way, not on the rhetorical grounds of impact, but more substantially because the cultural conditions of the West have moved elsewhere. Where we have moved to is not necessarily a position beyond postmodernity. In fact, as I show, some aspects of the postmodern condition have been accentuated. But it is not the same postmodern condition of the 1980s and 1990s. I point to four trends in particular that are evident in our present cultural situation (postsecularity, post-materiality, austerity, and neo-liberal economics), three of which qualify its postmodern character. In qualifying that character, we should then expect a change in theological responses to and reflections on postmodernity.

The first of those trends is what various social theorists have labeled "postsecularity." This is far from being an unambivalent term. Indeed, each social theorist who employs it seems to offer a different interpretation of what is intended by it. Two of the most prominent exponents of this trend exemplify its ambivalence. On the one hand, there is Jürgen Habermas (2002)¹ who, while calling now for a recognition of the role religion plays in the public sphere and democratic politics, views the turn to the postsecular as a critical reflection within secularism itself: secularism becoming conscious of that which it has abjected. The postsecular, for him, is less the opening of a new historical epoch that follows the secular than a recognition that the state must accept and respect the continuing existence of religious pieties and traditions—a continuing existence that is nevertheless still waning.² On the other hand, there is Charles Taylor (2007), who while becoming more explicit about his own position as a Roman Catholic believer has sketched what he describes as a supernova effect of believing that occurred with the onset of modernity. For him, it is not that religious believing disappeared with the separation of religion from public life and the dawn of the age of disenchantment, but rather that it was displaced onto new objects appropriated by an increasing individual expressivism. A plethora of new, hyperindividualized spiritualities and self-transcendences emerge such that, in the current cultural conditions, many of the objects of the displacement are once again explicitly religious. The postsecular for Taylor is explicitly a historical development and marks an

¹Since 9/11, Habermas has been thoroughly engaged with the new visibility of religion. See, most particularly, Giovanna Borradori, *Philosophy in a Time of Terror: Dialogues with Jürgen Habermas and Jacques Derrida* (2003) and the dialogue between Habermas and Cardinal Ratzinger at the Catholic Academy in Bavaria on January 19, 2004 (Habermas and Ratzinger, 2007).

²See also Hans Joas' supportive observations of Habermas' position in *Braucht der Mensch Religion? Über Erfahrungen der Selbsttranszendenz* (2004).

epochal shift with respect to secularization—a shift set to continue; religion will not go away.

Whatever the definitions and genealogies of the postsecular and whatever the reasons behind the rise in the public voice of religions through the various media for their dissemination, what is evident is that religion is not disappearing at any time soon. Furthermore, Europe, as *the* standard for secular society, is increasingly becoming a questionable exception. “It is clear that the wall between religion and government is now so porous as to be an unreliable guide to attitudes and actions,” write Haarlán Cleveland and Mary Luyckx in a background paper for a European Commission in 1998 (cited in Vries and Sullivan 2006: x and 697). Since so much twentieth-century theology either wished to annex itself with the project of secularity (theological liberalism or correlationalism) or counter its claims (theological conservatism or the critical revival of orthodoxy), then the new visibility of religion in the public sphere and the challenges it has posed to the secularization thesis modify the political landscape of Carl Schmitt’s friend–enemy distinction.³ Contemporary theology is presented with new allies and new forms of alienation.

The second trend is what the sociologist Ronald Inglehart has termed “post-materiality.” As I have written elsewhere (Ward 2010: 81–3), this is not anticonsumerist and certainly not necessarily a counterforce to the economic forces of neo-liberalism, but it does suggest an increasing espousal of values more consonant with Christian ethics, for example, than galloping postmodern relativism. In a postmaterial culture, concerns with quality of life come to the fore as basic needs in a time of economic instability (needs such as food, clothing, and shelter) are being met, and even being taken for granted as being met. Inglehart, whose work began examining emerging postmaterial trends in the 1970s, points to the rise of interest in human rights, personal liberties (such as sexual orientation and religious affiliation), community, and aesthetic satisfaction as indicators of this new trend. His conclusion, following a rigorous analysis of the World Values Surveys, states: “At the time of our first surveys, in 1970–71, Materialists held an overwhelming numerical preponderance over Postmaterialists, outnumbering them by nearly four to one. By 1990, the balance has shifted dramatically, to a point where Materialists outnumbered Postmaterialists only by four to three” (Inglehart 1997: 35). The postmaterial shift is, so Inglehart believes, set

³The friend/enemy distinction is at the centre of Schmitt’s agonistic understanding of the political. See Carl Schmitt’s *The Concept of the Political*, trans. Schwab (1996), and Jacques Derrida’s critical use of the distinction in *The Politics of Friendship* (2005).

to continue. It is associated with what has recently been discerned as “the revival of social critique” after the failure of left-wing politics, trade unionism, and state interventions in social welfare in the 1960s and 1970s (Boltanski and Chiapello 2005: 345–418). Today, it is probably most in evidence in much public debate around the issues of both the environment and migration. Worries about global threats to the ecosystem have ushered in a new urgency in recycling, attention to carbon footprints and emissions, apocalyptic visions of rising global temperatures and sea levels, and anxiety over the extinction of species. The weather forecast has never seen such popularity; global weather systems have never received such national attention. The fragility of life on this planet, the sheer contingency of the delicate ecosystems which enable there to be life here, is demanding restrictions, limits, and boundaries that require new codes of conduct and create new interpellations and technologies forming concepts of the self. The anxieties over migration are related to the issue of green politics in several ways (not least in that climate change is occurring fastest in some of the most deprived areas of the world). This has raised arguments for public attention surrounding immigration patterns and the plights of refugees which, in turn, provoke questions regarding national identity and national responsibility. Many governments in the West are being forced to rethink their policies, laws, and procedures of migration and discuss the possibilities of quotas. There are rumors of new violences against human rights perpetrated within the borders of nations foremost in establishing and proclaiming such rights; new intolerances; new xenophobias; new authoritarianisms—which all reinforce the argument that there has been a move from the micropolitics of the 1970s and 1980s toward macropolitics (Ward 2010: 21–33). The politics of identity that fought against heterosexism, patriarchalism, homophobia, racism, and religious discriminations are now secondary concerns in a global politics responding to global threats. The vast migration of peoples worldwide has, furthermore, deepened pluralism. It is recognized now that the project of modernity, in shifting to other cultures and other landmasses, manifested itself in different ways and at different times. It has brought to our attention that we must speak of multiple modernities and, therefore, pluralized postmodernities (see Eisenstadt 2002; Sadria 2009).

Thirdly, there is a new climate of austerity that is being fostered following the revelations of the mountains of debt accumulated by many of the most economically important nations of the world. The banking crisis in the closing years of the first decade of the twenty-first century, and now the Euro crisis, has not only led to new measures for shoring up, regulating, and restructuring international financial markets, but

also loudly proclaims that the kitsch excesses, beveled ironies, and mirroring surfaces of postmodernity were all built upon credit. The glitter ball realities of the postmodern condition—which were always available only to those who could afford them and profoundly accentuated these people from those people who could not—were a fantasy that this generation, and probably the one that follows it, will have to pay for. If we take two of the most important books analyzing and announcing postmodernity—Frederic Jameson's *Postmodernism or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (1991) and David Harvey's *The Postmodern Condition* (1991)—both emphasize how this cultural phenomenon was inextricably associated with new forms of capitalism. In particular, late capitalism (Jameson) or accumulative capitalism (Harvey) emerged as either an economic response to or effect of the rise in oil prices and inflation rates, the devaluation of currencies, and the separation of the dollar from the gold standard in the mid-1970s. The crisis of this late or accumulative capitalism (it was certainly not its collapse), that forced, and is still forcing, governments around the world to pump trillions of hard-core currencies into the unstable foundations of liquid assets, toxic mortgages, and motile financial markets, brings in its wake a new ascesis. The effects of plummeting interest rates and quantitative easing required, and continue to require, governments to embark upon a series of new austerity measures that result in, and will continue to result in rising taxes, cut pensions, soaring unemployment, and the impending bankruptcy of public institutions—probably, notably, those associated with higher education. New economic restrictions, on credit for example, foster new regimes of living aimed at curbing consumer excess and disciplining shoppers' greed. And postmodernity celebrated excess.

In light of these three trends, the cultural *laissez-faire* of postmodernism is being chastised and might therefore be said to be on the wane. But we have to treat the fourth trend that highlights the manner in which the mainstay of the postmodern condition, neo-liberal economics, still remains dominant. As Luc Boltanski and Eve Chiapello remark on the displacements of capitalism that both Jameson and Harvey alert us to: "This state of the world, which at the outset could be viewed purely negatively (the dissolution of the old conventions), or assimilated in postmodernist fashion to a chaos unamenable to any general interpretation, has finally found an instrument of representation in the language of networks" (2005: 345). Our contemporary cultural scene is preoccupied with networks that sociologists were beginning to see the importance of in the mid-1990s. On the whole, the networks are virtual and electronic—whether these are social, political, or

economic networks. They emphasize flows of information, liquid identities, malleable ontologies, and loose forms of belonging that foster soft responsibilities and communities as allusive as the scent of expensive perfumes. They constitute one of the enduring aspects of postmodernity, one set to continue and develop much further. I drew attention to this trend in the "Introduction" to *The Postmodern God* (Ward 1997: xv–xliv). I described the postmodern condition there in terms of the Internet, that image of the infinite that sits upon most of our desks. The Internet dissolves the rigidities of Cartesian space and time, re-enchancing the real *through* technology (which reverses Max Weber's disenchantment thesis), and combining information with entertainment, the aesthetic with the anesthetic. Hypertextuality, which creates a single surface of all knowledge and makes available both the past and present, is the adjunct of what French sociologist Jean Baudrillard terms "hyperreality," the order of simulation, the domination of simulacra. If the flows of images and knowledges can only afford "soft ontologies" (Vattimo 1999), if relations become as motile as neural networks, if identities become fluid and inseparable from avatars, then what the Internet and postmodernity announce is liquid realities: the fabulous movement of light on surfaces found in so many postmodern architectural icons (Frank Gehry's Guggenheim Museum at Bilbao or his Walt Disney auditorium in Los Angeles, or Norman Foster's "Gerkin" in London).

So then we are not witnessing the death-throes of postmodernity; but it is morphing.

AFTER POSTMODERNITY?

Given what we have seen above, "After" in this subtitle does not refer to a culture on the other side of postmodernity. Rather, it signifies "in the wake of." As postmodernism morphs and shape-shifts in a continuing neo-liberal economic trajectory, we have to ask where we are now and what has become of our theologies in this powerful cultural undertow. In the "Introduction" to the *Blackwell Companion to Postmodern Theology*, I offered another model for the signs of the time—an object that seemed to both exemplify postmodernity and point to changes occurring within it: the Gaylord Opryland Resort in Nashville, with its river, waterfalls, boating trips, plastic trees with real birds, and the re-creation of antebellum living all under a massive canopy of glass (Ward 2005: xii–xxvii). It is postmodern insofar as the visitor takes up residence in a gigantic theatre set where the fake and the fabulous entertain; if it points beyond postmodernity then, as I observed, the future it suggests is more of the same without the irony. For there is a

cabaret irony behind postmodern kitsch that allows the dark smile to appear now and then between the dazzling lozenges of beaten copper and aluminum: the existential angst about true identity and genuine memory in Ridley's Scott's *Blade Runner*; the terrifying vision of being colonized by the machine in the Wachowski brothers' *The Matrix*. In other words, to put it in Lacanian terms, made so familiar by Slavoj Žižek: postmodernity works out the sadomasochistic logic of a desire that knows something not to be the case but enjoys the symptom of repressing it. And what is at stake in sadomasochism is love, power, pain, and pantomime or their aestheticization; erotic relations as power relations enjoy their own staged violation and victimage.

In order, then, to understand why it is premature to say postmodernity is over, let us examine further the association between my two metaphors for postmodernism: the Internet and the Opryland resort. On the one hand, we have an advanced form of communication—a totalizing medium insofar as it brings together all forms of communicative media to date; on the other, consumerism as a leisure activity and a self-forgetful immersion in entertainment. The two are inseparable. Not simply in the obvious exponential growth of online shopping and pay-as-you-view downloading. They are inseparable in the human condition as such: communication is the expression of my condition, desire, and intention; consumption is the ingestion of that which is necessary to sustain my condition, satisfy my desire, and galvanize my intention. But with virtual reality, we have moved beyond the production of tools and prostheses to the production of atavistic and surrogate forms of living. In surrendering ourselves to the new productions, immersing ourselves in the life-styles they offer, we give our lives over to what Žižek called the “plague of fantasies” (2009). These fantasies are only ours insofar as they have been manufactured for us. Tools and prostheses have a use-value: they enable us to do something or produce something more easily—they are labor-saving. Their use-value associates them intimately with ourselves: they are extensions of our body. Georg W. F. Hegel and Karl Marx both recognized that since these tools could then be employed by other people, they bore potentially universal, rather than just subjective, value. In the hands of some, in the hands of the few over the many, the tools could be used to diminish individual life. There was then, with the manufacture of tools and technologies, a potential for alienation. The potential for alienation was directly related to their potential universalism. But, in moving far beyond the use-value of tools and technologies, in giving ourselves over to them, in no longer being able to view them as extensions of our body but replacements for it, the alienation is all the more profound. It is more profound because

it is no longer experienced as it was in the first and the second industrial revolutions, as evidently oppressive and life-denying. Nevertheless, it *is* oppressive and life-denying. It is oppressive because we are handing ourselves over to be colonized by the server's control, the programmer's imagination, and to both their ideologies and pathologies. It is life-denying because our virtual participation is vicarious; abstracted from the activity in the world that feeds our relationships with others, our sense of dependency and responsibility. But it is a profound alienation because its oppression and life-denial is continually displaced by the aesthetic pleasures of being entertained. The alienation is bunkered deep beneath an enervating sonambulance, like the memory of a suicide locked in the mind of Leonardo DiCaprio in Christopher Nolan's film *Inception*. A memory that, in fact, proves to be false.

THEOLOGIES IN THE WAKE OF POSTMODERNITY

I wish to point to three forms through which the present postmodern condition is being refigured theologically. Both *The Postmodern God* and the *Blackwell Companion to Postmodern Theology* showcased the work of a number of different theologians, some continuing an earlier liberal theology and some polemically advocating new orthodoxies. These theologies each took contemporary critical and cultural theory seriously; they engaged in their work various poststructuralisms issuing from the pens of Michel Foucault, Jacques Derrida, Gilles Deleuze, Paul de Man, Emmanuel Levinas, Luce Irigaray, and Julia Kristeva, among others; they either accepted the emaciated metaphysics these poststructuralisms offered or condemned them as nihilistic and relativist, capitulations to capitalism. The acceptance of certain liberations through an emaciated metaphysics still continues in the writing of John Caputo (2007), Carl Raschke (2009), and Gianni Vattimo (1999), but I think one of its most interesting exponents is the work of the late Marcella Althaus-Reid, whose theology announces a radical rethink of liberation theology in terms of queer theory. Althaus-Reid's theological work is then illustrative of the first of my three forms.

For the study of theology, the importance of Althaus-Reid's work lies in the challenges she lays down to most current attempts at dogmatics. In *The Queer God* (2003), dogmatic theology is labeled "T-theology." "T-theology" has institutional backing from both the academy and the church hierarchy. It is associated not only with the reification of a certain sexual ideology based in a biological reductionism, but also with economic conservatism, the bourgeois politics of the status quo, colonialism and imperialism. If the aim of her work is

“to recover the memory of the scandal in theology . . . the scandal of what T-theology has carefully avoided” (2003: 33), then because T-theology is a discursive practice (a complex of what Foucault called “technologies”) implicated in the production of the embodied, sexual subject, Althaus-Reid’s work is a call to such theology (and its theologians/legitimizing institutions) to recognize the kinds of bodies it has produced. T-theology’s repressions, self-censoring, and denials have not produced bodies of liberation; in fact, they have not consciously produced bodies that are sexual, economic, social, or political at all insofar as T-theology rarely treats embodiment. Furthermore, part of the reason why, despite the gospel proclamations of redemptive liberation and salvation, T-theology has not been able to achieve what it rhetorically seeks to achieve (salvation as liberation) is that in becoming ideological it has become abstract and idealistic. Meaning: like the best ideologies, T-theology ideology is invisible to itself. As Marx famously defined ideology in *Capital*: “They do not know it, but they are doing it” (quoted in Žižek 1989: 28). Althaus-Reid’s claim then is not just that T-theology is ideological, but in being ideological, its doctrinal meditations have floated off to form islands of paradisial ideas, all systematically connected one to the other in a pure theo-logic. In other words, however central the teaching on the incarnation is for Christian systematic theology, it is simply not material enough.

The philosophical basis of her work is that in any given context, all things are interrelated epistemically and that cultural hegemony is forged through the authorization of certain epistemologies and the castigation of others. In Althaus-Reid’s words: “By epistemological contexts we mean the fact that ways of knowing relate to each other” (2003: 25–26). To some extent, Foucault’s “archaeologies” lie behind a claim that there are structural homologies between discourses that produce our knowledges of things, but I think Althaus-Reid’s “relate” can admit dissonances as well as homologies. In the name of justice, in a cultural space (Latin America) composed of violent contrasts, juxtaposing one epistemology (of the Marquis de Sade’s *boudoir*) with another (texts from the New Testament) can force a “relation” that produces alternative knowledges. So because of the relatedness of all epistemological contexts, the sexual cannot be isolated from the economic (capitalism), the political (Western ideology), the psychoanalytical (libidal flows and exchanges), and the racial/ethnic (colonialism). A sexual theology cannot be constructed without exposing, dismantling, or destabilizing the contextual knowledges with which such sexual theologies in the past have accommodated themselves (the discourses with which they are imbricated) in order to maintain at least the vestiges of heterosexual

hegemony. In a theological project, then, that wishes both to make the Word strange and emphasize that the Word was itself made strange, it is not simply a matter of critiquing one discourse but allowing the subversions of other “related” discourses to cross-over and demand a more radical subversion. The dissonances created by these tactics rely upon importing “perverted” epistemologies—knowledges and ways of perceiving (and pleasuring)—on the basis of recontextualizing. For example, the classical theological discourses on the omniscient God are introduced to the God as Voyeur, and the Christian doctrine of eschatology, of the kingdom already and yet to come, is juxtaposed with accounts of deferred desire in sadomasochism. In this way, forced homologies are opened up to new, albeit scandalous, associations that require alternative modes of understanding. The controlled and restricted bodies—which are physical bodies as well as rhetorical bodies, social bodies, ecclesial bodies, bodies of ideas, and sacramental bodies—“the hungered body, the emaciated body, the lonely body of the Other (tortured, ill, accosted and oppressed sexual body)” (Althaus-Reid 2003: 47)—are all redefined in terms of the more nomadic body of the libertine. The licentious infiltrates the licit in a “hermeneutics of defamiliarisation” (Althaus-Reid 2003: 59). What is wagered in this strategy, based on the metaphysical claim of epistemological relatedness, is that since the interrelationship of the sexed subject is intimately tied to the economic, the political, the psychoanalytic, and the colonial, then to disrupt the model, to queer the nature of this sexed subject, offers the potential for the production of other kinds of bodies and other kinds of exchanges. These new bodies and exchanges would destabilize the neoliberal economics of current capitalism, the exploitative colonialism of what Antonio Negri and Michael Hardt have termed the new “Empire” (2001), the binary notion of the private and the public sphere that constructs the possibility for liberal democracies (that brings in its wake a depoliticization), and the notion of the freedom of the autonomous individual (that fosters the capitalist Nietzschean ethic of the “will-to-power” and the cult of indifference). And such a destabilization would allow for re-conceptions of “justice.” This is important: the queer epistemologies Althaus-Reid’s work attempts to construct aim at unlocking new desires, producing new relations, new exchanges, new knowledges, and therefore new bodies, the implications of which go far beyond sexuality as such to the political widely understood.

This brings us to Althaus-Reid’s central theological axiom. This theological axiom is not disassociated from her fundamental metaphysical claim. In fact, the metaphysical claim issues from the theological axiom: that God is a God who is in-relation, a Triune relation, an

“orgy” of relationality (in Althaus-Reid’s terms). Our notions of God are grounded in our knowledges and practical experiences of what constitutes “intimate relations.” “God is then not the big eye which follows us like an Orwellian policeman, but a dialogic God, whose identity is dependent somehow on people’s own loving relationships” (2003: 43).

The second form in which postmodern concerns are being refigured theologically is uncovered in the curious development of the theological as it is found within postmodern critical theorists themselves. Poststructural thinkers concerned with the Other, difference, and the unnameable or fetishized void frequently explore religious themes: Foucault on the technology of confession; Derrida on negative theology; Michel de Certeau on modern spirituality; Irigaray on “sensible transcendence”; Jean-François Lyotard on the unrepresentable; Kristeva on *credo*, etc. With a few notable exceptions (Levinas, de Certeau, and René Girard), these were not believers, belonged themselves to no tradition, and treated religion critically. If they opened up a vein that is now recognizably postsecular, they themselves espoused the secular worldview, generating secular theologies, secular forms of the *via negativa*. But with philosophers such as Badiou (2003), Agamben (2005), and Žižek (2000), and their treatment of the writings of St. Paul, a new direction is being taken.⁴ Their pictures of St. Paul differ according to the uses they are making of him. For Badiou, Paul is a revolutionary and the event (a nuanced and important term for Badiou) of his letters and theology announce a new turn in the cultural order. Agamben is much more concerned with the messianic temporality that Paul announces and the kind of faith community that invokes. Žižek builds upon Badiou’s thesis, developing it in his own Lacanian manner as the inauguration of a new dynamic countering the sadomasochistic deadlock of relations with a logic of sacrifice and gift. Postmodern theologians put to theological use a variety of postmodern thinkers and developed new critical dialogue partners from them. But with these three thinkers, we have an explicit turn of postmodern philosophy to theological thinking as a resource for the development of their own modes of contemporary reflection. If the earlier generation of poststructuralists were articulating what George Steiner once described as “paramarxism” (1984: 37–53), and evidence the last gasps of left wing thinking, then these thinkers are attempting to foster new forms of left wing thought *through* engaging with the resources of Christian

⁴See *Paul’s New Moment: Continental Philosophy and the Future of Christian Theology*, edited by Davis et al. (2010).

theology. This engagement has brought new attention, theologically colored, to concepts such as the community, the promise, the event, *kairos*, the messianic, and the eschatological. It is an engagement that leads directly to, and is evident within, our third form of postmodern theology. Unfortunately, none of these thinkers are in dialogue with an important reconsideration of Paul and the political arising from New Testament scholarship (see, for example, Blumenfeld 2001; Elliot 2005). I say “unfortunately” because this work, emphasizing the transcendent rather than the immanent concerns of St. Paul and the close relation between St. Paul’s writing, his cultural and historical context, and the faith communities he was speaking to, point out the reductive and self-serving ways in which St. Paul is being read by these postmodern thinkers. Nevertheless, the contributions of Alain Badiou, Giorgio Agamben, and Slavoj Žižek have served to open new conversations in which theologians and biblical studies have become involved in reciprocal conversations with postmodern critical theory. They have offered an opening for new and wider cultural debates in postmodernism that theologians are not simply learning from and employing as therapies in their own discourses, but contributing to. In this way, the postsecular horizons of contemporary Western culture are being extended.

The third form in which contemporary culture is being refigured theologically is the return to political theology that rejects the liberalizing tendencies in, say, Johann Baptist Metz or Jürgen Moltmann, and looks to develop robust Christian responses to the political. In part, this is a response to the new visibility of religion in the public sphere that has been occurring since the late 1990s and which I noted above. The new visibility is evident in the 1999 European Values Study, analyzed by the French sociologist Yves Lambert, who observes that “in all countries, young people who declare themselves Christian appear more religious in 1999 than in 1990 and 1981 . . . regardless of whether the indicators are of a personal religiosity . . . or of institutional religiosity” (Lambert 2004: 37–38). This trend would indicate that Europe is less the exception to an international desecularization than was certainly believed in the 1960s through to the 1980s. The new visibility is not necessarily a re-emergence of religion; in fact, institutional numbers in churches, temples, synagogues, and mosques have either declined or remained steady-state. But the visibility comes about through mediatization. The rôle religion has been playing in international politics encourages media attention (see Thomas 2003), with both *Newsweek* and *The Economist* publishing special issues in 2007 on current international affairs involving religion and politics and now appointing religious correspondents.

The recent turn to political theology has encouraged new research into theological figures such as Carl Schmitt, Johann Baptist Metz, and Reinhold Niebuhr. In fact, the revitalized interest in Carl Schmitt figures significantly both in the work of critical theorists now employing aspects of Christianity positively, such as Žižek and Agamben, and in the development of new political theologies. Two studies are illustrative of the changes that have occurred in postmodern theology that is re-engaging the political. The first is *Theology and the Political: The New Debate* (2005), edited by Creston Davies, John Milbank, and Slavoj Žižek, and the second is *Political Theologies: Public Religions in a Post-Secular World* (2006), edited by Hent de Vries and Lawrence E. Sullivan. In the first volume, we have essays not only from postmodern theologians such as John Milbank, Catherine Pickstock, Hent de Vries, and Regina M. Schwarz, but also by postmodern critical theorists who have no confessed religious affiliations: Slavoj Žižek, Antonio Negri, and Simon Critchley. As a “taster” for the kind of postmodern political theology that emerges from this volume, we can look briefly at what is one of the finest (though intellectually most challenging) essays in that collection: Catherine Pickstock’s “The Univocalist Mode of Production.”

Pickstock explicitly directs her argument to a postmodernity that is (in terms of both its philosophies and its politics) just not postmodern enough. Rather it is a late modernity—an amplification of protomodern and modern conceptual trajectories. In this way, she associates the univocalism of Duns Scotus (indeed Avicenna’s Plotinus) with the work of Levinas, Deleuze, and Badiou on the one hand, and the cult of modern civility and liberalism’s shrine to abstract human rights on the other. It is a hard road to travel, through perversions of logic and representation, formalism, and empiricism brought about by the rejection of a participatory metaphysics and an analogical worldview, to a civil order of peace, a “normative formalism . . . [that] allow[s] an appearance of peace through regularity that disguises the *agon*” (2005: 308). The current world-order of so-called postmodernity, both philosophically and politically, is founded the univocalist mode of production that, in a double bind that is as complex as it is difficult to grasp, “encourage[s] dualities without mediation: God is unknowably and equivocally remote as regards His being in quale; this gap can be bridged only by positive revealed disclosures” (2005: 291) which will eventually encourage theologies in which reason is divorced from revelation and nature from grace (both Karl Barth and Jean-Luc Marion are mentioned). The gap becomes the space in which the secular project will announce itself. The common Good, in which the goodness of God is observed,

celebrated, and given in the ordinary and everyday, drifts toward the liberal market state in which certain abstract goods can be held in common—abstract, that is, from both the communities and the bodies that they are formally attributed to: equality, education, the right to privacy, the right to own property, etc. Civility, tolerance, and respect for the other substitute for liturgy in this atomized and abstract individualism; in their sheer factual appearance, objects become reified, fetishized; and the virtual character of the real predominates, ushering in the fluxes, flows, deterritorializations, and liquidities celebrated by Deleuze but which only present an aesthetic veil to hide the void. “One can read Duns Scotus as offering a theological anticipation of postmodernity” (2005: 301). If Levinas’ philosophy offers rights and civility that reduces transcendence to the immanent subjectivity of other people, and Deleuze presents only a choice between the territorial politics of the *status quo* and deterritorial terrorisms and mavericks, then Badiou wants a grace without God that presents only a happy face on arbitrary chance that cannot be politically planned for. Not that all is rotten in the state of affairs; throughout, Pickstock counterpoints her critical analysis of univocity and its disseminating productions with an alternative theological vision anchored in Augustine of Hippo, Thomas Aquinas, and Nicholas of Cusa. Neither protomodern, modern, nor postmodern their doctrines of creation and analogical participation in the operations of a Triune God, treated by Pickstock not uncritically, these writers offer the possibility for both a Christian metaphysics and a Christian politics. Pickstock then presents us with the new orthodox response to postmodernity that is politically inflected. The question here is for whom this corrective work is being done. It certainly is engaging in critical ways with postmodern thought, but to what constructive ends? Is it apologetics? If so, into what church is Pickstock wishing to usher these postmodernists since the genealogical method of her approach does open itself up to the criticism that she is advocating a return to Latin Christendom? In turn, such a theological and ecclesial position needs to engage contemporary theological concerns with ecclesiology—particularly, the unity of the Church in the face of both highly liquid forms of faithful belonging and the increasing proliferation of Christian traditions, denominations, and movements since the demise of Christendom.

The same critical collaboration between postmodern theory and theological analysis is evident also in the second volume spoken of above: *Political Theologies: Public Religions in a Post-Secular World*. Here voices such as those of Jean-Luc Nancy, Chantal Mouff, and Judith Butler mix with the likes of Pope Benedict XVI—although the

emphasis of the volume is primarily upon political and theoretical engagements with religion (where the religions spoken of are plural, and include polytheism, Islam, Judaism, and *Laïcité* as well as Christianity). The ambitious historical and topological scope of the book and its materials are introduced by a piece of postmodern writing by Hent de Vries that typifies both the aim and argument of the collection and the kind of postmodern theology that has taken this turn to the political. The edited volume, all eight hundred pages of it, is an "archive and resource," and de Vries asks, in the concluding lines of his self-confessed far too long "Introduction": "should we not . . . begin by observing and interpreting the relentless process of fragmentation and then inflation that the concept of theologico-political—and everything for which it stands—has undergone and continues to undergo? Indeed, do the real questions not situation themselves *before, around, and beyond* this notion, to the point where a different vocabulary . . . needs to be invoked or invented?" (2006: 88). These closing questions parallel a similar set of questions which open the "Introduction," and after a wending through "the flows of capital and information, immigration and migration, bodies and ideas" (2006: 27) in which "the mutual imbrication of 'salvation' and 'power' reveal complexities" (2006: 28), and an exposition of the analyses undertaken by each of the essays, he concludes: "an answer to our questions must be left in suspension" (2006: 88). And, as a final flourish, he adds: "There is no more urgent project, therefore, than to ask in what sense the legacies of 'religion' disarticulate and reconstellate themselves" (2006: 88). Before even embarking on the essays themselves, we are paralyzed by the complexity we have been led into and left within. It is a complexity in which political theology is both the most important topic for our contemporary attention, and the most diffuse, allusive, fragmented, and pluralized phenomenon ever to be encountered: nothing less than the sum of global civilizations and their histories. In true postmodern fashion, the project expounds a Derridean syntagma: "political theology without political theology." That is: political theology—its endless deferral. This is a conclusion to a contribution characterized by great intellectual energy and dexterity (if not self-indulgence), which is about as useful as a colander in a monsoon flood. In an attempt to do far too much, it does very little at all.

CONCLUSION

But this article is less an exercise in judgment and more a description of the field of postmodern theology fifteen years after *The*

Postmodern God. The point I made in the opening section is now more evident and hopefully proved: it is far too premature to announce the demise of the postmodern condition while two of the primary forces behind that condition—the rise of neoliberal economics and the liquid realities of information—morph into ever-new guises. In fact, de Vries' and Sullivan's *Political Theologies: Public Religions in a Post-Secular World* situates itself from its first words in "[t]he age of globalisation." And yet . . . we *are* elsewhere. Watch out for the rise of "eco asceticism"—a sub-activity of Inglehart's postmaterialism that models itself on the practices of the Christian desert-fathers and Zen Buddhism and has as its ideal "no impact": I leave this planet in the same condition I found it.⁵ While Western Europe pumps pounds and euros into the flaking foundations of many of its banks, could the days of rampant capitalism be over, and a new austere spirituality, disciplined and self-renouncing, with liturgies rooting and excessive to civilities, lie on the theological horizon? That surely would mean we can toll the bell for the passing of the postmodern era.

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⁵See *America: The National Catholic Weekly*, November 5, 2007, at http://www.americamagazine.org/content/article.cfm?article_id=10363 and the online journal *Encounter*, August 2, 2009, at <http://www.abc.net.au/rn/encounter/stories/2009/2640219.htm>. An explosion of voices followed the broadcasting by the BBC World Service of "Eco-Asceticism" on November 24, 2010.

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