

*God Seminar: Opening the Discussion
on God and the Human Future*

DAVID GALSTON	<i>Preface</i>	85
DAVID GALSTON	<i>Contending with Postmodern Hermeneutics and Biblical Criticism</i> Thinking Philosophical Theology with the Jesus Seminar	89
JOHN D. CAPUTO	<i>A Short Précis of The Weakness of God and The Insistence of God</i>	107
JOSEPH BESSLER	<i>Moving Words</i> Theology and the Performance of Proposing	119
JOHN KELLY	<i>Plato and Christian Belief</i>	139
JARMO TARKKI	<i>Hylotheism</i> Life as a Slide Show	157

PUBLISHER
Polebridge Press

EDITORS
Nina E. Livesey
University of Oklahoma
Clayton N. Jefford
Saint Meinrad Seminary and
School of Theology

EDITORIAL BOARD
Arthur J. Dewey
Xavier University
Robert T. Fortna
Vassar College, Emeritus

Julian V. Hills
Marquette University

Roy W. Hoover
Whitman College, Emeritus

Lane C. McCaughey
Willamette University, Emeritus

Chris Shea
Ball State University

James Veitch
Victoria University

ISSN 0883-4970

Forum, a biannual journal first published in 1985, contains current research in biblical and cognate studies. The journal features articles on the historical Jesus, Christian origins, and related fields.

Manuscripts may be submitted to the publisher, Polebridge Press, PO Box 346, Farmington, MN 55024; (651) 200-2372. westar@westarinstitute.org. A style guide is available from Polebridge Press. Please note that all manuscripts must be double-spaced, and accompanied by a matching electronic copy.

Subscription Information: The annual *Forum* subscription rate is \$30. Back issues may be ordered from the publisher. Direct all inquiries concerning subscriptions, memberships, and permissions to Polebridge Press, PO Box 346, Farmington, MN 55024; (651) 200-2372.

Copyright © 2016 by Polebridge Press, Inc. All rights reserved. The contents of this publication cannot be reproduced either in whole or in part, except for brief quotations in scholarly reviews and publications. Permission requests should be directed to the publisher.

Contributors

Joseph Bessler (Ph.D., University of Chicago) is the Robert Travis Peake Professor of Theology at Phillips Theological Seminary in Tulsa. The author of numerous essays related to Westar projects and a fellow of the Jesus Seminar who helped launch the God Seminar, his books include *A Scandalous Jesus* (Polebridge, 2013) and *Law and Theology* (with Martin Belsky, 2005). He is currently at work on a manuscript tentatively titled *Moving Words: How Theology Proposes to Lead Beyond God*.

John D. Caputo (Ph.D., Bryn Mawr College) is the Watson Professor of Religion Emeritus (Syracuse University) and the Cook Professor of Philosophy Emeritus (Villanova University). A writer and lecturer in the area of postmodern theory and theology for both academic and general audiences, his latest books are *Hoping against Hope: Confessions of a Postmodern Pilgrim* (Fortress, 2015), *The Folly of God* (Polebridge, 2015), *The Insistence of God* (2013), and *Truth: Philosophy in Transit* (Penguin, 2013).

David Galston (Ph.D., McGill University) is the Academic Director of the Westar Institute, the Ecumenical Chaplain at Brock University, and an Adjunct Professor of Philosophy at Brock University in St. Catharines, Ontario. A co-founder and Academic Advisor of the SnowStar Institute of Religion, Fellow of the Jesus Seminar, and United Church minister, David is the author of *God's Human Future* (Polebridge, 2016), *Embracing the Human Jesus* (Polebridge, 2012), and *Archives and the Event of God* (McGill-Queens, 2010).

John C. Kelly (Ph.D., University of Chicago) is Associate Professor of Philosophy and Sanford Distinguished Professor of Humanities Emeritus at the University of Nevada, Reno. A Westar Fellow, his primary research areas in Philosophy have been in Wittgenstein, Plato, and contemporary ethical theory.

Jarmo Tarkki (Ph.D., University of Helsinki) is Minister of California and Texas Finns, an office of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA). An Adjunct Professor of Theology at California Lutheran University, Thousand Oaks, and Teaching Fellow at the Pacific Lutheran Theological Seminary, Berkeley, he is the author of numerous books and articles published in Finland, Canada, and the United States. He previously worked as a sailor, prison chaplain, political campaign manager, editor-in-chief, columnist and as a TV-host in Finland.

Preface

The Westar Institute was founded on the principles of critical scholarly inquiry into the question of the historical Jesus. For such a question, Christian dogmas and beliefs were and remain outside the proper aims of research.

When considering Biblical Studies, historical-critical research outside the interference of dogma is relatively easy to achieve. It is a question of letting the research of a text follow a natural path according to the context out of which the text arises. To do otherwise, to allow the research to impose its agenda on the text and context, is to put the cart before the horse.

The scholars who compose the Seminar on God and the Human Future have a slightly more difficult task. It is important in any theological endeavor to respect the conclusions, however preliminary, of historical-critical scholarship in relation to the theological tradition under consideration. Yet, at the same time, theology is not expressly in the same category of historical-critical research. Theology is about ideas that emerge from particular contexts but are not necessarily tied to those contexts. An easy example is the platonic idea of "the Good." In a certain way there is no such "thing" as the Good. It's just an idea. Yet, in another way, it is a very impactful, significant, and guiding idea difficult to live without. The Good impacts the Western tradition as that to which social formations aim and that under which human relationships are judged. Western law depends on and assumes the idea of the Good even though the Good does not really exist.

The study of theology often involves things that do not really exist. This does not mean that the non-existing thing lacks value. It just means that we need to take great care when considering the value of theology, of the things theology talks about, and of the intentions theology holds, or may hold, when talking. In such quandaries, which compose the hermeneutical tasks of theology, historical-critical scholarship still remains important. Historical-critical scholarship is the ground or weighted anchor that secures the element of realism on every task of the theological imaginary.

The essays collected in this issue of *Forum* try to address these two significant sides of academic theology. One side is the serious consideration of historical-critical scholarship, and the other side is the effort to re-imagine the value and future of theology as a human endeavor. The essays move from problems related to the deconstruction of old, stable dogmas in theology to a defense of the significance of the historical Jesus for theology, to an understanding and

critique of platonic theology, and finally to raising up a uniquely conceived theology.

I offer a critical reply to scholars of religion who belittle, and often assume justification in doing so, the scholarship of the Jesus Seminar that focused on the historical Jesus. To me, such belittlement marks a failure to think in theology. I employ the Heideggerian distinction between “thinking” and being “thought provoking,” indicating that hermeneutics has been restricted to provoking theological thoughts but not very inventive when it comes to opening new questions. Echoing Bessler, I see the historical Jesus question as historic and as a chance to think theology in new ways.

John D. Caputo offers a short autobiographical account of his journey to theology and then helps the reader make a remarkable and insightful distinction between weak and strong theology. The move to theology, for Caputo, rested on the pivot of Derrida and the rejection of hermeneutics as a stable discipline. Hermeneutics is not the universal key that unlocks all doors but, conceived radically as Caputo does, the enterprise of open-ended interpretation always on the move. Such an understanding of hermeneutics leaves the future unsettled and radically open to hope, to what Caputo calls the event— what is to come but never what is here. This insisting voice of what is to come, but what cannot overtly change what is now, is the voice of weak theology. To Caputo, the God of weak theology has the “audacity not to exist” but nevertheless still calls.

John Kelly offers an excellent review of Plato’s thought and how Plato found a home in Christian theology. As Kelly reviews the historical reshaping of platonic thought into doctrinal elements of Christian theology, he touches on some important observations. We are used to reading Plato as a dualist, but Kelly observes how Plato’s forms—such as the Good—are properly unconditional. Like in deconstruction, they are the undeconstructible—not stable things but rather like promises that hang around but never appear in the flux of history. Then, Kelly indicates the failure Christianity has experienced when trying to convert dialogue to dogma and points to the new materialism as a way forward for theology.

Joseph Bessler helps the reader review and then reconsider the significance of theology in the contemporary world. He reminds us of two things. First, that from approximately the 1960s onward, the stability of theology that was assumed by previous generations has crumpled and fallen. To Bessler this opens an opportunity to change the nature of theology, placing emphasis on the rhetoric of theology and the constructive tasks of theology. Bessler very helpfully reviews some of the key theologians who have introduced the instability of postmodern thought into theology as a positive gain.

Jarmo Tarkki turns to language about God, indicating four main categories that have housed the historical expressions of theology. Tarkki leads us through the inadequacy of traditional understandings of the divine and delivers the

reader to the consideration of Alvin J. Reines and the ideas of hylotheism. Tarkki's point is not to extol Reines so much as to demonstrate how thinking about God as unlimited potential and elusive possibility raises new questions. Tarkki offers hylotheism as a complement to Caputo's weak theology and as a serious consideration among the emerging problems and promises theology offers today.

All the essays above form the first contribution of scholars to the Westar Institute's new Seminar on God and the Human Future.

—David Galston

Contending with Postmodern Hermeneutics and Biblical Criticism

Thinking Philosophical Theology with the Jesus Seminar

David Galston

The Jesus Seminar concluded its project on the historical Jesus in 1998 with the work on the *Profiles of Jesus*¹ (2002). This collection of essays followed the publication of *The Acts of Jesus*, which in turn was the follow up to the more controversial and widely known original publication of the Seminar, *The Five Gospels*² (1993).

The conclusions of *The Five Gospels* were in general sync with biblical scholarship when the Fellows of the Seminar claimed that approximately twenty percent of the sayings attributed to Jesus over the first three centuries of the Common Era could be judged as reasonably historic.³ This was the consensus reached through a simple voting technique expressing the collective opinion on the authenticity of Jesus sayings. The colors red and pink represented the opinion that Jesus probably said this or something like this. The colors grey and black expressed degrees of greater improbability.

Even though the conclusions of the Seminar in relation to the sayings of Jesus were uncontroversial in the general setting of biblical studies, that the media followed with interest the deliberations of the Seminar turns the otherwise academic project called "The Jesus Seminar" into a kind of catchphrase, if not a convenient paradigm to represent questionable scholarship, anti-Christian sentiment, and generally fringe ideas. The Seminar in fact rested its conclusions on the fundamentals of mainline biblical criticism that were established after the revolutionary breakthroughs of nineteenth- and twentieth-century historiography. To be sure, the Seminar did not just repeat the conclusions of previous generations but, like all scholarly enterprises, relied upon previous work to stir new perspective and expose the need for new or revised models. Still, likely due

1. Hoover, ed., *Profiles of Jesus*.

2. Funk et al., eds., *The Acts of Jesus*; Funk et al., eds., *The Five Gospels*

3. Many people belittle this percentage as both paltry and absurd, but twenty percent is actually a very high number in the spectrum of biblical scholarship. Many scholars would conclude that zero percent of such material can be traced back to the historical Jesus. Robert Miller makes this point extremely well in *The Jesus Seminar and its Critics*.

to unexpected public interest, the Jesus Seminar became, and often remains, a convenient foil by which to characterize so-called extreme scholarship.

In a book review otherwise unrelated to biblical criticism, Robert Magliola offered a passing and typical criticism of the Jesus Seminar based on the cache of the Seminar as a convenient paradigm for “fringe” scholarship. Magliola accused the author under review (Robert Knitter, who writes about Buddhism and Christianity) of “cafeteria-styled spirituality” and “dependence on the fringe conclusions of the ‘Jesus Seminar,’ and the like.”⁴ This casual dismissal of the Jesus Seminar inspired by hermeneutical thought is often employed by biblical critics themselves. It reveals a subtle tension, even a contention, that exists between postmodern forms of hermeneutics, in which the motivation of the critic is always under scrutiny and the critic who uses a methodology to reach a result. The contention expresses suspicion held by a hermeneutic of an author/agent’s motivation in using a chosen method. In the case of the Jesus Seminar, suspicion comes to the fore mostly through other biblical critics, but it is founded upon insights drawn from hermeneutical philosophy and theology. To some extent this contention is justified, representing a genuine concern for any researcher and writer. All scholars ought to be cautious about imposing a silent agenda upon their subject. But in many ways it is an unjustified contention that falsely casts the suspicions of hermeneutics against the methods of biblical criticism. In this scene, neither side benefits from the other nor pushes the other to new levels of inquiry. If we concentrate initially on the nature of hermeneutics and then see how hermeneutical contentions were used against the Jesus Seminar, it will be possible to explore the question of the historical Jesus beyond the regular cycle of critique and defense.

About Hermeneutics

Hermeneutics is the struggle involved in interpretation; it is the struggle to hear the relay of Hermes who retrieves and sends messages from and to the other side, from and to the gods, from and to Being. To indulge Hermes is to indulge in the ambiguities of interpretation, which consist of questioning the appropriateness of the message sent, the meaning of the message received, and even the abilities of the messenger (i.e., the method used to engage the text). To indulge Hermes is to indulge the question of meaning.

Since about the fourteenth century when William of Ockham declared that a substance is not a thing outside the mind,⁵ hermeneutics has been less about sending messages out to Being than about being in Being, being in that for

4. Robert Magliola, review of *Without Buddha I Could not be a Christian* (Paul F. Knitter), 1217.

5. William of Ockham, *Summa Logicae*, 1.15.

which there is no outside. In the nineteenth century, the concentration on this world of being delivered both biblical criticism and philosophical theology to the realization that religion is human creation; it is that which emerges in and with the projective activity of humans being in history. This was directly the conclusion of Ludwig Feuerbach (1804–1872) and the operating assumption of D. F. Strauss (1808–1874). It remains true to say that this basic insight continues to define religion as a problem that concerns human values and the human future.

Hermeneutics, then, identifies a struggle, but as such it does not hope for an end to struggle.⁶ It is about confronting the question of meaning, but not about concluding the quest for meaning. Since meaning, like Being and God, has from the nineteenth century fallen into history, the quest for meaning remains the activity of being in history; it remains the human condition of historicity, of being-there in the world. We might even say that hermeneutics operates like the uncertainty principle of quantum mechanics because it consists of the permanent and unstabilizing question about how history (being-there) predisposes the interpretive experience of the horizon of being. Hermeneutics questions how meaning “happens,” how it is “there,” in the phenomenon of being human with the world. Hermeneutics raises the question of meaning with the knowledge that social factors, whether of power, gender, or economics, have already formed the predisposition of experience in the world and have consequently created meaning as an “event” of history. Since the reading of the world presupposes the factors of being-there in the world, hermeneutics is the principle of uncertainty because it factors-in time, location, culture, and language as colors of the art of interpretation. Martin Heidegger called the factors that continually structure the art of interpretation the “compartment” of intentionality.⁷ He meant that the view upon the world, which is expressed intentionality, is always and already a view located in history before the horizon of being cast in time.

While it is true that the conclusions of the Jesus Seminar in *The Five Gospels* are consistent with contemporary practices in the analytical study of the Bible, the criticism directed at the Seminar comes from the inspirational, and at times misunderstood, background of hermeneutics. The contention lies not so much with the results yielded in the Seminar but the methodology chosen to yield them. In various ways, it is charged, the Seminar is guilty of hermeneutical naiveté: reaping the benefits of the method sown without considering how the chosen method pre-packages or even fore-words the conclusion reached. “I have always belonged,” writes Ben Vedder, “to a meaningful spectrum that

6. Caputo contrasts the hermeneutical task of moving forward (*kinesis* and repetition) as always on the move and always in the problem with the Greek (Platonic) tradition of recollection: seeking the quiet, the receding, and the immovable. See his *Radical Hermeneutics*.

7. Heidegger, *Basic Problems of Phenomenology*, 61.

co-determines what I perceive and what I make the subject of my thinking and questioning.”⁸ Belonging to a “meaningful spectrum” is effectively the critique of methodology as a tool that sketches beforehand the spectrum in which a view is held. The apparent inability of the Seminar to notice this co-determinant element—that spectrum of meaning to which one already belongs—is a favorite criticism directed at the Seminar by its main detractors. It is a criticism that arises in various argumentative forms when philosophically inspired hermeneutic casts its compartmental suspicions on the art of biblical criticism.

Yet, this “favorite criticism” of hermeneutics, while attractive, is neither insightful nor even accurate when directed at the Jesus Seminar. Granted it is a thought-provoking criticism, it is still not, as Heidegger would have said, what we call thinking.⁹ Thinking involves the struggle of taking a thought to a new location beyond the permission the method grants, but an easy criticism involves raising a thought—being thought provoking—with the already established method. It might be said that the favorite criticism leveled against the Jesus Seminar is only thought provoking; it does not involve the struggle to take a thought to a new location. The real task of hermeneutics related to the Jesus Seminar is thinking with the Seminar beyond the level of its thought-provoking analysis. The task at hand is now twofold, understanding first the favorite criticism and its shortcomings and second, seeking a genuine contribution to hermeneutical thinking about religion after the work of the Jesus Seminar.

Hermeneutics and the Historic Jesus

In his book *A Scandalous Jesus*,¹⁰ Joseph Bessler reminds us of the difference between history and the historic. History, of course, is the record of past events, but the historic is that which changes the perception of history. Religion is particularly susceptible to housing the historic. Religion is often the home of the event that changed history, even when the “event” in question never happened. God gave the Torah to Moses on Mount Sinai. Forgetting for the moment the historical improbability of this event, the literary problems about differing traditions, and the differing ways Jewish tradition holds this memory, the event is still historic. While the historian can justly conclude that the event never happened, it would be ridiculous to conclude accordingly that this “non-event” is not the most historic thing that ever happened in the Jewish imagination. The same is true of the Christian resurrection: this non-event is the most historic thing that ever happened in the Christian imagination. The Buddha’s first turn of the dharma wheel is also a most historic non-event. Things do not have to

8. Vedder, “Religion and Hermeneutic Philosophy,” 40–41.

9. See Heidegger, *What is Called Thinking?*

10. Bessler, *A Scandalous Jesus*.

happen in history literally to be historic, and religion is among the best locations to demonstrate this point.¹¹

In his classic book *Christ and Time*,¹² Oscar Cullmann attempted to demonstrate that for the Christian imagination the resurrection of Jesus changed the way time was understood. The resurrection was an event, in this sense, that was historic because it changed the experience of the world. In more recent work, such as *In Search of Paul*,¹³ Dominic Crossan and Jonathan Reed make a similar point when indicating that for Paul Christ and the Kingdom of God are the inverse experience of Caesar and the Empire of Rome. Accordingly, to be with Paul in his vision, and perhaps to be with Jesus in his vision, is to experience time differently: different values, different reasoning, different priorities. The two forms of being in history from the Pauline perspective, Crossan and Reed point out, are Roman piety, victory, and peace *versus* Pauline faith, equality, and peace. These oppositional values are indicative of differing “time” perceptions; each cluster is a form of being in history with a time horizon distinctly construed such that they are indeed distinctly “historic” entry points to history.

What Bessler indicates is that Christian theology offers several historic entry points to history (the resurrection, the Council of Nicaea, the Reformation), each being not just a part of Christian history but also re-orientations in the points of entry to Christian history. Then Bessler wonders why, or perhaps if, the study of the historical Jesus, beyond a question of history, should not also be a question of historic re-orientation. Indeed, does not the very scandal of the historical Jesus arise from the possibility that this critical form of study is a “historic” event?

. . . the question of the historical Jesus was, in fact, not only a historical question but also a *historic question*—a question that created a series of profound social, political, and theological impacts that have continued to shape and reshape our world. It is a question that cannot be reduced to this or that particular proposal about the historical Jesus, but a question whose disturbing power has not only *not* gone away, but continues to open up new spaces for historical and theological construction and new spaces of lived faith.¹⁴

If it is the case that “the historic” marks a shift in perception or orientation in time, that it is not “history” *per se* but history as “event,” then it can also be stated that theology, which is not history but the philosophical contemplation of the history of religion, is the task of defining the historic. Theology is the explanation or the apology of the historic within time and within culture. This means that the historic element of the historical Jesus lies in the way the historical Jesus

11. I suppose one could argue that politics is pretty good at it, too.

12. Cullmann, *Christ and Time*.

13. Crossan and Reed, *In Search of Paul*.

14. Bessler, *A Scandalous Jesus*, 2.

changes Christian theology. Yet, unfortunately or perhaps ironically, the historical Jesus has not been able to perform miracles inside the house of theology, and this is largely due to the reception of the historic along with the suspicion of the hermeneutic. I will gather this suspicion under three headings: the suspicion of convenience, the suspicion of naive methodology, and the suspicion of perniciousness. I will suggest that not only are these suspicions misguided but also that they do not constitute the act of “thinking” in relation to the historic question about the historical Jesus.

The Suspicion of Convenience

Even though *The Five Gospels* begins with the expressed warning, “Beware of finding a Jesus entirely congenial to you,”¹⁵ this very criticism was frequently directed at the Jesus Seminar during and following its proceedings. The criticism constitutes the suspicion of convenience. Scholars who reacted most stringently against the Jesus Seminar invariably did so on the basis of defending an apocalyptic Jesus, that is, a Jesus who believed in and busily announced the end of the world (the great cosmic cleanup). Since the end of the nineteenth century and the conclusions of Albert Schweitzer’s *Quest of the Historical Jesus* (1906, ET 1910), the standard reading in biblical scholarship had been that the historical Jesus was a prophet of the end times (*eschaton*). With this reading of Jesus established, Schweitzer posed his apocalyptic (and true) historical Jesus in contrast to the modern (and false) gentle Jesus, and he expressed hope that his true historical Jesus might take up the sword against the false modern Jesus. “. . . It is a good thing,” Schweitzer wrote, “that the true historical Jesus should overthrow the modern Jesus, should rise up against the modern spirit and send upon earth, not peace, but a sword.”¹⁶ Had Schweitzer known that his apocalyptic Jesus would, in the twentieth century, become the violent Jesus of both Islamic and Christian extremism, perhaps he would have reconsidered his use of Christian metaphor. Nevertheless, an important contrast that continues in our time was made: an apocalyptic Jesus, who is “other” in relation to modernity, is a true Jesus, whereas a non-apocalyptic Jesus is too conveniently modern to be taken seriously. In other words, to use hermeneutical language, a non-apocalyptic Jesus suspiciously “comports” to the “intentionality” of the modern. As Paula Fredriksen exemplifies, this suspicion of convenience is merited because “Such a [modern] Jesus—caring, staunchly egalitarian, antinationalist—is immediately, comfortably relevant to our own concerns.”¹⁷

15. Funk et al., eds., *The Five Gospels*, 5.

16. Schweitzer, *The Quest of the Historical Jesus*, 403.

17. Fredriksen, *Jesus of Nazareth*, 200.

The suspicion of convenience appears as the most popular criticism among biblical scholars who express grave doubts about the Jesus Seminar.¹⁸ Howard Kee made a direct charge, indicating that the Seminar's non-apocalyptic Jesus is ". . . only the late twentieth-century counterpart of earlier scholarly attempts to recreate Jesus in a form more compatible with the current intellectual climate."¹⁹ This same critique of convenience surfaces in the attention of theological and philosophical scholars of religion. While not expressly referring to the Jesus Seminar, philosophers of religion often find it is necessary to regard religion as that factor that breaks into human experience from the outside as the other. Religion is or needs to be "dissimilar" to cultural norms.²⁰ Prayer, as Jacques Derrida once commented, makes theology possible only as the "menace" and "contamination" that first stirs theology.²¹ The sacred is the original "lack" of presence, Mark C. Taylor wrote, ". . . not the *arche* but the *anarche* that re-moves the ground that once seemed so secure."²² These expressions can seem attractive given that they are about post-religion and being beyond religion—and religion in a post-religious world. Yet each assumes a hidden orthodoxy in that religion functions—or again is supposed to function—to alter, to be the difference, the other, the outside, or the thought that stings. Each assumes religion is revelation, the particular that must be peculiar in order to break into life as the inconvenient. The analysis complements an apocalyptic Jesus who likewise is necessarily, or so it seems, inconvenient in order to be other in the contemporary world. Indeed, one might charge that the analysis complements the long history of Christianity with the apocalyptic Jesus as its norm.

Yet the criticism of convenience is not a criticism that lies beyond thought provoking to constitute thinking. It is too easy to dispel the criticism on the same grounds it is made, employing the same methodology by making mirror image contrary points. In fact an apocalyptic Jesus is the Christian norm and has been at least since the time of Irenaeus. It is certain that an apocalyptic Jesus best suits a culture in love with violence and in admiration of war, which fits very many cultures internationally today. An apocalyptic Jesus is not at all "inconvenient" but very much convenient, which many cultural attachés fully know. The apocalyptic Jesus elects governments, stirs revenge, convinces many of the right to bear arms, offers cataclysmic protests against high taxes, and justifies intolerant standards of gender relationships and roles. It is absolutely curious not to notice how normative an apocalyptic Jesus is in both the historic

18. In his 1999 work *The Jesus Seminar and its Critics*, Miller reviews the often acerbic evaluations of the Jesus Seminar by Ben Witherington, Luke Timothy Johnson, Birger Pearson, Howard Kee, Richard Hays, and William Lane Craig.

19. Kee, "A Century of Quests for the Culturally Compatible Jesus," 25.

20. John Riches and Ben Quash, commenting on Hans Urs von Balthasar, "Hans Urs von Balthasar," 136.

21. Derrida, "How to Avoid Speaking," 186.

22. Taylor, *About Religion*, 42–43.

and contemporary political cultures and how fundamentally convenient—if not absolutely orthodox—this version of Jesus is to Christianity as a whole. On the other side of the coin, one can argue how difficult it is to be non-apocalyptic: to practice wisdom, to observe non-violence, and to care for justice. Few can do it, and it has certainly proven “inconvenient” to those who have tried. Since both the apocalyptic (Mark 13) and non-apocalyptic (Good Samaritan parable) Jesus are in the Christian Bible, it is equally the “intentionality” and “comport” of the scholar that opens these two models as authentic. Both Jesuses are opened by the same methodology. Neither portrait of Jesus constitutes “thinking”; both are history, but neither historic.

The Suspicion of Naive Methodology

If the first criticism commonly leveled against the Jesus Seminar is based on the suspicion of convenience, the second one called the suspicion of naiveté is not remarkably different. Naiveté marks the tendency to trust innocently that which is of questionable fidelity or at least that which ought to be regarded with critical rigor. In the case of criticism directed against the Jesus Seminar, the charge of naiveté comes with the accusation that the Seminar did not understand how their critical methodology pre-determined the Jesus that the method opened to the scholar. Accordingly, the Seminar’s Jesus is too much like a member of the Greek school of Cynicism, which presumably Seminar members had naively assumed prior to the review of sayings. Richard A. Horsley may represent this view in his two main criticisms of the Seminar. First, Horsley charges that the seminar collectively was predisposed to valuing countercultural icons. This predisposition, in hermeneutical language, is the manner in which the scholar as *Dasein* (the existing present) “uncovers” the “existent” Jesus within the scholar’s relationship of intentionality. The scholar, in short, uncovers Jesus on the basis of the scholar’s intentional disposition to countercultural value. This basic naiveté is only augmented for Horsley with yet a second effect, which is the manner in which *Dasein’s* intentionality is the project of *Dasein’s* being in the world. In the context of biblical studies, Horsley holds that the Jesus Seminar has projected a contemporary frame of reference upon antiquity to effectively choose a Jesus already fabricated (pre-fabricated) in the scholar’s perception. More recently, William Lyons, when reviewing the Seminar’s vote of black (improbable) on the Simon of Cyrene appearance at Mark 15:21,²³ summarized, “The simple fact is that individual scholars will view Simon as either fact or fiction because of their pre-existing views on the second evangelist, the

23. In the commentary on this scene, the Seminar’s collective opinion was expressed with the conclusion, “Black is the correct color for this piece of Marcan fiction.” Contrary to Simon Peter, Simon of Cyrene does (literally in the narrative) take up the cross and follow Jesus. Funk et al., eds., *The Acts of Jesus*, 154–55.

burgeoning Jesus movement, the cultural possibilities of the ancient world, and because of their choice of historical-critical method."²⁴ Though Lyons reveals no sophisticated use of hermeneutics, his point is consistent with the charge of naiveté. Scholars tend to rely on selected methodology that already favors or comports their act of uncovering according to their situational intentionality.

Against this critique of naiveté, there are two counter points to make. One is to notice the inevitability, that is, circularity, of the criticism. The second is found in the simplicity of the critique that serves more to silence criticism than to engage in the critical task at hand. The situation of inevitability rests in the condition of historicity as human factuality. Human beings cannot read or interpret anything without assuming the fact of being in history: this is the condition of historicity. It is impossible not to employ the horizon of the condition of being, framed in and with the technologies of thinking, in the reading of history. This does not make the reading correct or incorrect; it only describes the condition of the reading act. We can say the condition of the reading act, which is the fundamental condition of intentionality in historicity, is ineluctable. To critique a scholar for being in this condition, and thus to be ineluctably tied to the pre-existent, is to accomplish little more than say that the scholar is an actual human being. It does not make a judgment on the success of the methodology employed or on the suitability of the methodology in comparison to alternatives. In effect, Lyons and the general critique of naiveté employ a stalemate tactic to silence critical thinking.

This introduces the second point, which is that the silencing of criticism does not constitute the act of thinking. The job of a scholar is to reach conclusions, to put the cards on the table, and to encourage the development of the subject of study. The job is not to silence the subject or to turn conclusions into equivocations. It is naturally the case that in scholarship every conclusion is provisional, but scholarship is not possible without conclusions to be debated. The charge of naiveté works to withdraw scholarship from the forum of debate by drawing every claim of research into the circle of historicity where its sheer humanity can be shamed. The suspicion of naiveté is not thinking, but the silencing of thinking. It is the use of the condition of historicity as a trump card to dismiss the act of thinking, which effectively corners the enterprise of scholarship.

The Suspicion of Perniciousness

The most extreme form in which hermeneutics is used to silence critical thinking comes in the form of the suspicion of perniciousness. At several locations in his book *The Jesus Seminar and its Critics*, Robert Miller touches on this point.

24. Lyons, "The Hermeneutics of Fictional Black and Factual Red: The Markan Simon of Cyrene and the Quest for the Historical Jesus," 150.

Miller refers specifically to Luke Timothy Johnson's insistence that the Jesus Seminar has a preconceived "theological agenda."²⁵ In Johnson's case, that agenda includes specific wishes on the part of Seminar members to have their Jesus and their understanding of Christian origins impact and reshape the tradition of Christianity.²⁶ To this charge, Miller responds, "Does Johnson seriously intend this as a criticism?"²⁷ Every scholar, including Johnson, holds an agenda, and it is exactly consciousness of one's agenda that separates scholarly work from uncritical expression. Every scholar engaged in writing is in a context of intentionality, a point of being in the imagining of the present. This awareness is the strength of scholarship, and it is exactly scholarship that denies such awareness that is most "agenda" driven. Yet, Johnson's critique is not merely uncritical; it also charges the Seminar with a pernicious element. By pernicious I mean that the critic views the Seminar's conclusions with suspicion on the basis that the conclusions hold or imply hidden, and in some ways threatening, elements. Since Johnson appears to be among those who refuse to see their own agenda, the pernicious charge leveled by Johnson is due to the threat he sees in the Jesus Seminar against his own agenda. Johnson interprets the Seminar injuriously, and his reaction accordingly is one that seeks to inflict injury in return.

The suspicion of perniciousness lies in the critique of several other commentators on the work of the Jesus Seminar, though I will limit comments here to a few examples. Thomas J. J. Altizer suggests the Jesus Seminar has a typically postmodern nihilistic aim, innocently (yet perniciously) assuming a secular Jesus who addresses the new mass culture of the new mass society. The Seminar is not really a scholarly community, neither one of Religious Studies generally nor of historical research particularly, but in place engages in the repackaging and reselling of Religious Studies.²⁸ Altizer lumps the Jesus Seminar into the

25. Miller, *The Jesus Seminar and its Critics*, 85.

26. Johnson makes these points in his book, *The Real Jesus: The Misguided Quest for the Historical Jesus and the Truth of the Traditional Gospels*. However, I refer specifically here to Johnson, "The Jesus Seminar's Misguided Quest for the Historical Jesus," 16–22.

27. Miller, *The Jesus Seminar and its Critics*, 85.

28. Though Altizer specifically mentions the Jesus Seminar and its portrayal of a secular Jesus, his overall criticism is directed at Religious Studies as a discipline. He is critical of a new mass appeal, or perceived attempt at this, understanding such an appeal as a benign form of nihilism. Altizer does not define what he means by nihilism but relies on his reader's interpretation of that term. The term, though, can mean several things—even in Nietzsche, upon whom Altizer relies. It can mean the technical repetition of the same (this being the "mass appeal" form and its boredom), but it can also be the revolutionary overthrow of stable meanings (such as class structures) based on the revelation of emptiness as a key to human imagination and productivity (this is its Marxist-existential form). Altizer appears to mean the first definition, which accounts for his critique of Religious Studies as nihilism based on mass appeal (and for his critique of the hidden secular agenda of the Jesus Seminar). I draw this reading from Altizer's seemingly sarcastic comments, "Yet if postmodernity is calling forth a new mass culture and a new mass society, it might well be that this alone could make possible a genuine understanding of a truly natural or even truly human religion, one which would be impossible to understand in 'deep' thinking and scholar-

general category of selling out Religious Studies to the mass culture of post-modern society and, consequently, usurping the task of religious scholarship to voice the “other,” that is, the different or peculiar vision of humanity deeply rooted in religion. Altizer practices a hermeneutical suspicion of perniciousness because he voices his concern from a stance set against postmodern culture and sees the Seminar as a benign yet deliberate selling out of religion through mass appeal.

A similar suspicion of perniciousness arises in the comments of A. J. Grant, who contrasts Rudolf Bultmann’s (1884–1976) modern program of demythologizing with Giambattista Vico’s (1668–1774) valuing of myth and finds Bultmann and modern form criticism lacking. Grant reduces modern biblical criticism strictly to Enlightenment rationalism, and in this he attempts to pose form criticism as the overt attempt to value “logos” (reason) both above and prior to “mythos” (story). While, I would argue, misappropriating Derrida, he thinks form criticism is guilty of logocentrism.²⁹ Bultmann’s program consequently diminishes the lasting value of story in an overcompensating rationalism that attempts to “. . . oppose history to myth.”³⁰ This critique carries over to the Jesus Seminar. The Seminar, too (to Grant), misses the value of myth. It misses how myth is the invention of cultural experience portrayed in rhetoric, how, for example, the Gospel of Mark is a “parable-myth” addressing the readers (and ironically juxtaposing the outside reader—who gets it—with the inside disciples of Mark who do not get it).³¹ Missing this, what should be a truly obvious point, the Jesus Seminar is guilty of a technical Enlightenment reading that reduces the story of Jesus, through form criticism, to “a small pile of pieces” (i.e., various parables and aphorisms).³² Finally, Grant not only raises the popular hermeneutical criticism that scholars see in Jesus who they want to see, but also, implying a pernicious interpretation of the Seminar, questions how members of the Seminar could even be so “audacious” as to “attempt to say anything” about the conclusions of form critical scholarship.³³ Grant inadvertently employs censorship not to critique but to silence the Seminar and stigmatize its conclusions.

Yet again, the criticism is not only unfounded but also poorly motivated. In the first place, it is evidently ironic that Grant employs “demythologizing” in order to critique it. After all, he first has to explain to the contemporary reader

ship, a thinking wholly alien from the great body of humanity.” Altizer, “The Challenge of Nihilism,” 1020.

29. Grant, “Vico and Bultmann on Myth: the Problem with Demythologizing,” 72 n. 4.

30. Grant, “Vico and Bultmann on Myth: the Problem with Demythologizing,” 64.

31. Grant, “Vico and Bultmann on Myth: the Problem with Demythologizing,” 70.

32. Grant, “Vico and Bultmann on Myth: the Problem with Demythologizing,” 76, quoting from Johnson, *The Real Jesus: the Misguided Quest for the Historical Jesus and the Truth of the Traditional Gospels*.

33. Grant, “Vico and Bultmann on Myth: the Problem with Demythologizing,” 69.

what Mark's myth is before he can criticize Bultmann's program, an act that upholds exactly Bultmann's point. If we did not have to explain ancient myths to modern people in order for modern people to understand them, then we would not need to demythologize the gospels. Grant has to explain Mark's myth!

Beyond the irony, Grant's accusation that the Seminar constructs a positivist version of Jesus and, in the process, both misunderstands myth and echoes Enlightenment rationalism is simply not true. Neither the Seminar specifically nor biblical scholarship generally has held a rationalist view since the time of David Friedrich Strauss in the early nineteenth century. Strauss already understood that the rationalist characteristic of an earlier generation of historical Jesus researchers, for example Reimarus, was misguided. Understanding the Bible means understanding ancient mythic or world order. It is impossible to employ Hermes, let us say, without some acknowledgement of the differing worldview inhabited by the inquirer and the source. The nineteenth-century breakthrough was exactly that the biblical world operated on the foundation of a different myth. Antiquity had issues fundamentally at odds with modern experience. But what Grant overlooks most egregiously is the inevitability of this difference and the impossibility of canceling it. It is absolutely true that modern science is a "myth" in the sense that, like any other era, it is knowledge structured on basic metaphorical relationships to world experience. Quantum physics deals with things no one can actually experience but things that can be metaphorically presented in mathematical models. Those models can be used to interact with reality as a means to interpret what is observed in a particle accelerator, but that interactivity is based on mythic imagination (i.e., models that structure—*vorzeichen*—the horizon of experience). In place of water structuring the unseen, as Thales long ago proposed, we have particles and waves. Both ways of structuring reality work—or did work, in Thales's case—in their time, but this does not mean that they are equally effective myths. It is misleading for Grant to create a situation where either the ancient myth is wholly accepted (and the sources are read only on this platform) or else the reader is guilty of projecting Enlightenment rationalism onto the source. This reading of perniciousness leaves no ground for subtlety and shows almost no awareness of advances in biblical criticism since the nineteenth century.

In the case of Bultmann it is not that one must displace the mythological worldview of the Bible with modern sensibilities but that one must translate (carry across, meta-phor) the ancient worldview into modern sensibilities. It is a dialogue of worldviews that Bultmann sought to establish. Yet that dialogue is still constituted on a few simple points. One is that modern people do not think like ancient people—we do not structure the world like ancient people, and we do not anticipate the world like ancient people. There is not much we can do about this difference, but certainly, whatever else, there is no point in attempting to reconstitute antiquity in modern times.

When it comes to the historical Jesus, scholars do have to accept the form of myth Jesus lived in as a figure of history and also understand the mythic presentation of Jesus in the gospels. The gospels as mythical forms are anticipations (i.e., worldviews) of the historic meaning of Jesus. But this insight is not opposite to the task of relating the Jesus tradition to the contemporary mythic construct. The theological task in relation to Jesus becomes historic when and if the historical Jesus impacts the contemporary mythical world. It might be said with equal conviction that only a historical Jesus, that is, a human Jesus, is capable of delivering the historic to the contemporary theological world, for this (de-ontologized and de-mythologized) Jesus can inspire the task of thinking theology in our time.

Thinking and the Historic Jesus

The Jesus Seminar was not guilty of a hermeneutics of convenience nor of naive methodology; it did not carry a hidden agenda. To the contrary, the Seminar was aware of these hermeneutical troubles and published this awareness consistently. If there was a shortcoming to the work of the Seminar, it is that beyond the question of the historical Jesus there was reluctance to think of Jesus in historic ways. Some scholars of the Seminar ventured to define such questions,³⁴ but largely the question remained on the horizon. Theologians meanwhile tended to dismiss the question of the historical Jesus based the hermeneutical presuppositions named above.

What is thinking with the Jesus Seminar as opposed to being thought provoking through criticism of the Jesus Seminar? Thinking a question is a philosophical challenge that involves taking a question further, moving it to the next phase, even imagining it in what had been unimaginable ways before the initial question was asked. Since the Jesus Seminar asked the question about the historical Jesus, what was the unimaginable in the question? This is the challenge of thinking.

There are two distinct forms of thinking that come out of the unimagined in the work of Jesus Seminar. One involves "event philosophy," which in postmodern thought has become a significant analytical tool; a second involves the deep question of the future of religion as a human value. The latter question moves religion from its traditional ontological foundation of thinking to a new epistemological foundation that problematizes thinking. The Seminar as a collective did not consider the implications of shifting from ontology, even though

34. In my experience, these scholars included Robert Funk, Dominic Crossan, Marcus Borg, Roy Hoover, Brandon Scott, Hal Taussig, and two philosophical theologians, Don Cupitt and Lloyd Geering.

this is a helpful analysis, nor raise epistemological problems about the historic question of the historical Jesus.

Event philosophy, as I understand it,³⁵ is an epistemologically rather than ontologically based hermeneutic. The ontological basis of hermeneutics involves the priority of being, the presence of reality as the complex relationship of beings, and how being is assumed in the question of being (and before a statement about being can be made). Much of theological history is based on the ontological priority in the question concerning meaning. In classical understanding, life is about finding stability in the movement of being by determining, despite the protest of Heraclitus, a fixed, immovable point. God in the classical sense worked well as this absolute point of nothingness, that is, the point beyond essence and existence or beyond the accidental shifts of *existentia* where both quality and potentiality are transcended in the (or as) *Actus Purus*. Reality in this way of thinking is not an event but rather *energeia* ordered as *logos*, and the question concerns the source of *energeia* and the reliability of *logos*. This can be seen in Aquinas' five ways, which always presuppose a trust in the order of reality to deliver an opening point to the source of reality. The source for Aquinas was gained through revelation, that is, revelation of the priority of Absolute Being that cannot belong to the order of beings but that in the order of beings can be understood as that necessarily pre-given to the question. In modern theology, Paul Tillich expressed the priority of Absolute Being as the Ground of Being necessarily present in the question of being and as the solution to the meaning of (and angst about) being.³⁶

Event philosophy is contrasted with ontological philosophy because it upholds the priority of epistemology as a socio-political event, that is, as the reading of being and, more importantly, the reading of the significance of being. The ontological question concerning meaning is not possible outside of socio-political settings that have already produced the location of the reading and the structure of the question. The setting creates the significance and makes possible the historic in the midst of history. In another way, every reading of ontology is already a "technology," as Michel Foucault provocatively put it.³⁷ He meant that the question of being belongs to the epistemic production of the location from where the question is posed. The question of being is never "non-local," never absolute, never less than the activity of the technology, the technique, that makes it possible and consequently makes it historic. A third way to say this is that every interpretive act, including ontological readings, is an epistemic event. It seems that, after all, the god Hermes does not deliver

35. The "event" analysis offered here is based on my book about Michel Foucault and philosophical theology entitled, *Archives and the Event of God*. Žižek in the recent publication *Event* defines the event as that which "... is a change of the very frame through which we perceive the world and engage in it" (page 10).

36. Tillich, *The Courage To Be*.

37. Foucault, "The Political Technology of Individuals."

messages but codes. Hermes is a messenger involved in the coding of the socio-political reasoning of an ontological order. Hermes is an epistemic event rather than an ontological relay.

In relation to the Jesus Seminar and the historic nature of the historical Jesus, how was Christianity an event? That is to say, how did the epistemic experience of Christianity come to be manufactured in the socio-political power structure of Roman Imperial culture? What was the epistemic reading that early Christianity projected onto Roman Imperial ontology? Members of the Jesus Seminar hinted at an answer when focusing on the parables of Jesus. In many published documents by individual members like Crossan or Scott, the parables of Jesus were conceived as epistemic readings that stood out as transgressive appropriations of the ontological order. Funk also offered this insight in plain language when he concluded that “very few of Jesus’ pronouncements constitute practical advice.” We can translate practical advice as ontological advice, which is advice about how to be in the default world. In place, Funk explained, the sayings of Jesus have to do with something less often considered, and that is “how one is disposed to the things that really matter.”³⁸ Funk’s turn of phrase displaces the question of how to be in the world with how to be “disposed” to the world, which is not the ontological but epistemological question: it is the question about being in the world transgressively rather than simply being in the world—a question about life as event rather than life as being. In parable, one is located in life by means of the story such that the location is changed, transgressed, or “re-imagined” (as Scott wrote).³⁹ To be located transgressively is to be not of the order of things, not of the “ontology” of things; and this “not” is the definition of thinking. The historic question that can emerge from the Jesus Seminar is the question about how to be transgressive in the socio-political power structure of contemporary ontology. How is one an “event” rather than a being, a location rather than a recollection?

In some cases, at the edge of its deliberations, Seminar scholars ask questions that approach the epistemological priority indicated above. In some cases the question about the historical Jesus was about Jesus as an “event” rather than a specific individual. This is evident in the way that uncovering the historical Jesus was finally not about a person but a voiceprint. It was about, in this subtle way, finding an identifiably transgressive location. This does not mean, as some scholars imagine, finding a convivial counter-cultural hero for modern times, but rather about discovering if the historical Jesus is epistemologically identifiable. This same question followed the Seminar into works on Paul and the origins of Christianity. Is Christianity—one might add in its diverse forms—epistemologically identifiable as a transgressive option in the cultural setting

38. Funk, *Honest to Jesus*, 159.

39. Scott, *Re-Imagine the World*.

of the Roman *imperium*? This was the type of question pursued by Crossan in *God and Empire*.⁴⁰ It shifts the question of the historical Jesus and the rise of Christianity from an ontological to epistemological foundation. It potentially re-introduces the historic to the history of religion. But one must add, in the face of this, few theologians were listening and few philosophers of religion cared, whether due to ontologically based hermeneutics getting in the way or to misunderstanding the question as historical rather than historic.

In response to this silence, one might recognize the altered form of questioning and think about the significance of religion as an event rather than an ontological order. It is possible in this spirit to explore religion on two fronts. One is to examine the history of religion as the production of God. This means understanding eras of human history primarily as an epistemological activity that produces an ontological order. While it is indeed imperative to understand the ontological order, that is, the interplay of cultural markers within a society, it is even more fundamental to understand how that order produces events of epistemic dimension. Only in the latter case is religion examined as a human product whose past and future value can be questioned.

This leads to a second claim when imagining the value of religion as an event. If religion is the consequent projecting of the epistemic imagination upon the horizon as ontology, a conclusion that is both the spirit of Feuerbach and the proclamation of Nietzsche, then religion is fundamentally imaginary. It is the great non-existent of human experience that orders experience out of nothing and exerts power both toward and over it. The value of religion rests in the way it is imagined. And this is a liberty of thinking that the Seminar, on many fronts, never knew it was inspiring. The revelation of religion is its emptiness, its no-being, but the emptiness is the reason religion can be re-imagined value. Religion is thinking. It is the transgressive task of re-imagining the question set in the epistemic horizons of the existent who faces an ontological order.

Conclusion

I have attempted to show in this essay that the hermeneutical critique of biblical studies of the type the Jesus Seminar engaged is often unfounded. Common criticisms directed at the Jesus Seminar are basic ones that can be successfully applied to most subjects and most scholars. The criticisms do not constitute thinking about religion but rather express clever analyses easily dispelled.

In contrast to its critics, the Jesus Seminar not only offered a picture of the historical Jesus for debate but also implied a complementary relationship between biblical criticism and hermeneutical philosophy. This relationship may have arisen unintentionally, but it comes to the fore when the question is

40. Crossan, *God and Empire*.

thinking with the Seminar rather than merely critiquing it. Thinking with the Seminar means moving beyond the Seminar and picking up implications that were left as fragmentary notes within the proceedings. Event Philosophy is one way to pick up the fragments and think new questions with its emphasis on epistemology prior to ontology. With this shifted priority, the question concerning religion changes from ontological order to epistemological event.

The change of priority raises the possibility of understanding religion as thinking: a transgressive location that holds its value insofar as its very emptiness creates the possibility of a reimagined horizontal project. Out of the contention between biblical studies and hermeneutics, then, arises the potential of thinking the event of religion as a transgressive value for humanity.

Works Cited

- Altizer, Thomas J. J. "The Challenge of Nihilism." *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 62,4 (1994) 1013–22.
- Bessler, Joseph A. *A Scandalous Jesus*. Salem OR: Polebridge, 2013.
- Caputo, John. *Radical Hermeneutics*. Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1987.
- Crossan, John Dominic. *God and Empire*. New York: HarperCollins, 2007.
- Crossan, John Dominic, and Jonathan L. Reed. *In Search of Paul*. New York: HarperCollins, 2004.
- Cullmann, Oscar. *Christ and Time*. Philadelphia: Westminster, 1964.
- Derrida, Jacques. "How to Avoid Speaking." Pp. 167–90 in *The Postmodern God*. Ed. Graham Ward. Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1997.
- Foucault, Michel. "The Political Technology of Individuals." Pp. 145–62 in *Technologies of the Self*. Amherst MA: University of Massachusetts Press, 1988.
- Fredriksen, Paula. *Jesus of Nazareth*. New York: Vintage Books, 2000.
- Funk, Robert. *Honest to Jesus*. New York: HarperSanFrancisco, 1996.
- Funk, Robert and the Jesus Seminar, eds. *The Acts of Jesus*. New York: HarperSanFrancisco, 1998.
- Funk, Robert, Roy Hoover, and the Jesus Seminar, eds. *The Five Gospels*. New York: Scribner's, 1993.
- Galston, David. *Archives and the Event of God*. Montreal: McGill-Queens, 2011.
- Grant, A. J. "Vico and Bultmann on Myth: the Problem with Demythologizing." *Rhetoric Society Quarterly* 30,4 (2000) 49–82.
- Heidegger, Martin. *Basic Problems of Phenomenology*. Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1988.
- _____. *What is Called Thinking?* New York: Harper and Row, 1968.
- Hoover, Roy, ed. *Profiles of Jesus*. Santa Rosa CA: Polebridge, 2002.
- Johnson, Luke Timothy. "The Jesus Seminar's Misguided Quest for the Historical Jesus." *Christian Century* (January 3–10, 1996) 16–22.

- _____. *The Real Jesus: The Misguided Quest for the Historical Jesus and the Truth of the Traditional Gospels*. San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1996.
- Kee, Howard Clark. "A Century of Quests for the Culturally Compatible Jesus." *Theology Today* 52,1 (1995) 17–28.
- Lyons, William. "The Hermeneutics of Fictional Black and Factual Red: The Markan Simon of Cyrene and the Quest for the Historical Jesus." *Journal for the Study of the Historical Jesus* [serial online] 4,2 (June 2006) 139–54.
- Miller, Robert. *The Jesus Seminar and its Critics*. Santa Rosa CA: Polebridge, 1999.
- Ockham, William. *Summa Totius Logicae*. Pp 653–62 in *Philosophy in the Middle Ages*. Ed. Arthur Hyman and James J. Walsh. Indianapolis: Hackett, 1973.
- Magliola, Robert. Review of *Without Buddha I Could not be a Christian* (Paul F. Knitter). *The Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 78,4 (2010) 1215–18.
- Schweitzer, Albert. *The Quest of the Historical Jesus*. New York: Macmillan, 1969.
- Scott, Bernard B. *Re-Imagine the World*. Santa Rosa CA: Polebridge, 2001.
- Taylor, Mark C. *About Religion*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999.
- Tillich, Paul. *The Courage To Be*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1952.
- Vedder, Ben. "Religion and Hermeneutic Philosophy." *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 51,1 (2002) 39–54.
- Quash, Ben. "Hans Urs von Balthasar." Pp. 106–24 in *The Modern Theologians*. Oxford: Blackwell, 1997.
- Žižek, Slavoj. *Event*. New York: Penguin Books, 2014.

A Short Précis of *The Weakness of God and The Insistence of God*¹

John D. Caputo

I grew up in a culturally Catholic world and was steeped in Greek philosophy and the Catholic middle ages. I deeply admired the brilliant adaptation of Aristotle made by Thomas Aquinas, and I readily embraced Heidegger's phenomenology, which had clearly been touched by the robust realism of Aristotle. Heidegger was what I had been looking for: a critique of modernity that did not leave me stranded in the thirteenth century. As the ice of the Council of Trent thawed under the warming fires of Vatican II, Heidegger dared to criticize modernity, not by going back to something premodern, but by going forward to something new. I admired the breakthroughs made by Husserl—whose "intentionality" echoed with the medieval *esse intentionale*—but not the Neo-Kantian transcendentalism and cognitivism of his phenomenology. The antecedent of phenomenology for Husserl was Descartes; the antecedent of phenomenology for Heidegger was Aristotle. That's the difference. I plunged into Heidegger, at first *Being and Time*, but I became still more fascinated by the later Heidegger's meditation on "*Gelassenheit*," with its echoes of the mysticism of Meister Eckhart, which became the subject of my first book.²

Derrida was the pivot. He reshaped everything for me and planted the seeds of the formula "radical hermeneutics."³ I added the qualification "radical" in order to shield the word from Derrida himself, who dismissed hermeneutics as a kind of code-breaking, a way to find a master key or *legendum*. Real hermeneutics, hermeneutics with teeth, I said, is our task *just because* we lacked the key, *just because* there is no final interpretation, *just because* interpretation never stops. A final interpretation is not an interpretation at all but a dogma. Interpretation goes "all the way down," to the roots. Hermeneutics is constituted in an affirmative way by the absence of a master key, which is not a defect, something

1. The following is an excerpt from the Preface of the English translation of the Spanish edition of John D. Caputo's *Weakness of God*. The Spanish edition is entitled, *La Debilidad de Dios: una teleología de acontecimiento* (trans. Raúl Zegarra; Buenos Aires: Promoteo Libros, 2014).

2. Caputo, *The Mystical Element in Heidegger's Thought*.

3. Caputo, *Radical Hermeneutics: Repetition, Deconstruction and the Hermeneutic Project*.

missing, but the open-endedness that keeps interpretation constantly on the move. The absolute future is always open, always coming, and we cannot see it coming. We must dare to take a risk, to keep the future open. We must dare to hope. Hope is the real audacity. Radical hermeneutics is a hermeneutics of hope.

But all along, no matter what path I have pursued, I did not know how *not* to speak of God. No *epochē* or reduction could keep me safe from God. Beyond any waiting for God or Godot, God was always waiting for me. No surprise that when I discovered Heidegger's later writings my first question was, is this not a kind of mysticism? When I discovered Derrida, what held my attention were his prayers and tears. It seems inevitable—the optical illusion of retrospection—that I would someday write a book on God and theology, a book in which, as Catherine Keller put it on the back cover of *The Weakness of God*, I would “come out of the closet as a theologian.” That implied, quite rightly, that I had been a closet theologian all along. It is unnerving to see one's whole life contracted into a blurb for a book.

The Weakness of Theology

“Weak theology” poses a stumbling block to the philosophers because it takes the name of God seriously and refuses to relegate it to “religion” or some confessional body, even as it poses a scandal to the confessional theologians because it displaces the name of God in favor of something going on *in* this name. While it was Vattimo who first made use of the vocabulary of weakness (*pensiero debole*), I myself had first adopted the word “weak” from Derrida's references to Benjamin's “weak messianic force.”⁴ That in turn drew my attention to St. Paul, for whom the “weakness of God” confounds the strength of the world (1 Cor 1:25). Weak thought is thinking deprived of recourse to an underlying metaphysical support. The deprivation, the *debilitas*, means that the strength of metaphysics has withered and thinking has been left to its own devices—that is, to interpretation. Weak theology is, beyond that, a theology that travels *sans papiers*. It carries no letter from the authorities. It ventures forth to speak of God but without divine warranty, reserving the right to ask any question about what calls itself Reason or Revelation (both capitalized and in the singular).

But then what is left? Nothing—but the experience of life, the interpretation of life/death, of the traces of life and death, like so many lines in the sands of time, that take place in and under the name of God. Weak theology follows the trace of God, of the name (of) “God,” by realizing that it is forced, like the rest of us, to read the signs along the way, to make its way solely by way of its hermeneutic skills, forced to pay its own way with the coin of what insight it

4. Derrida, *Specters of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning, and the New International*, 55.

has to offer. There is no Big Being out there, no Big Book, no Big Institutional Body to back it up. Its force is weak, its voice reduced to the whisper of the persuasiveness of what it has to say. It has no powers of intimidation, no means of retaliation, no powerful institutional apparatus, no police, no army, no central headquarters, no money, no candles, prayer books or incense to enforce its will. Weakness is here a hermeneutic category; it describes the weak force of interpretation. It lays down the sword of the absolutes—the inerrant books and infallible decrees—that confessional theology carries at its side, in favor of peace, of the weak force of what it has to say.

A weak or radical theology has to do with what is going on *in* the strong theologies, the underlying forms of life (Wittgenstein) or modes of being in the world (Heidegger). Weak theology is a hermeneutic of the “events” (Derrida), the promises and desires that stir inchoately within our restless hearts. Strong theologies report back to their confessional communities. Weak theologies report back to anyone willing to listen to stories about life and death, whoever and wherever they are. Because they deal with underlying and more elusive matters, the weak theologies are varied and ambiguous, nascent and underdetermined, excessive and overdetermined, indeterminate, and inarticulate. They claim neither supernal nor supernatural provenance. Forged from below, from the natural and human materials of life in time, deprived of both speculative-metaphysical support and supernatural warranty, the audacity of weak theology is to be, without further pretense, a poetics—a constellation of metaphors and metonymies, of rhetorical tropes and unexpected linguistic turns, of narratives, allegories, and parables, whose cumulative effect is to give words to an underlying form of life.

The Weakness of God

God, the name of God, is the name of an event, of something that happens to us, or rather, of something going on *in* what happens to us, in and under this name. Weak theology proceeds from a double “reduction”—in the phenomenological sense—first, from God, from the name (of) “God,” to an event, to the call of an event, and then from that call to the response. Weak theology means to suspend God in favor of the event, to dare a reduction to reading the traces of the event, to hearing the echoes of the call. The call calls, whether we “believe in God” or not, whether we have even heard this name or not, which implies that this event might surface elsewhere, outside the confines of religion and theology and their “God.”

The event belongs to a purely hermeneutical order. The event is not God. It is not the name of God. The event is what is harbored *in* the name of God, the chain of effects that are set off by the disseminative energy of the name. The “event” (*événement*) is what is coming (*venir*) and coming (*revenir, revenant*), what promises and is promised, what calls and is recalled and is being called

for. The event is the invitation, the solicitation, the provocation, of something coming, something in-breaking or incoming (*l'invention*). The event is the coming of something unforeseeable, unprogrammable, something other (*l'invention de l'autre*), quite other (*tout autre*), which shatters our horizon, our expectation, which takes us by surprise. As such the event belongs not to the future present, the more or less foreseeable and predictable future, but the absolute future, the one we cannot see coming, where all we can say is, let's see what comes (*voir venir*). The event is impossible, not a simple logical contradiction, like a square circle, but *the impossible*, something whose coming shatters the hermeneutic horizon of what we thought was possible, throwing the world into confusion. Nothing guarantees that this gift will not be poison, that the event will not be a disaster. If the event is a promise, it is no less a threat; the promise of new life also threatens us with death, which is why the name of God so often serves as an alibi for murder. When it comes to the coming of the event, nothing guarantees a happy outcome.

When I speak of the possibility of *the impossible* ("with God all things are possible") we must proceed with caution, remembering that this is hermeneutics, not metaphysics. I am not saying, and this is a misunderstanding I want to cut off, that the name of God is the name of a being who does impossible things. I am not even saying that it is the name of a being who calls. God is not an agent-being who does, or refrains from doing, certain things for which God is praised or blamed. The call is not the doings of a being; it lies in what is being-called in the middle voice; the call is called *in* the name of God. So *the impossible* is a possibility that gets itself called in and under this name, an invitation to do the impossible, like a faith that moves mountains. But as Heidegger shows, it is constitutive of the call in a positive way that we are unable to establish the ontic identity of the caller, if there is one.⁵ So there is a cascading chain of audacity here: the name of God is not the name of a being, even of the highest or first being (*ens supremum, primum ens*), who does impossible things. It is not the name of the Being or ground of beings, as in Hegel and Tillich, which is just more metaphysical, post-theistic panentheistic theology. Nor is it the name of the being beyond or without being (*hyperousios*) of mystical theology, behind which one usually finds Neoplatonic (hyperousiological) metaphysics. The audacity of God is this: God does not exist—as a being, as the being of beings, as a hyperbeing—God insists. That is the formulation of *The Insistence of God*, which is a sequel to *The Weakness of God*. God has the audacity to not exist, to be content with a call, or rather, with something that gets itself called in and under the name of God, insinuating itself into the sinews of factual life. God has the audacity to leave the existence and the strength to us. That event

5. Heidegger, *Sein und Zeit*, §57; Derrida, *Given Time*, I: *Counterfeit Money*, 6.

is what is going on *in* (Deleuze) the name of God, what is being promised and mourned (Derrida) by it. In *The Weakness of God* the existence of any such being, or Being of beings, or hyperbeing, called God is put out of play. So when I say that the name of God is the name of the possibility of the impossible, I have in mind an entirely hermeneutical matter, where the possibility of *the* impossible means the event that shatters the horizon of expectation, where existence is our responsibility.

Weak theology is a hands-off hermeneutics that keeps its hands out of the pockets of metaphysics in order to understand, to stand under, the event. Having purely hermeneutic force, not entitative power, the name of God lacks the boom and bombast of a supreme and omnipotent entity that can draw (other) entities out of nothing, intimidate poor Job, issue divine commands from on high, all the while reigning sovereignly above and outside that order. An event, its voice ever soft and low, can always be prevented, refused or repressed, ignored or distorted, and all this with impunity. The call does not keep an army at its beck and call. It is a force without force, a force that cannot be enforced.

Radical Christianity

The Weakness of God is focused on the hermeneutics of the kingdom of God whose coming is announced in the preaching of Jesus, and here more often than not I am following the lead of Dom Crossan and the Jesus Seminar. Weak theology makes no attempt to conceal its debt to the NT. The unabashedly confessional turn taken in this book—my weak theology proposes a radical Christianity—does not contradict what I am saying about the distance between a weak (or radical) theology of the event and a strong confessional theology; it illustrates what I mean. My idea in the book—and this is a point I fear I have failed to make clear—is not to start another war, this one between strong theologies and weak, and to put the two in strict binary opposition. On the contrary, the first thing we must do in deconstruction after making a distinction like this is to deconstruct it, to show that the distinction is porous, that the borders cannot be policed, that there are all kinds of contaminating contacts. Radical theology is not some kind of pure ahistorical undertaking, and events are not essences that are empirically embodied in the confessional theologies. No theology, no thinking, weak or strong, drops out of the sky. Every radical theology has an historical genealogy, a materiality, a family tree, a pedigree, a debt to one confessional tradition or another, in accord with the demands of a hermeneutics of factual life. Here, as everywhere, the strength of a distinction made in deconstruction is found precisely in its weak points, the points of intersection between its two terms.

Accordingly, a radical theology is the becoming-radical of confessional theology, a way of radicalizing a particular theological tradition, the very one(s) we

inherited, in which we find ourselves always and already. A radical theology whispers radical thoughts in the ears of the confessional traditions, haunting them, giving them no rest. It does not exist; it insists. It does not exist in itself and it cannot take place in an historical vacuum. It is not pure reason but a pure parasite. It is parasitic on the inherited confessional theologies, where the parasitic function is, like many parasites, salutary, necessary for the health of the organism: it releases the event that a concrete confessional theology contains (possesses) without being able to contain (limit), like a "container of the uncontainable" (ἡ Χώρα του Αχώρητου). A radical theology discloses the event the confessional theology encloses, that it "harbors," which means both to conceal and to protect. It lets the event burn through the confessional theology and make itself felt. This is risky business, which is why confessional theologians time and again incur the wrath of the confessional institutions. When they break through to the event, or the event breaks out in them, either way, this breakthrough—their audacity—is viewed with alarm by the confessional powers that be, for whom the inbreaking event is uncanny and unorthodox, heterodox and heretical. Heretics and mystics are thus important resources for radical theology, heroes of audacity, its patron saints and sometimes, alas, even martyrs. In the past such audacity could cost the heterodox their lives; nowadays it can cost them their livelihoods.

The event harbored in the Christian tradition(s) is the kingdom of God. The kingdom is what is to come; it has already begun to come in the life and death of Jesus. The entire vocabulary of "come" (*viens*) and "to come" (*à venir*) in deconstruction bears the mark of Jewish and Christian messianism. In weak theology the parables about the kingdom of God that Jesus tells, the parable that Jesus himself *is*, is the paradigm. Antiquity is rife with stories of men born of a woman but fathered by a god, but unlike these god/men Jesus does not slay his enemies and emerge triumphant. He is publically executed and his disciples scatter and deny knowing him. He goes to his death without resistance, but not without the agony of the garden, and most importantly not without forgiving his executioners. When faced with an enemy, he responds with love; when faced with an offense, with forgiveness. The kingdom of God he proclaims is focused on the poor and imprisoned, on the lost coin, the lost sheep, the lost son, on the outsider and the outcast, the least among us. When God "rules" in this kingdom, the rule is ironic, unruly, unroyal: the last are first, the insiders are out and the outsiders are in, a topsy-turvy world that makes no sense in the eyes of the world. The first chapter of 1 Corinthians perfectly condenses the kingdom of God that Jesus announced. It is a kingdom of those who are not wise or well born by the world's standards, in which God has chosen the foolish to make manifest his wisdom and weakness to make manifest his rule.

However audacious it might sound to the orthodox, the "weakness of God" is thus not a phrase I coined but a direct citation of Paul (1 Cor 1:25). The ex-

pression is explosive, revolutionary, subversive—in short, the height of audacity. *The Weakness of God* is the systematic and radical pursuit of Paul's point, a hermeneutics of weakness, but (and this is my audacity), *without* compromising it the way I maintain that Paul does in the second chapter of 1 Corinthians. Paul makes it clear that for all his talk of weakness, he has something up his sleeve. His intention is not simply to greet the power of the world with the weakness of God but to trump the power of the world with the greater long-term *apocalyptic power* of God (2:5–6), which triumphs over Satan and his minions, making God's enemies his footstools. The power of the cross for Paul will eventually crush the power of the Romans who crucified Jesus. An infinite retaliation, the torments of hell, awaits them. What looks like weakness to the world is really power, true power. At that point, as so often happens in what we call Christianity, the voice of Paul has taken over and the voice of Jesus, who forgives his enemies, breaks off.

In weak theology, on the other hand, the idea is to follow the weakness of God all the way down. "Christianity" means those who answer the call (*ekklēsia*) to take Jesus as "the icon of the invisible God" (Col 1:15). Everything that Christians believe about God must pass through the prism of Jesus, who images God for them. But Jesus is a figure of the weakness of God—of forgiveness, not retaliation; of peace, not war; of preferring the poor, not the wealthy; of lambs among wolves, etc. But if Jesus, then also God—that is the Christian premise. Weakness all the way down to the root radically—that is radical Christianity. If Jesus is the icon, then the mark of God is not omnipotence, not triumphant power, but persecution; not retaliation, but forgiveness. If the kingdom of God is rejected, scorned or even attacked, that is not to be answered by the sword, and if the "church" at times has taken up the sword, that is proof that the church is not to be confused with the kingdom of God.

Once again, we must not pit weakness in binary opposition to strength, as if strength in any sense, in any context, is always something to be avoided. As this same Paul famously said, when I am weak, then I am strong (2 Cor 12:10). Once again, this is a point that is perhaps not made sufficiently clear in *The Weakness of God*. The kingdom is about the "weak force" of forgiveness, about the "powerless power" of non-violence, about living like the lilies of the field. It is a force, a true force, but it is weak or non-violent force. It is a power, a true power, but a powerless power, not power as the world knows power, not retaliatory power in this life or the next. Above all, it is not, as it is for Paul, a short term disadvantage with a long-term advantage, a "secret" (1 Cor 2:7) unknown to the unsuspecting that takes them unawares. It is rather the powerless power of forgiveness *as such*, of pure forgiveness, no matter what the cost, even if the powers and principalities would prevail. Forgiveness is a gift given without the expectation of return, whether it is a good strategy or a foolish one, especially if it is a foolish one. The weak force of the kingdom of God, then, is the force of

a *claim* that is made upon us *unconditionally but without power*, which rises up in a kind of splendor over the powers of the world—like the kiss that Jesus gives the Lord Cardinal Grand Inquisitor in *The Brothers Karamazov* that completely disarms this powerful man; or like the powerless power of a man who forgives his executioners.

The audacity is to say “come” to a kingdom *without* trying to back up the kingdom with the existence of a super-being, a God-being, a Big Being, to command or enforce it. The audacity is to call for a kingdom *without* a “heavenman” (James Joyce), an eternal *logos* come down from eternity to light the way for a humankind lost in the dark (Gospel of John); *without* turning the kingdom into an economy, *without* making his death into the price the heavenman had to pay his heavenly father in order to redeem us from sin. The weakness of God is not a world-historical, table-turning divine triumph that crushes the enemies of God.

The Insistence of God

I have been criticized for lacking a doctrine of the Trinity in *The Weakness of God*. That is a lack, I would say, I share with Jesus of Nazareth, and it arises from keeping my eye on what Jesus said and did, not on what they said and did at the Council of Nicaea. Since I see my weak theology as a kind of heretical Hegelianism—where the event does service for what Hegel called the Absolute Spirit—I can now see my way clear to an eccentric Trinitarianism.

The Trinity traces the movement of the double reduction, the movement from insistence to existence.

1. The name of the Father is the name of a call, of the insistence of a call that calls for a response. The Father does not exist; the Father insists as the in-existent event that calls for existence.

2. But that call cannot be heard, that insistence cannot be felt, the event cannot eventuate, without a mediator. By calling for the coming of the kingdom, the mediator contracts or concentrates the event into a particular form and figure. In the mediator, an *icon* is put forth (*vor-stellen*) as a figurative form of the event, a salient, striking, arresting image. This image forms the centerpiece of a *poetics*. The mediator is a particular individual who steps forth and announces the event, who says in uncompromising terms that he has been sent to announce the year of the jubilee (Luke 4:18–19), that the kingdom of God is coming and has already begun. In this individual, the call achieves its first mundane reality, and for having the audacity to be the incarnation of the event (not of an eternal *logos*) he is repaid with death, which destroys his particular empirical existence—but not the event.

3. The event cannot be deconstructed. The de(con)struction of *the* impossible is impossible. Murder cannot reach as far as the event, as far as the face (Levinas) of the mediator. As every martyrdom shows, murder has access to the

empirical individual but not to the event. In that sense, the event, though too weak to defend itself, is stronger than death. The disciples of the mediator agree that the event that took place in the mediator is to be sought among the living, not the dead. Under the impact of this event, they reconvene (*con-venire*) and they reinvent his life. So the event lives on in the lives of the community; the event survives (*sur-vivre*) in the dangerous memory of the martyred mediator. The event continues to insist, to call and solicit, and so begins to be converted into existence in the community. The ones who are called by the call (*ekklēsia*), who answer the call in words and deeds, in spirit and in truth, fill up what is lacking in his dead body, which lives on in their bodies. These bodies are the people of God, God's entrance into the world, God's existence. They materialize the spirit that the mediator left them when he left the world, the spirit in which insistence achieves existence.

This Trinitarian spirit in a weak theology is neither a subsistent triadic process going on in eternity (Augustine and Aquinas) nor a metaphysical process in the being of the Absolute (Hegel). The Trinity describes the dynamics of the event, of the passage from the insistence of the event into existence, of the double reduction, first from the name to the event and then from the event into a response, and it takes place in space and time.

In *The Insistence of God* I redescribe the weak force of the event as a kind of irreducible, ineluctable insistence that insists on existing, where the weakness of God depends upon us to give God strength. As I said above, the critique of power and the defense of weakness cannot be conducted as if these words meant only one thing, as if there is no context in which power is something to be affirmed and weakness something to be avoided. The weakness of God translates into the strength of our resolve to fill up what is missing in the body of God. The name of God is the name of a promise that it is up to us to keep. The truth of God is something we must make come true (*facere veritatem*). That is the significance of the "perhaps," the *peut-être*, where the "might" of God Almighty in the theology of omnipotence is transformed into the "might be" of a weak theology, the "perhaps" of the event, which is the possibility of the impossible and demands a show of strength on our part. The two titles, *The Weakness of God: A Theology of the Event* and *The Insistence of God: A Theology of Perhaps*, are intentionally symmetrical and ultimately synonymous.

I was not content to repeat myself here but to break new ground on several fronts. I claim in the tradition of Tillich that God does not "exist," not as individual entity, but instead God "insists," that is, the name of God is the name of a "call" that summons us beyond ourselves. But with that I want to push past Tillich by claiming that God is not only not an existent being but also that God is not the "ground of beings" or Being itself (or a mystical *hyperousios*). In a sense I am proposing a new "divine name," that the name of God is the name of "perhaps," not in the sense of something indecisive but in the sense of what

pushes us beyond the possible to the hitherto unimaginable. "Perhaps," I say, is not a "sleepy indifference" but "a steely, indefatigable, resolute openness to what seems to have been closed off," to an unforeseeable future.

I also engage in a detailed dialogue with and critique of two leading theorists of the day, Catherine Malabou and Slavoj Žižek, both of whom have resuscitated in their own way a new version of the "death of God" theology that descends from Hegel. I try to fashion a view that is neither confessional theology nor militantly atheistic, but belongs to what I call a radical theology, or what Derrida would call a religion without religion.

The book also pushes continental philosophy of religion beyond its old boundaries by entering into dialogue with what is variously called the "new materialism," or the "new realism," or "speculative realism," centered around the work of Quentin Meillassoux, a student of Alain Badiou, for whom St. Paul is a central figure of a militant revolutionary subject. Meillassoux spearheads a new generation of French and Anglo-phone philosophers who charge continental philosophy with subjectivism and call for a new realism, respectful of the mathematical sciences. Surprisingly, I actually agree with much of this criticism, and in the final section of the book I make use of the work of Bruno Latour to re-situate this "theopoetics" within a "cosmo-poetics." The result is not a cosmic nihilism, what Nietzsche called the "cosmic stupidity" (the stars don't know we're here) but what I call the "nihilism of grace," not the cosmic stupidity but the cosmic luck or grace of life, which intensifies the unique value of life instead of undermining it.

In speaking of insistence and existence, I am saying that we are not done yet. We have not fed the hungry nor released the imprisoned. This is not the year of the jubilee, maybe next year, but not yet. The event is like a messiah who never shows up, for whom we pray and weep. This structure of expectation is not a temporary condition but a temporal one, the very condition of temporality, of living in time. Weak theology is the affirmation that the future is always worth more, not because it is but because that is what it hopes for; that is its faith, its love. Hope is driven by the impossible. *By* the impossible everything begins.⁶ Hope dares affirm the fortuitousness of the perhaps, the vitality of the promise, the possibility of the impossible. The event that insists in the name of God is perfectly described by Levinas as the *beau risque*, the beautiful but dangerous risk of life, one in which God's fingers are crossed. In a theology of the event, things are neither steered mightily unto good by an invisible wisdom nor hollowed out at their center. Things are just unstable, risky, betokening neither an absolute plenum nor an absolute void but containing a promise that is also a threat, a "perhaps" that is not indecisive but audacious, that dares perhaps to hope. Things are astir with the undecidable fluctuations of the promise and the risk of perhaps. The fundamental category in weak theology is not loss but life, and the fundamental character of life is hope, the exhilaration of the promise/

threat, of a hope against hope. Dare to think (*sapere aude*), to be sure, but the motto of the *new* Enlightenment is dare to hope (*sperare aude*). The audacity of weak theology is the audacity of hope, and the audacity of hope is the audacity of God.

Works Cited

- Caputo, John D. *Radical Hermeneutics: Repetition, Deconstruction and the Hermeneutic Project*. Bloomington IN: Indiana University Press, 1987.
- _____. *The Mystical Element in Heidegger's Thought*. Rev ed. Athens OH: Ohio University Press, 1978. New York: Fordham University Press, 1986.
- Derrida, Jacques. *Given Time, I: Counterfeit Money*. Trans. Peggy Kamuf. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991.
- _____. *Specters of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning, and the New International*. Trans. Peggy Kamuf. New York: Routledge, 1994.
- Heidegger, Martin. *Sein und Zeit*. 15th ed. Tübingen: Niemeyer, 1979.

Moving Words

Theology and the Performance of Proposing

Joseph Bessler

Thinking in the Wake of the Death of God

The edge of Paul Tillich's comment that "the proper response" to any claim of God as an object "is atheism" still cuts deeply into the embedded assumptions of most people who say they believe in God.¹ While located explicitly in his 1959 collection of essays, *Theology of Culture*, the view is consistent with the body of his three-volume work in *Systematic Theology*. To read Tillich carefully across the span of his career is to realize that he was attempting to expand both the audience and reach of theology. Unlike Karl Barth, who sought in the face of World War I to draw theology back from public discourse and to protect it from the gross failures of modernity as seemed evident in World War I, Tillich argued that theology needed to be engaged more deeply with the world.

Invited to address conferences on depth psychology and philosophy, gracing the cover of *Time* magazine, and footnoted in U. S. Supreme Court rulings, Tillich's existential theology involved an expansion of theology's conversation partners to the voices, theistic and not, of major humanistic philosophers, artists, and literary critics. That expansion is most clearly evident in the way he spelled out his view of theology as a correlation of question and answer. It is important, said Tillich, that one attend not only to the substance of a question that is put to theology, but to its form (e.g., as an existential question of meaning). And that when answering the question, the theologian must answer in the form of the question. This basic methodological move helped open theology to the world. Arguing that atheists were often rejecting forms of theism, which in fact needed to be criticized as merely mythological (and one sees here his lively connection with Bultmann), Tillich sought to demythologize theology by retrieving for Protestantism the philosophical tradition of Christian theology. To dramatize the newness and transformation of that classical model, however, Tillich stood the model on its head. While virtually all classical theology,

1. Tillich, *Theology of Culture*, 25.

informed by Platonism, viewed the journey to God as an ascent to the upper reaches of reality beyond the clouds and stars, Tillich argued that God is the “depth dimension.”²

Nonetheless, Tillich’s emphasis on Being, or the Ground of Being, or what in *Systematic Theology* he called “being itself,” retained a metaphorical preference for stability. Insofar as Being holds everything—that is, insofar as everything participates in Being—then Tillich still privileged the stability and the preference for traditions that seem to follow from it. That Being continues to represent stability indicates how deeply the philosophy and theology of the West remained captive to the metaphysics of the unchanging, of stability, of what Derrida would call “presence.” And so, Tillich’s provocative comment—which was not all that provocative to specialists—helped raise the question of the Death of God in a yet more profound way.

My teachers at the University of Chicago, David Tracy and Langdon Gilkey, were both deeply influenced by Tillich, and both were deeply involved in discussions surrounding the Death of God.³ Both in their own way spoke of theology’s new, post-Tillichian experience of increasing alienation from public, secular life. Gilkey’s own remarkable formulation of theology’s bewilderment at its new situation deserves repeating here:

No more than five years ago the “younger theologians” seemed to have a comfortable basis of their task, fashioned by the great theologians of the 20s, 30s and 40s. . . . We saw ourselves as a generation of “scholastics” whose function would be to work out in greater detail the firm theological principles already forged for us. We knew from our teachers what theology was, what its principles and starting point were, how to go about it, and above all we were confident about its universal value and truth.

The most significant recent theological development has been the steady dissolution of all these certainties, the washing away of the firm ground on which our generation believed we were safely standing. What we thought was solid earth has turned out to be shifting ice—and in recent years, as the weather has grown steadily warmer, some of us have in horror found ourselves staring down into rushing depths of dark water.⁴

And Tracy, in his opening chapter of *Blessed Rage for Order* (1975), could write: “What seems needed is a new look at the possibilities of a revisionist theology which will be appropriate to the central meanings of the secular faith we share and to the central meanings represented in the Christian tradition.”⁵ For

2. Notice the openness here to the philosophical project of Martin Heidegger, which one will also hear in the transformative work of Karl Rahner on the Catholic side.

3. It was Gilkey who helped name what was emerging as the “Death of God” theology and who encouraged several of the seminal thinkers to be in closer touch with one another.

4. Gilkey, *Naming the Whirlwind: The Renewal of God-Language*, 8–9.

5. Tracy, *Blessed Rage for Order: The New Pluralism in Theology*, 14.

his part, Charles Winquist, in the final chapter of his book *Epiphanies of Darkness: Deconstruction in Theology* (1986), drew attention to the collapsing confidence in the public character of theology on the part of both Tracy and Gilkey, even as each was committed to theology as a public task.⁶

I wrote my dissertation on Gilkey and his longing for a more empirical theology—one that paid attention to what he called the *felt dimensions* of human experience as it opened up the space or dimension of the theological. He was not speaking of proofs for the existence of God, but he was looking for a domain of human experience that would be appropriate for illuminating the meaning of God language. Like Tillich, Gilkey himself was drawn to “depth” metaphors; he envisioned human experience as a layered phenomenon, including dimensions of the aesthetic, the moral, the political, and the theological. I loved Gilkey’s desire to tie the theological to ordinary experience, even as I kept discovering Gilkey’s fingerprints, as it were, on the shaping of the religious experience he was describing. What Gilkey argued he was *finding* in experience, looked increasingly to me like he was putting it there.

It was Tracy’s rethinking of Tillich’s model of theology as correlation, however, that proved more influential for the discipline. Tracy argued that Tillich’s correlational model of question and answer should be re-imagined: correlation as conversation. And to explore the significance of that shift he turned to Hans Georg Gadamer’s (student of Heidegger) analogy of understanding as playing a game—that you give yourself to the “to and fro” of the game so that the game plays you.⁷ In a way analogous to the activity of playing a game, then, Tracy argued that correlational theology should be understood as a conversation in which we allow the *to and fro* of the conversation to play us. Insofar as the goal of theology is greater understanding, this hermeneutical model calls for everyone’s voices to be honored, while also encouraging all voices to listen well and carefully to others. In truth, there is something of the mystical in Tracy’s appropriation of Gadamer’s game analogy; the giving of oneself to the game—to be played, as it were—suggests a kind of apophatic norm to hermeneutics.

What the irenic Tracy had been reluctant to acknowledge, however, is that part of the enjoyment in playing a game is playing to win. People bring strategies to games—strategies they learn over time—that function as a kind of point of view when approaching the game, or the game of interpretation. Such strategies of engagement underscore the importance of *players* playing the game and, thus by analogy, of constructing—and not just receiving—their interpretations.

6. Winquist turns to Victor Turney’s analysis of liminality to locate the discourse of theology in the ensuing period, from which we have not yet emerged. Winquist encourages theologians to embrace the marginality of this liminal period, using the discourse of deconstruction as a way of entering more deeply into the rupture that has occurred not only between theology and its external publics, but within theology itself.

7. See Tracy, “Theological Method,” 41.

Tracy had thus been somewhat reluctant to acknowledge the role of argument in theology. In several places, for example, he allowed the point that argument may be needed to interrupt a conversation in order to work out particular problems or issues, but he would not acknowledge the rhetorical, persuasive dimension of theology itself.⁸ It is as if Tracy did not recognize that this own works were attempting to persuade others about the nature of the discipline of theology, and that he was very good at it!

Tracy's model of theology as conversation and as hermeneutics echoes—in a slightly less obvious way—Tillich's focus on the stability of being. Because hermeneutics is the study of interpretation, it acknowledges that tradition provides relative stability for this approach to theology. Tracy wrote of interpreting the *classics* of the tradition—a term that has surfaced in a number of criticisms of Tracy's work, insofar as "classics" tends to refer to a predominantly Western, white, male tradition of authorship and authority.

Thus, Tillich and Tracy and Gilkey's commitments to public theology retained a commitment to a model of God tied conceptually to the language of stability, of sovereignty, to what Derrida would call "presence." And that commitment to the logical consequences of stability, of tradition, of sovereignty, of conversational presence, and so on, functionally sought to hold on to a model of God that was no longer intellectually persuasive.

My own interest in theology as a rhetorical discipline comes in part from my eventual critique of Tracy's own avoidance of rhetoric.⁹ But my interest in rhetoric was encouraged earlier, during my studies as an undergraduate at Northwestern University and its School of Speech, where in its department of Communication Studies I encountered the discipline of rhetorical studies. Thomas Farrell's work on rhetoric and rhetorical theory helped me imagine the continuing work of theology in what I take to be a more postmodern direction.¹⁰ Contrary to our frequently held assumptions that "rhetoric" means empty ornamentation, Farrell demonstrates that rhetoric is a public discipline about questions and issues that are uncertain, but that yet require an audience capable of rendering judgment.

By adopting a more rhetorical footing for theology, I understand it as a discipline that does not issue from a stable, secure ground, but from the midst of uncertainty and instability. Yes, theology, like all disciplines, has been shaped within the flow of histories, cultures, and understandings of reality. And the theologian is always operating in two overlapping, but distinct, domains. Insofar as the theologian is involved in the scholarly analysis and critique of the ongoing life of the discipline of theology, one is engaged in a kind of rhetorical

8. See Tracy, *Dialogue with the Other*.

9. Again see Tracy's book, *Dialogue with the Other*.

10. Farrell, *Norms of Rhetorical Culture*. See especially chapter six, "Rhetorical Coherence: Refiguring the Episodes of Public Life," in which he contrasts "conversation" and "rhetoric."

criticism. Insofar, however, as the theologian is offering a proposal for how to understand not only the discipline but also the theological as such, then one is engaged in the poetic work of engagement, seeking to provoke, confront, and cajole whoever will listen with a proposal for practicing life together. Because the proposals of theology—not just constructive/systematic theology, but also works of fundamental/philosophical theology—are always rhetorical in character, they emerge not only in the midst of rich historically, politically, and socially configured contexts but also, and inevitably, as partial constructions—both in the sense of being fragmentary and in the sense of leveraging interests. I am therefore very grateful for the work of Jacques Derrida, and to other philosophers such as Michel Foucault, Jean Luc Nancy, and theological interpreters such as Mark L. Taylor, Jack Caputo, and Catherine Keller, who help us imagine the work of philosophy and fundamental theology in the midst of instability.

Spotting the Theological in the Political

I turn now to a relatively brief reflection directly related to a broader book-length project on which I am currently working, tentatively titled *Moving Words: Theology and the Art of the Political*. In it I will argue that works of theology are rhetorical, constructive proposals, moving words to orient life within and beyond communities of religious affiliation. In this project I argue that theological speech is more similar to political speech than to scientific speech. Theology is less concerned with the rational inquiry of nature than it is with forming communities and establishing, maintaining, and re-creating a life-giving *polis*. This is not to say that theology should not be interested in science or in contemporary philosophy, for by engaging these disciplines theology maintains its claim to wisdom, which is to say a discourse that is not merely popular or conventional but one that strives to encourage an ethic of public conversation and engagement at a serious level. Great theology, in my view, encourages that public engagement with science and philosophy because of its vision *for the polis*, for the kind of dynamic exchange that keeps a community growing, off center, creatively unstable, and perhaps impossibly open to the impossible—akin to what Derrida has suggested.¹¹

In my book project, I begin by using contemporary acceptance speeches, delivered by political candidates at their party's nominating conventions to show how the flow and coherence of their speeches move through five topics similar to those named by Christian theology—the goodness of persons created in the image of God, the flawed and estranged character of human beings from our capacity and promise, the core proposal for a new beginning grounded in the transformative presence and activity of Jesus the Christ, the emergence of a new

11. See, Derrida's essay, "Justices."

and growing community that embodies the presence and transformative practice of that Jesus in compelling and inviting ways, and a vision of future well-being not simply for one's own community but for the healing of the world.

Bill Clinton's 1992 Democratic Convention address, for example, begins by affirming the American Dream, interpreting that phrase in part through the language of an "expanding middle class," and affirming his own participation in that experience and dream. He then in a second move begins to call into question the leadership of then President Bush, and here one sees Clinton turning to the language of America's status "falling" in the world, and of Bush himself caught in "failed" policies. These apparent slides announce a deeper problem, that Bush was himself out of touch with the aspirations of the middle class.

On cue, Clinton then turns to the third move, announcing that what is needed is a "New Covenant" between Americans and their leaders, a covenant that will enhance the interests of a thriving middle class even as it asks and demands new things of us. Much of the center of the speech explores the dynamics of his proposal, and as he concludes that portion, he then in a fourth move launches into the kind of community that America can yet build if we will join with him. In this new community there will be a new/old ethos to this community—one that respects all others and does not play the "them" game—"them the gays, them the minorities, them the liberals," because, says Clinton, "this is America, one nation under God, indivisible with liberty and justice for all."

In his fifth and final move, Clinton, having already noted that President Bush had "mocked" what Bush called "the vision thing" of the Clinton campaign, turns to a vision of the future. He concludes his address by inviting his audience to imagine the future of the nation by imagining the future of his daughter, Chelsea—and of all our sons and daughters—and the responsibility we owe them to build a strong and vigorous nation.

While at one level the speech plays out very conventional themes—and alludes, however consciously or unconsciously, to the topics of a Christian theology—the speech also offers a proposal, a vision, for how the community should both see itself and see its relation to the world. Clinton cannot make the American people choose, much less internalize, this proposal, but he has to make it in ways that are both strategic and poetic. While it is commonly said that candidates campaign in poetry but govern in prose, it is important to remember that the promises a candidate makes in poetry will be remembered when that candidate is governing in prose. In other words, the poetry must already risk its real convictions or be damned by a future court as having been merely manipulative.

My point in suggesting this parallel is *not* to endorse any political dogma of "American exceptionalism" nor to show the dependence of political speech on the religious or theological in a way that would demonstrate the transcendent status of theology. Instead, my point is to make evident that every theologian's coherent interpretation/construction of the major topics of theology is *rhetorical*

in character, that it makes a proposal, inviting a variety of audiences, including audiences it may not be aware of—for that is the way of discourse—to imagine ways of being together, ways of engaging others.¹² And like the political, to which I am aligning/comparing theology, the proposals of theological discourse aim to influence the direction and orientation of communities that will listen to it. And that play of discourse, not unlike the political itself, can be fairly contentious.

The reason that theological proposals differ is because they are constructing the coherence of these topics in strategic ways to leverage different concerns, (e.g., concerns about the nature of correct, orthodox belief, or the existential meaning of faith, or concerns about equality of persons—and thus about justice—or even for the earth itself perhaps, or the need to speak of the end of God-Talk, and so on). They differ, therefore, in their intentionality and in the discourses to which they are disposed to listen. In the wake of this last generation's explosion of theological voices, I confess to being somewhat amused and annoyed by the idea, voiced by some, that it makes no difference whether one is a liberal Christian, for example, because one is *only* giving intellectual cover to far-right conservative Christians. Such a claim is analogous to saying that it makes no difference to be politically progressive in the U.S. or France or Malaysia or China, because you are thereby *only* giving intellectual credibility to far-right parties within that national political system.¹³

More importantly, what I also want my analogy to illuminate is that the topics of theology, as such, are not *sui generis*, *not* unique; they do not name a fixed or even relatively bounded, and therefore closed, set of understandings, as many orthodox and postliberal theologians would like. Rather, these topics, especially when engaged together (implicitly or explicitly), enact a coherent structure for *proposing* models and orientations for the purpose of showing a possible way into making a common/uncommon future. At stake in these public proposals is not only the always dangerous terrain of communal identity formation, but also the way in which the boundaries of a community are engaged, for example, guardedly, openly. To borrow a phrase from Jack Caputo that we will explore a bit later, the Christian names of these topics cannot control or contain the event of proposal “sheltered” within them. Yet, understood as a discourse akin to the political, theologies risk proposals that invite others to take them seriously.

12. And by offering fairly conventional Christian understandings of those topics above, I in no way mean to narrow or limit the range of possible interpretations of those topics. Contemporary works of liberationist, political, feminist, and various post-modern theologies, including works by Westar friends such as Don Cupitt, exhibit the marks of these topics precisely because these works, however different, are offering proposals for our attention and possible commitment

13. See Harris, *The End of Faith*.

Once one begins to see the topics of theology as enacting a proposal that performs the processes of both identity-formation and boundary engagement, while shaping as well an understanding of the milieu in which these processes have import, then one begins to realize not only why there are such differences in contemporary theology, but why orthodox and more mainstream theologies through much of the twentieth century have explicitly avoided the language of rhetoric with respect to theology. They did not want to acknowledge in any way that theology might be “grounded” on anything other than fixed truth; they did not want to acknowledge that theology was “partial”—representing in effect some cultural interests over others; they did not want to acknowledge the slippery slope of their own positions, hence the inclination toward anathematizing others and towards an emphasis on both truth (as unchanging essence) and a high-wall view of the boundaries separating the true community from the false. What we might call theology’s *anxiety* of its rhetorical character is nowhere more evident than in the topic I have yet to discuss: God.¹⁴

The reason it is helpful, in my view, to begin with theologies’ varying constructions of the topics of theology, rather than with God, is because by attending to these constructions we can see the contextual and the rhetorical character of theology. In addition, we can begin to see better how God has functioned throughout the history of theology in the West to both stabilize the shifts in theological rhetoric and to minimize any attention to the play of an ungrounded rhetoric. As early Christian thinkers gravitated toward imagining their Christian view of God in terms of Plato’s eternal, unchanging forms, they sought not only to explain in some philosophical sense the contingency of all that exists within time. They also sought to claim that Christian faith provided for those who joined the company of Christ a point of connection, a lifeline, to that eternal, unchanging realm—and thus, to something better than what other cults were offering. After all, the emergent Christian theology had to *propose* something, and something at once distinctive yet also within the range of cultural intelligibility, in order to gain a hearing. And so early Christians grappled—and grappled differently—with how best to link faith in Christ with an enduring truth.

What creeds called forth by emperors sought to achieve was a stability of truth claims that mirrored the belief in an unchanging God. Creeds sought to limit discourse, to hedge it within a oneness, a unity to be celebrated and empowered, while simultaneously creating an otherness to be damned—at least until it should be graced to enter into the imperial oneness of orthodox truth. While there is considerable play within the political and intellectual range of that imperial and philosophical discourse, it is the discourse within which the-

14. Cupitt, *Emptiness and Brightness*, names this anxiety of universal contingency in a very accessible way.

ology steps for about a thousand years, before it is stretched by dramatically new knowledge and new political circumstances.

The emergent forces of modernity would challenge the political model of kingship and the classical assumptions of knowledge and philosophy. Yet, those same new forces retained an anxiety of change, the anxiety of rhetoric. Institutions of philosophy/science, whether early on in Descartes' meditations, would seek a kind of Archimedian point from which to view the world objectively, providing an epistemological foundation of certainty and a virtual mirror of nature onto which new sciences would confidently build. Later on, as in Newton's universal law of gravity, which provided hope and fuel for other discoveries of universal knowledge, modern institutions were eager to show that they were the faithful guardians of a universal truth appropriate for a rational creation. God remained quite important, if now secondary, in this new situation. The relations of church and state that flowed from the wars of the Reformation now blessed the rise of nationalism, and the adventures of colonial expansion. Churches, however, anxious over the loss of their old prerogatives, would grasp at any and every failure within the modern experience—as in Karl Barth's use of World War I—as a proof of the need for a God who was, in Barth's language, "totally Other." Despite Barth's own flamboyant rhetoric, the study of rhetoric would be dismissed throughout much of the modern period as decoration and as mere flowery speech. Its own rebirth in both culture and theology would come in the 1960s and 1970s, when we all became reacquainted with the shaking of the foundations.

As stated at the outset of this draft, the tendency to think about God in terms of stability reaches into the mid-twentieth century. And even as it is clear that Gilkey's sense of solid ground melting under his feet conveys deep anxiety, there were already intellectual resources emerging, insisting that our previous attachments to metaphysical and linguistic stability were both unwarranted and illusory. For example, in 1962 Jacques Derrida began what editor Peggy Kamuf has called "one of the most stunning adventures of modern thought," by publishing his translation of Edmund Husserl's *The Origin of Geometry* with a "long critical introduction."¹⁵ Not shrinking from this new situation, Gilkey sought in his 1969 book, *Naming the Whirlwind: The Renewal of God-Language*, to re-stabilize God language as a depth dimension of ordinary speech.¹⁶ But, it would be in the discovery of the ungrounded character of language and reality that a new philosophy and theology of instability would respond to Gilkey's anxiety over "the rushing depths of dark water."

15. See Kaumf's preface to *A Derrida Reader: Between the Blinds*, vii. Michel Foucault published his first major work, *The History of Madness*, in 1960. Jean Luc Nancy would begin his publishing career in 1973. Don Cupitt wrote *Taking Leave of God* in 1980.

16. Gilkey, *Naming the Whirlwind*.

Moving from Stability to Instability, Three Proposals

What better way to indicate this turn to instability than by taking up three quite different proposals that exemplify this shift. As my treatment of each will be relatively brief, I will not attempt assessments of these various moves, but try only to capture the way in which the shift to instability occurs. The three texts are *The Theological and the Political: On the Weight of the World* (2011) by Mark Lewis Taylor, *Face of the Deep: A Theology of Becoming* by Catherine Keller (2003), and *The Weakness of God: A Theology of the Event* (2006) by John Caputo.

Taylor wastes no time in introducing his readers to what he calls “the theological.” Writing in his preface, he tells us one should not confuse “the theological” with the “guild discipline” of theology, which is a “credentialed profession, especially in the Christian West, that typically reflects on doctrines of a religious tradition and fosters an ethos of transcendence.”¹⁷ While later in the book, Taylor will acknowledge that he is a member of that professional guild and proceed to suggest lines of re-interpreting the major topics he had earlier sidelined. In this introductory moment he wants to illuminate a distinction between what the guild typically does in its conventional—read “stable”—practice with something far more fascinating and less stable:

The theological is a specter haunting Theology, is already unsettling it, perhaps dissolving it, disseminating it anew among other languages and other disciplinary discourses—on the way to revealing something much more significant than Theology’s structured ethos of transcendence. The theological strikes a “neither/nor” approach to the binary of transcendence/immanence, but recasts both of these in a milieu of what Jean-Luc Nancy terms “transimmanence,” a haunting and ghostly realm of seething presences. It is a milieu within which we must reckon with a new belonging of the theological and the political to one another.¹⁸

Informed here by Avery F. Gordon’s work *Ghostly Matters: Hauntings and the Sociological Imagination* (itself influenced by Jacques Derrida’s *The Spectres of Marx* [1992]), as well as by Nancy’s philosophical notion of “transimmanence,” Taylor announces a significant disruption to theology-as-usual. Although other theologians will see in this move the attempt by Taylor to engage in the work of fundamental theology, they will also see him trying to avoid discussing this milieu of “transimmanence” apart from any sense of stable foundations.

The theological, for Taylor, begins far away from any conventional language of God. In fact, Taylor uses the following lines from Michel Foucault’s *Discipline and Punish* as the epigraph for his preface: “. . . the entire parapenal institution, which is created in order not to be a prison, culminates in the cell, on the walls

17. Taylor, *The Theological and the Political*, xi.

18. Taylor, *The Theological and the Political*, xi–xii.

of which are written in black letters: God sees you." Taylor comments on those final words:

The theological is not this phrase; it is the seething discourse and practice that is alternative to that marking and making of the cell's agony. It envisions a liberatory and different way through the weight of the world. It is the way those who endure imposed social suffering "weigh-in" with an alternative to the world that is often weighted against them and buttressed by the discourse of transcendence.¹⁹

In line with his own previous works in the area of liberation theology, Taylor sees conventional theology in this passage and throughout the book as part of the problem—wedded too frequently to interests of colonial power and wealth, and utterly insensitive to those persons and groups suffering at the margins. What is relatively new for Taylor is his use of categories, not only "transimmanence," but also this image of the "weight of the world" from the philosophy of Nancy, who provides the intellectual analysis of an unstable view of reality. Nancy's essay, "Being Singular Plural," in which he rejects any and every attempt to get a stable discourse of Being, is itself a kind of political ontology, disallowing either a kind of glomming onto plurality or a reductionism into singular particularities. By insisting on the interplay, the dynamic milieu of these three terms at all levels of existence, Nancy destabilizes all claims to settled or sovereign power.

Taylor also uses Nancy's complex reflections on the "weight of the world," by which Nancy seems to explore the spacing and pressures of bodies in extension within a metaphysics of *Being Singular Plural*. Taylor uses this language of weight and his own sense of "shifting" weight to help name the way pressures and oppressive forces pile up on those who live at the margins of society—including those who are tortured. In responding to this horrible weight of oppression, Taylor looks at the production of art from within and among the circles of those who are oppressed, and he finds here expressions of what Nancy calls "transimmanence." With this term, Nancy envisions a transcendence of immanence, but not transcendence in the sense of ascent out of the domain of weight. Rather, "transimmanence," according to Taylor (commenting on its treatment in Nancy's book, *The Muses*):

is a passing, and passage, about "coming, departure, succession, passing the limits, moving away, rhythm. . . ." Transimmanence's passing and moving, thus, is not some tranquil floating. It can also be a place of vertigo, often described as facing an "unknown," again however, an unknown *within* the world, self, society, and history, the unknown within passings and passages of and through a singular plural world.²⁰

19. Taylor, *The Theological and the Political*, xiii.

20. Taylor, *The Theological and the Political*, 130–31.

The theological, according to Taylor, emerges in this complex space where those who have suffered profoundly from the weight of the world, weigh in with their own traumatized voices in ways that call forth the possibility of the world shifting, weighted differently. The theological is this-worldly, but it does not collapse into the always-already-said, always-already-done of immanence. Instead, it shifts, it turns, it weighs in, it proposes a turn upon the failed models of past transcendence. Taylor's significant nod to the rhetorical comes in part as he acknowledges that the site of his own exploration of those who bear the weight of the world rhymes with the Christian topic of the crucifixion of Jesus. How Taylor begins to reimagine the significance of that scene, I will leave to the reader.²¹

Catherine Keller's *Face of the Deep: A Theology of Becoming* opens with phrases affirming the very watery depths that Gilkey glimpsed "in horror":

And darkness remains over the face of *tehom*: the deep, salt water, chaos, depth itself. Out there. In here. Meditating two centuries ago on "how everything begins in darkness," Schelling intimated that "most people turn away from what is concealed within themselves just as they turn away from the depths of the great life." . . . We are trained to fear the darkness. "What terrifies you?" asks [Luce] Irigaray of her masculine interlocutor. "The lack of closure," she surmises. "From which springs your struggle against in-finity." What might happen if we ceased to fight, if we let the undertow draw us toward the depths?

The darksome waters bear so many denigrated faces: formless monsters, maternal hysteria, pagan temptation, dark hoards, caves of terror, contaminating hybrids, miscegenation and sexual confusion. Queer theories, groundless relativisms, narcissistic mysticisms. The collapse of difference. Excess, madness, evil. Death. Amidst the aura of a badness that shades into nothingness, how can we rethink the darkness of beginnings? This book is about that depth, its darkness, its face and its spirit. What kind of a subject-matter is that?²²

It is as if Keller had read Gilkey's metaphor of solid ground turning to "rushing depths of dark water," and said to him, "Yes, that's exactly where we need to be. What are you afraid of?" Keller wants to demonstrate that it is possible for theology to be at home in the midst of instability; in fact, she wants to argue that this is theology's proper home.

In order to make that argument, she begins by identifying the traditional formula of *creatio ex nihilo* as the problem, tracing its roots to the loathing of women, the loathing of the body, and the loathing of change. Aligning its notion of a good creation with the ordering command of a Father god, the early church fathers inserted into their doctrine of creation a word that Genesis had not used: *nihil*. The Hebrew *tehom* ("the deep") is not *nihil* ("nothing"). By inserting this

21. See especially Taylor, *The Theological and the Political*, 125–58.

22. Keller, *Face of the Deep*, xvi.

“nothing” into church doctrine, however, the early fathers of the church sought to provide a clear theological foundation. A good God created the world *ex nihilo*, from nothing; how powerful is that? And how well ordered must the creation have been, being created by such a good God? Comments Keller:

Theologies have tried to draw the line at “God,” to say that, whenever the creation starts, it is preceded by absolutely nothing—nothing but the pure and simple presence of God the Creator. Certainly this “nothing but” of a non-negotiable starting-line lends a useful sense of foundation. It offers protection from the tidal waves of a chaos for which we are never prepared; and from the slow lapping erosion of meaning. Is it possible, however, that the foundationalisms themselves have proved more dangerous than that which they have damned and damned?²³

To argue against that stable foundationalist doctrine of creation, Keller will turn 1) to her own previous work in process theology on the dynamic notion of “continuing creation,” 2) to the still unsettling discourse of feminist theology (pointing out the link between those dark waters of chaos and women’s vaginal waters), and 3) perhaps most importantly to the linguistic play of Jacques Derrida’s *différance*:

The affinity of *tehom* to Derrida’s *différance* lies there where the latter leaves its “trace” in writing. Might we read its elusive “always already” in the salt water deposited in the second verse of the Bible? We might then track this precreation trace back out through the prolific play of difference flooding “the creation,” unfolding in its light and dark, its swarming multitudes, its “creeping things innumerable.” Spurred on by the more recent grammatology of Derrida’s beginnings, we need no longer derive those swarming, fluttering, bifurcating multiples from the undifferentiated Origin of a simple Creator. . . . In other words the attempt to discover the true origin is doomed. It only brings us to the boundary of our own language. . . .²⁴

By framing the West’s fascination with and commitment to stability, to foundationalism and sovereignty as unrealistic *avoidance*, as a damming up of the unconscious and strategic blocking out of the unworthy dark-sinned hordes at the gate, Keller shows that far from being the basis of a just theology of creation, the doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo* is part and parcel of the Fall, as it were—the Fall into the madness of order. To correct this deep theological problem at the heart of Christian theology, Keller argues that we must relearn to navigate and negotiate the complexity of what at least some ancient voices knew as “the deep.” Once again, instability is not presented as a mere pose but as the milieu in which we live and move and have our being. If we can begin to own this truer state of affairs, Keller believes we have reason to hope:

23. Keller, *Face of the Deep*, 10.

24. Keller, *Face of the Deep*, 10.

If we discern a third space of beginning—neither pure origin nor nihilist flux—its difference translates into another interstitial space: that between the self-presence of a changeless Being who somehow suddenly (back then) created; and the pure Nonbeing out of which that creation was summoned, and toward which its fluency falls. That alternative milieu, neither being nor nonbeing, will signify the site of becoming *as genesis*: the topos of the Deep. Can we tell the story this way: that *tehom* as primal chaos precedes and gives rise to the generative tensions of order and disorder, form and formlessness? Might *tehom* henceforth suggest the chaoid (so not necessarily chaotic) multidimensionality of a bottomless Deep: the matrix in which the creation *becomes*? In which the strange inter-fluencies of creatures—in ecology, predation, genetics, cultures—crisscross the abyss of difference?²⁵

In Keller's language of "Can we tell the story this way?" one can hear her proposal to rework and replay differently the classical *topoi* of Creation and Fall and the place of humanity and human discourse within her reformulation of the "milieu." It is important to reiterate that here, as with Taylor before, and Caputo to come, Keller's rhetorical proposal does not emerge from an argument based upon sure foundations and settled truths. No, Keller's proposal emerges precisely from an understanding of *realizing* (the word *reality* itself seems too fixed here) as chaotic, unstable, boundless. Any discourse of God, therefore, in Keller's proposal will not link to a discourse of stability but to an association with instability.

One might argue that this move to philosophy on the part of Taylor, Keller, and Caputo (still to come) suggests an anxiety over the foundations of their own discourse, but that is why the point above needs reiterating. At stake in these turns to philosophy is the argument that the *appearance* of stability, of stable presence and persistence, is itself a construction emerging out of the play of language and discourse. A better *discipline* for all disciplines, they suggest, is to attend more carefully and more persistently to this endlessly rhetorical realizing of unstable proposals.

Jack Caputo's *The Weakness of God: A Theology of the Event* (2006) expresses his desire to enter "into dialogue with the groundbreaking theology of creation to be found in Catherine Keller's *Face of the Deep*."²⁶ Like her, he also has biblical texts in mind as he begins; not the creation account, as with Keller, but Paul's references to weakness in 1 Cor 1:25 and 2 Cor 12:10. Yet it is Caputo's indebtedness to Derrida's philosophical journeys into instability that helps him explore and re-imagine the core topic of theology, God.

To begin his process of deconstructing, which, to be clear is not at all the same thing as denying, theology's discourse of God, Caputo notes a pivotal distinction between "names" and "events." "Names," claims Caputo:

25. Keller, *Face of the Deep*, 12.

26. Caputo, *The Weakness of God*, 18.

contain events and give them a kind of temporary shelter by housing them within a relatively stable nominal unity. Events, on the other hand, are uncontainable, and they make names restless with promise and the future, with memory and the past, with the result that names contain what they cannot contain.²⁷

Informed it seems by something like J. L. Austin's distinction between *constatives* and *performatives*, Caputo echoes a distinction that Derrida made in a discussion of J. Hillis Miller's analysis of the poetry of Gerard Manley Hopkins. About Miller's analysis, Derrida writes:

What is remarkable in the Millerian deciphering is the analysis of a *double performative*: After having elucidated the doctrine, that is, the constative knowledge, the ontotheology, the theology, or the epistemology that serves as the presupposition or foundation of the performative stratum of the poetic act, one must bring to light a still more profound foundation. The stratum of the foundation has a constative appearance, to be sure. But it becomes a credible consensus only through a more originary engagement and thus through an initial performative, through the preperformative of a pre-event that precedes and prepares everything.²⁸

Once again the move is from relative stability to relative instability. While it seems that names, or constatives, provide the stability for the sake of events, or performatives, Derrida challenges that assumption, pointing out that what *appears* as a constative actually presupposes prior performative events. Those preperformatives, as Derrida calls them, have something of a more ghostly character, as does Caputo's further description of *events*:

Names belong to natural languages and are historically constituted or constructed, whereas events are a little unnatural, eerie, ghostly things that haunt names and see to it that they never rest in peace. . . .

Although a name contains an event, an event cannot in principle be contained by a name, proper or common. There is always something uncontainable and unconditional about an event, whereas names, like "God," belong to the conditioned and coded strings of signifiers. The event is the open-ended promise that the name can neither contain nor deliver.²⁹

With this unsettling distinction between name and event, Caputo opens a space between what he calls "strong theology" and his own weak theology. By "strong theology" Caputo means that God is the "nominator of an entity," that is, the name of a being named God, or the name of being itself. Such theologies, says Caputo, grounded as they are in the name of a sovereign, are often accompanied by "corpulent articles of faith, a national or international headquarters,

27. Caputo, *The Weakness of God*, 2.

28. Derrida, "Justices," 235.

29. Caputo, *The Weakness of God*, 2.

[and] a well-fed college of cardinals to keep it on the straight and narrow."³⁰ By "weak theology" Caputo means the event that is sheltered within the name of God. Resisting the language of Being and of God's sovereign power and even the way strong theology has "power up its sleeve" when it speaks of the weakness of God,³¹ Caputo underscores the importance of the unstable and the undecidable:

The name of God is the name of an event transpiring in being's restless heart, creating confusion in the house of being, forcing being into motion, mutation, transformation, reversal. The name of God is the event that being both dreads and longs for, sighing and groaning until something new is brought forth from down below. The name of God is the name of what can happen to being, of what being would become, of what rising up from below being pushes beyond itself, outside itself, as being's hope, being's desire.³²

So if God is other than being yet an event sheltered in some sense in the language of being, how does Caputo propose to proceed?

Suppose we dare to think about God otherwise than metaphysics and metaphysical theology allow? Suppose we say there is at least this much to the death of God: that the God of metaphysical theology is a God well lost and that the task of thinking about God radically otherwise has been inescapably imposed upon us? Suppose we say that metaphysical theology has been given enough time to prove its case and that the time has come to think about God in some other way? What then?³³

Moving away from metaphysical stability, Caputo is also clear that he is not trying to resolve the debate over whether there is "an entity called God." "About God as an entitative issue, I have no opinion."³⁴ Caputo can make this statement, almost casually, because the understanding of language with which he is working both assumes and explains the disconnect between words and things. Enter the term *différance*:

Différance is a word Derrida uses to describe the general condition that besets us all . . . in virtue of which we must all make our way by way of the differential spacing of signifiers. Boy/toy/joy, king/ring/sing, and so forth, produce the significant effect they do by reason of the differentiated spacing, either phonic or graphic of these signifiers. Whether you say king or *roi* does not matter so much as whether, inside the language game you are playing, the rest of us can discern the difference (or the "space between") king/sing or *roi/loi*. In general that sort of thing holds, *mutatis mutandis*, not only for linguistic signifiers but also for the concepts they signify, and more generally still for the whole range of our beliefs

30. Caputo, *The Weakness of God*, 7.

31. Caputo, *The Weakness of God*, 8.

32. Caputo, *The Weakness of God*, 9.

33. Caputo, *The Weakness of God*, 23.

34. Caputo, *The Weakness of God*, 10.

and practices, cultural and institutional, all of which come under and are structured by this differential spacing.³⁵

As many have known for some time, there is a genuine cultural revolution at work in this turn to language. For theologians and the faith community it means that God is no longer understood as a being or Being itself operating outside of language to which the name “God” refers, hence the importance of the distinction between name and event.

Nonetheless, as indicated in his language of “daring” above, Caputo believes a weak theology might also be a forceful one. He italicizes the “*existential intensity*” of passion at work in the “modesty of [t]his proposal.” “Indeed, as an event, the name of God overtakes us and overturns us, uprooting and unhinging us, and leaves us hanging on by a prayer.”³⁶ In a way that reminds me again of Gilkey’s project seeking the “renewal of God-language,” Caputo’s proposal involves just such a re-imagining, only now within a dramatically revised understanding of language and metaphysics. His proposal will re-work not only the language of God and the critique of the notions of sovereignty and being, but also of creation (with assistance from Keller’s work), as well as topics on Jesus and the kingdom of God and eschatology.

Conclusions

While my own reflections here are partial and somewhat fragmentary, I hope that one can see that these three theological works I have been exploring—in only a very cursory way—are immensely helpful for a project designed to make evident theology’s own structure of proposal. With the help of these authors, one can see afresh that the topics of theology—creation in the image of God, sin, christology, ecclesiology and eschatology—are not names of fixed doctrines, but that they instead, and especially together, shelter an event of proposal that has within it the potential and capacity—through its interaction with an audience—to be a *polis* transformative of the ways we not only speak, but listen, and act, and move in a widening world.

There is always a temptation in our late modern and postmodern worlds to be suspicious of any discussion of God, and thus perhaps a tendency to read into these three texts a defensive posture, a desire to locate a place, a *topos*, in culture where one still might defend the existence of God as an object of worship. Each of these three texts respond to that challenge by calling into question the adequacy of our own established metaphysics and offering, as well as an alternative, more unstable understanding of language and the milieu of our world shaped by moving words. It is from within this revised and

35. Caputo, *The Weakness of God*, 24.

36. Caputo, *The Weakness of God*, 11.

re-imagined understanding of our cultural and global milieu that these thinkers pose the question of “the theological,” “the Deep,” the “Weakness of God,” as possibilities, as proposals for how one might both re-imagine the meaning/consequences of such language, as well as how one might best locate oneself to encounter the impossible event of God.

What becomes clear in these proposals is not only that they are moving away from the rhetoric of establishment, foundations, and stability and moving in the direction of ontological instability, but that this move to the uncertain is also a move toward the political margins, away from established power in order to evoke a new kind of credibility with a new kind of audience. There is an awareness of a shift in creative power away from the dominance of Euro-American empires and toward a more complex play of identities in a new world that is not only post-modern but post-colonial. And these shifts already portend potentially dramatic transformations as our world enters into the depths of a transition-resisting empire and embracing a new play of differing voices. Precisely in this new metaphysical/linguistic insecurity that can yet shelter us, we can learn both that we need to listen carefully to others’ witness of life and to others’ proposals, but also to insist on the importance of collaboratively crafting proposals as part of a shared obligation to negotiate real differences within and across boundaries together.

If my current project, *Moving Words*, will make a helpful contribution to understanding the rhetorical/proposal character of theological discourse, it will do so in no small part to the kinds of projects I have sketched here. For these kinds of creative and courageous works help all of us see our world in a new, unstable, uncontrollable, yet hopeful and purposive light.

Works Cited

- Barth, Karl. *Epistle to the Romans*. 6th ed. Trans. Edwyn C. Hoskins. New York: Oxford University Press, 1933.
- Bultmann, Rudolf. *Jesus and the Word*. Trans. Louise Pettibone Smith and Ermine Huntress. New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, [1926] 1934.
- Caputo, John D. *The Weakness of God: A Theology of the Event*. Bloomington IN: Indiana University Press, 2006.
- Cohen, Barbara, and Dragan Kujundžić, eds. *Provocations to Reading: J. Hillis Miller and the Democracy to Come*. New York: Fordham University Press, 2005.
- Cupitt, Don. *Emptiness and Brightness*. Santa Rosa CA: Polebridge, 2001.
- _____. *Taking Leave of God*. London: SCM Classics, [1980] 2001.
- Derrida, Jacques. “Justices.” Pp. 228–61 in *Provocations to Reading: J. Hillis Miller and the Democracy to Come*. New York: Fordham University Press, 2005.
- _____. *The Spectres of Marx: The State of Debt, the Work of Mourning, and the New International*. Trans. Peggy Kamuf. New York: Routledge Classics, [1992] 2006.

- Farrell, Thomas B. *Norms of Rhetorical Culture*. New Haven CT: Yale University Press, 1993.
- Gadamer, Hans Georg. *Truth and Method*. 2d ed. Trans. Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall. London: Sheed and Ward, 1989.
- Gilkey, Langdon. *Naming the Whirlwind*. Indianapolis IN: The Bobbs-Merrill Company, 1969.
- Gordon, Avery F. *Ghostly Matters: Hauntings and the Sociological Imagination*. Minneapolis MN: University of Minnesota Press, [1997] 2008.
- Harris, Sam. *The End of Faith: Religion, Terror and the Future of Reason*. New York: W. W. Norton, 2005.
- Kamuf, Peggy, ed. *A Derrida Reader: Between the Blinds*. New York: Columbia, 1991.
- Keller, Catherine. *Face of the Deep: A Theology of Becoming*. London: Routledge, 2003.
- Nancy, Jean Luc. *Being Singular Plural*. Trans. Robert D. Richardson and Anne E. O'Bryne. Stanford CA: Stanford University Press, [1996] 2000.
- Taylor, Mark Lewis. *The Theological and the Political: On the Weight of the World*. Minneapolis MN: Fortress, 2011.
- Tillich, Paul. *Theology of Culture*. Ed. Robert C. Kimball. New York: Oxford University Press, 1959.
- _____. *Systematic Theology*. Vol. 1. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1951.
- Tracy, David. *Dialogue with the Other*. Louvain: Peeters, 1990.
- _____. "Theological Method." Pp. 35–60 in *Christian Theology: An Introduction to its Traditions and Tasks*. Ed. Peter C. Hodgson and Robert H. King. Philadelphia: Fortress, 1982.
- Turner, Victor. *From Ritual to Theatre: The Human Seriousness of Play*. New York: Performing Arts Journal Publications, [1990] 2001.
- Winquist, Charles. *Epiphanes of Darkness: Deconstruction in Theology*. Minneapolis MN: Fortress, 1986.

Plato and Christian Belief

John Kelly

Tertullian's query, "What has Athens to do with Jerusalem?" is one indication that early Christian thought was entangled with Greek philosophy. More or less sophisticated forms of ideas and themes associated with the philosophical schools of the ancient world were a part of the cultural mix of the era. And many early Christian thinkers utilized the philosophical resources of their era to define and defend Christian thought. In particular, Plato and Platonism had a major impact, culminating in the writings of Augustine. However, Tertullian's question suggests that there is something problematic about the confluence of philosophy, and by implication, Platonism, with Christianity.

It is also useful to contrast the positive response of many early Christians to Platonism with contemporary criticisms of Platonism by those who wish to defend a religious or spiritual understanding of life. Plato clearly and emphatically rejected the materialism of his day and argued for the fundamental importance of the mind in understanding both human beings and the cosmos. Hence, he might seem to be a natural ally for those seeking to establish a place for religion and spirituality in a world dominated both intellectually and practically by modern science and technology. Obviously, this has not happened, and it is useful as a way of understanding our present situation with respect to belief in God to ask "Why?"

Reading Plato

The place to begin in attempting to understand the attraction of Platonism, as well as its problematic character, is with Socrates. The Socrates who became a cultural hero in the ancient Greco-Roman world is primarily the Socrates depicted in Plato's dialogues. Modern Plato scholars have focused a great deal of attention on the question of the historical accuracy of Plato's depiction, just as NT scholars have focused on the question of the historical accuracy of the depiction of Jesus in the canonical gospels. Presently, there is a fairly broad consensus that the so-called "Socratic dialogues," such as, *Euthyphro*, *Crito*, *Laches*, and *Protagoras*, do accurately depict the philosophical practices of the historic Socrates.

On the other hand, other dialogues that had a major impact on the ancient world's understanding of Socrates, such as *Phaedo*, contain ideas and arguments

that did not have their source in the historic Socrates. This is analogous to the role played by the Gospel of John in forming the Christian tradition, which many modern scholars agree is not an accurate representation of the words of the historical Jesus.

Plato clearly revered the historic Socrates he knew as a young man, and in his dialogues he presents him as the embodiment of a life devoted to philosophical inquiry, even when the presentation is not historically accurate. It is this presentation that created a mythic Socrates who became a different kind of hero in the Greco-Roman world.

The best myths often have their basis in historical facts, and most scholars accept Plato's *Apology*, a work that presents itself as Socrates' defense at his trial for impiety and corrupting the youth of Athens, as a reasonably accurate account of what Socrates said on that occasion. In the *Apology*, Socrates defends himself by defending the life of philosophical inquiry. In this defense Socrates makes some extraordinary claims, such as that the unexamined life is not worth living (38a),¹ and that no harm can come to a good man (41d), and that the pursuit of virtue is more important than the pursuit of wealth and political power (29d–e). He also asserted that his fellow Athenians were ignorant regarding the question of how to live a virtuous life and that he is wiser than they are because he is aware of his own ignorance (23a–b).

There is a curious mix of apparent skepticism and dogmatism in these claims. Socrates often used irony in his interchanges with his interlocutors, and his professions of ignorance, which are frequent in the Socratic dialogues, have to be unpacked. For example, someone in our world might plead ignorance on the question of the nature of dark energy on the grounds that s/he knows nothing about contemporary cosmology, but someone else might profess ignorance because s/he knows a very great deal about this subject and recognizes that, given the current state of their knowledge, physicists do not have a good answer to the question. Thus Socrates' profession of ignorance is quite compatible with some very strong claims, such as that the conceptions of virtue presupposed by his Athenian contemporaries are unreliable as guides to living a good life.

The dogmatic claims, on the other hand, do not appear to be ironic. Socrates' life exhibited his conviction that the unexamined life is not worth living, and his behavior at his trial showed his commitment to the principle of the self-sufficiency of virtue. This is the principle that virtue is sufficient for human happiness or well-being and that so-called "external goods" such as wealth and po-

1. All references to Plato's texts are by Stephanus' page numbers that identify the page and column of a passage in the edition of Plato's works published in 1578 by Henri Estienne. Standard Greek editions of Plato's works, and many good English translations, have the Stephanus numbers in the margins for easy reference.

litical power are not necessary for happiness. What is striking about the *Apology* is the absence of even a hint of a reasoned account justifying these convictions.

Reading Plato

Plato wrote dialogues in which he never appears as a participant. A character, Socrates, does appear in most, though not all, of the dialogues as an active participant. Each of the dialogues has a dramatic setting with a variety of participants, some of whom were real persons, while others were Plato's creations, and still others who may or may not have existed. The character named Socrates regularly, though not invariably, defends the principles enunciated in the *Apology*, though his defenses sometimes lead him into the kind of philosophical speculation that is at odds with the professions of ignorance found in the Socratic dialogues.

It is often assumed that the character Socrates who appears in dialogues, such as *Phaedo* and *Republic*, is Plato's mouthpiece, who expresses Plato's own philosophical doctrines. However, this assumption has been questioned in recent years and should not be accepted uncritically.²

Many, if not most, contemporary philosophers interpret Plato in terms of a developmental model. On this model the dialogues can be divided into three groups—early, middle, and late—that represent distinct stages in the development of Plato's philosophical ideas. The early dialogues are the "Socratic dialogues" in which Plato uses Socratic argumentative techniques to deal with the sorts of ethical issues with which the historic Socrates was concerned.

The middle dialogues, such as *Symposium*, *Phaedo*, *Republic*, and *Phaedrus*, contain what are commonly thought of as Plato's doctrines—for example, the theory of recollection, the theory of Forms, the immortality of the soul, and the sharp dichotomies between appearance and reality, and opinion and knowledge. The middle dialogues also contain those memorable myths, images, and metaphors with which Plato has come to be identified, such as the myth of the cave, the image of the sun, and the image of the charioteer driving the black and white horses. Finally, the late dialogues, such as *Theaetetus*, *Sophist*, and *Statesman*, deal with much more complex and technical issues and do not rely on either the imagery or doctrines of the middle dialogues.

The underlying assumption of this developmental model is that Plato was essentially a systematic philosopher who began by addressing those questions in ethics with which the historic Socrates had been concerned, but who came to see that the methods employed by Socrates would not yield satisfactory answers to these questions. This led him to investigate a range of interconnected

2. See, e.g., Press, *Who Speaks for Plato*.

epistemological and metaphysical questions that resulted in the doctrines commonly associated with Plato and Platonism. Finally, on some versions of this model, Plato became dissatisfied with the doctrines of the middle dialogues and turned to a much more abstract and logical investigation of questions in epistemology, ontology, and political philosophy. Whatever the merits of this contemporary developmental model, it is not how Plato's dialogues were read in the Greco-Roman world in which Christianity emerged.³

Plato founded the Academy, which was a school and research center that existed continuously under an unbroken line of successors until the mid-first century BCE. Less than a hundred years after Plato's death, the Academy adopted a skeptical interpretation of Platonism that rejected the possibility of either proving or disapproving the truth of philosophical doctrines, including those associated with Plato. On this view, the dialogues provide the logical tools and arguments to undermine philosophical doctrines that go "beyond" what we know from everyday life. Academic skepticism meant suspending judgment about the truth or falsity of philosophical doctrines. It should be distinguished from Pyrrhonian skepticism that denied that we could ever determine the truth of any judgment.⁴

Academic skepticism should also be distinguished from the radical skepticism employed by Descartes, who argued that we should begin the task of developing a system of knowledge by rejecting any claim that is not indubitable. This line of reasoning led Descartes to his famous *cogito ergo sum* ("I think therefore I am"), which became the foundation for his reconstruction of human knowledge.

On the other hand, there was another group of philosophers, the Middle Platonists (c. 68 BCE to Plotinus in the early-third century CE), who rejected the skeptical interpretation of the New Academy and argued that Plato was committed to some robust metaphysical doctrines, including the immortality of the soul and the existence of a transcendent reality. The Middle Platonists were not a school in the sense of having a distinct physical location and a common body of teachings. They were a diverse group of thinkers, including the first-century Jewish philosopher Philo, who were like-minded in their reading of Plato. The doctrinal reading of the Middle Platonists had a substantial influence on Christian thinkers such as Clement of Alexandria, Origin, and Augustine.⁵

The roots of both of these interpretive traditions are to be found in Plato's dialogues. In fact, I think that skepticism and doctrine are intertwined throughout his writings, and I shall try to illustrate this by briefly considering four representative dialogues in the following two sections.

3. Annas, *Platonic Ethics*, 1–7.

4. OCD 1362.

5. OCD 1193.

Skeptical Platonism

In *Euthyphro*, Socrates encounters the character Euthyphro outside of the court where Socrates is to be tried that day on a charge of impiety and corrupting the youth of Athens. Euthyphro is at the same court because he has charged his own father, who had inadvertently caused the death of a hired workman, with murder. Euthyphro, who claims to be an expert in religious matters, justified his action by appealing to the concept of piety. Socrates is astonished by Euthyphro's claim, because harming one's father was widely regarded as impious, and Socrates asks him to explain what piety consists in so as to help him (Socrates) respond to the charge of impiety leveled against him by his accusers (5a).

What Socrates wants is a reasoned account—a *logos*—that can serve as a model, or paradigm, by which what is pious, or holy, can be identified and distinguished from what is impious (6d–e). Socrates' request for a paradigm of piety is a response to a situation in which there are deep disagreements on a practical level about what constitutes virtues, such as piety, and no consensus on how to resolve those disagreements.

Socrates explicitly contrasts this situation to practical disagreements about the quantifiable properties of things that can be peacefully resolved by counting, measuring, and weighing. He suggests that finding a paradigm for piety will enable people to resolve disagreements about piety with similar results (7b). How this might actually work in practice is never explicitly spelled out in the *Euthyphro*, but Socrates' view seems to be that it is necessary to first reach agreement on how to agree in disputed cases before attempting to settle those cases.

Socrates' working assumption is that the concepts he investigates are governed by logical norms that can be explicated through a process of dialectical reasoning. In his view, there is such a thing as getting it right when it comes to concepts such as piety, courage, or justice. Thus, if a proposed account entails contradictory conclusions, it must be wrong.

For example, Euthyphro claims that piety is what the gods love and impiety is what they hate. Socrates points out, however, that according to the poets, who are Euthyphro's authorities, the gods differ among themselves about what they love and hate. Consequently, on this account one and the same thing will be both pious and impious at the same time.

Euthyphro acknowledges the logic of Socrates' point, and modifies his initial proposal, affirming that “. . . the pious is what all the gods love, and the opposite, what all the gods hate, is the impious” (9e1). Socrates responds to this new *logos* with another question, “Is the pious loved by the gods because it is pious, or is it pious because it is loved by the gods?” The first alternative presupposes that there is a standard of piety that is logically prior to and independent of

what the gods may or may not love; whereas the second takes the gods' attitudes, as characterized by the poets, as the standard of piety.

The ancient Greeks regarded such things as murder or harming one's parents or violating the norms of hospitality as acts that transgressed fundamental moral boundaries; and the gods are depicted in Homer and Hesiod, as well as Greek tragedy, as punishing such acts. The poets, however, do not depict the gods as having created these norms. They are a given within the moral universe of the ancient Greeks. Hence, it should not be surprising that Euthyphro, who claims to believe all the stories about the gods, accepts the idea that the gods love what is pious because it is pious. But this leaves Euthyphro in a quandary, because he has no way of making sense of the concept of piety apart from the likes and dislikes of the gods as described by the poets.

The same conundrum confronts contemporary Christians who affirm the existence of moral absolutes. When the authority of these absolutes is attributed to God, the question arises, "Are such acts as murder, abortion, and incest inherently wrong, or could God have willed that they are sometimes permissible or even positively good things to do?" The first alternative presupposes a transcendent standard that constrains even God; whereas the second makes "moral absolutes" contingent on the unconstrained will of God.

The *Euthyphro* ends in *aporia*, a logical impasse, and the question "What is piety?" is left unanswered, as Euthyphro leaves to go into court to prosecute his father for murder, even though he has no stable reflective understanding of piety. Though this dialogue has been classified as "aporetic," it embodies a strong critique of any attempt to justify moral norms on the basis of supposedly authoritative texts. Socrates' point is not that all such texts are false or immoral, but that they have to be rationally assessed before being accepted as authoritative.

The impasse confronting Socrates and Euthyphro, as well as the readers of the dialogue, leaves us with two alternatives. On the one hand, we might conclude that there is no standard or model for the concept of piety; it is just a word with an unstable sense, meaning different things to different people in different situations at different times. Hence, it has no logic. On the other hand, if we do accept the intuition that piety has a determinate sense, and hence a logic, then we have to conclude that Euthyphro and most of his contemporaries were seriously confused about what it meant to be pious.

The fixed fulcrum on which this dialogue turns is Socrates' commitment to the idea of a reasoned account of piety. Socrates' rationale for this commitment is quite straightforward. If someone is charged with impiety in court and one of the possible penalties is death, then there had better be clear standards of what constitutes impiety. Furthermore, these standards cannot simply be public opinion, because such opinion may or may not be just. Otherwise, the court's decision of guilt will be a paradigm of injustice.

There is a larger issue here, however, which has to do with the question of the intellectual and moral authority of a second-order rational understanding of our first-order ethical beliefs and practices. This is a very difficult and highly contested question in our world that I cannot address here, except to point out that the second-order practice of rationally reflecting on our ethical practices is itself well embedded in those practices. That is, a part of acquiring ethical concepts and learning how to apply them is learning how to rationally criticize the application of those concepts. For this we have Socrates to thank or curse.

The *Meno* is also an aporetic dialogue, but the *aporia* here arises from perplexity about the very nature of Socratic philosophical inquiry. The dialogue begins with Meno asking Socrates whether virtue can be taught, and Socrates characteristically responding by saying that this question cannot be answered until they know what constitutes virtue. Meno, another self-described expert, is confident that he knows what virtue is, and after some complex preliminaries he says that “virtue is to desire beautiful (noble) things and have the power to acquire them” (77b). It becomes clear in the subsequent discussion that what Meno has in mind is the acquisition of wealth and political power (78c). Socrates points out that there is a difference between acquiring these goods virtuously or viciously, and he is able to reduce Meno to incoherence. At this point, Meno introduces what is now called “the paradox of inquiry”:

A man cannot search either for what he knows or for what he does not know. He cannot search for what he knows—since he knows it, there is no need to search—nor for what he does not know, for he does not know what to look for. (80e)

Socrates responds to this paradox by telling a story that he has heard from “wise men and women talking about divine matters.” The story is that the soul is immortal and over time has learned everything about virtue and other things that under the appropriate conditions it can recall (81c–d).

The theory of learning as recollection is not, as presented by Socrates, a reasoned account. Its function in this context is to persuade Meno not to abandon the attempt to answer the question at hand—“What is virtue?” Socrates attempts to illustrate that learning is recollection by asking Meno’s slave boy, who claims not to know geometry, how to determine the length of a side of a square whose area is exactly twice that of a given square figure. Initially the slave boy says that doubling the length of one side of a given square will yield a new square figure whose area is twice that of the original square. Socrates then demonstrates to the boy that the area of the new square will be four times that of the original square, at which point the boy is stumped.

Next, through drawing figures in the sand and asking questions, Socrates gets the boy to grasp that the correct answer is that the length of the sides of the new square is equal to the square root of the hypotenuse of a right triangle

constructed from the two equal sides of the original square figure. If, for example, the sides of the original square are each one foot long, then the length of the hypotenuse will be the square root of two, which will be the length of the sides of the new square (82b–85b).

Socrates' interchange with the slave boy makes two important points. On the one hand, in mathematics many of our pre-reflective intuitions turn out on critical examination to be mistaken. On the other hand, we all possess a considerable amount of latent or tacit knowledge that can be made explicit through a dialectical process that will enable us to correct those mistakes if someone is able to ask the right questions. Socrates also wants to apply these two points to questions about the nature of virtue—many of our pre-reflective intuitions are mistaken, but we can overcome these mistakes by engaging in the right kind of reasoning process.

After the slave boy episode, Meno and Socrates return to their attempt to find a successful reasoned account of the concept of virtue, and agree that “virtue as a whole, or in part, is wisdom” (89a). But Socrates immediately expresses doubts about this conclusion, because there do not appear to be any teachers of virtue.

Good men, such as Themistocles, often have bad sons, which leads Socrates and Meno to conclude that virtue cannot be taught (96c). This conclusion raises the question of how men like Themistocles acquired their virtue. Socrates ends the dialogue by saying that “virtue appears to be present in those of us who may possess it as a gift from the god” (100b). This tentative conclusion raises the question of the point of Socrates' practice of engaging others in conversations. The historical Socrates can be credited with having created the practice of examining pre-reflective ethical intuitions in order to reveal and eliminate contradictions, confusions, ambiguities, and false beliefs. But he did not uncover a logically coherent, rationally defensible body of ethical beliefs inherent in the ethical practices of his fellow Athenians. This result led him and Plato to conclude that the everyday ethical beliefs of their contemporaries could not, on their own, be the basis of a good life.

Doctrinal Platonism

How, or if, one can achieve a rationally justified, self-reflective ethical way of life is a very contentious question. But this is what the philosophical schools and movements in the ancient Greco-Roman world attempted to do. And with the exception of the skeptics—Academic and Pyrrhonian—there was a broad consensus that this required a synoptic account of the cosmos, as well as of human nature and its place within the cosmos. The doctrines associated with Plato are in the service of providing such a synoptic account.

The Greek Stoics argued that philosophy was divided into three parts—logic, physics, and ethics. They attributed this division to Plato, and the

Middle Platonists, as well as Augustine, accepted it.⁶ The Stoics and the Middle Platonists regarded each of these three areas of inquiry as distinct but interconnected. That is, one could investigate what constitutes a good life on its own terms because neither the study of logic or physics determines some single way of life as best. Similarly, the basic principles of logic or physics could be grasped independently of one another. However, both logic and physics did place broad constraints on what would count as good reasons for adopting a particular way of life. Finally, a proper understanding of physics would make manifest the nature of the relationship between human beings and the cosmos.

Hence, one could start with logic and work to physics and ethics, which was common for the Greek Stoics. But it was not necessary to do so, since beginning with ethical questions would inevitably lead one to deal with logical issues and the study of nature. This way of thinking about philosophy helps make sense of a dialogue like the *Republic*, where Plato seems to throw in everything but the kitchen sink in what begins, ostensibly, as a discussion of justice.

The doctrinal reading of Plato is based primarily on dialogues, such as, *Symposium*, *Phaedo*, *Republic*, *Phaedrus*, and *Timaeus*. I shall focus on the *Republic* and the *Phaedo*, where what is referred to as the “Theory of Forms” and the doctrine of the immortality of the soul play a prominent role. The character Socrates says a number of different things about the Forms in these two dialogues, but he does not speak of a “Theory of Forms”; that is a label applied by later commentators. This is not simply a verbal quibble, because it is far from clear that Plato actually had a theory about the Forms.

There is no consensus among philosophers as to how to interpret the many different things said by the character Socrates about the Forms so as to yield a single coherent theory. Furthermore, there is a dialogue, *Parmenides*, where a young Socrates engages an old Parmenides and his student Zeno in a discussion of the idea of Forms that contains devastating criticisms of this idea. Socrates in this dialogue is unable to respond to these criticisms, and a number of philosophers have concluded that Plato had abandoned the idea as a result of these criticisms. Finally, there have been many philosophers, beginning with Aristotle, who do not think that the accounts of the Forms in these dialogues make sense. I am inclined to agree with Aristotle on this question, but I also think that Plato invoked the Forms as a way of articulating some philosophical intuitions that do make sense.

As we have seen, Socrates in *Euthyphro* sought without success to find a paradigm of piety that would enable him and others to distinguish pious from impious actions and persons. This can be read as an attempt on Socrates’ part to reach a reasoned consensus with Euthyphro, and other possible interlocutors, about the shared public meaning of the term “piety” in their society. But I think

6. Annas, *Platonic Ethics*, 109–10.

it is clear that Socrates, as depicted by Plato, was seeking a transcendental standard of piety that applies across the board, as opposed to a standard of piety that would represent a consensus of opinion among fifth-century Athenians, or those Athenians with whom he might chance to discuss the question.

The term “transcendental” is used in a number of different ways. What I have in mind is illustrated by the geometric proof in *Meno*. This proof is universally valid, not as a matter of fact, but as a matter of logic, regardless of whether it is recognized as such by any particular linguistic community. Similarly, modern scientists seek to find invariant mathematical relationships that hold across space and time in all frames of reference. The term “transcendental” applies because these invariant relationships are taken to be manifestations of the inherent structure of the universe. The belief that there are transcendental truths in this sense is commonly referred to as “realism” in academic philosophy.

Plato was a realist with regard to logical, mathematical, and evaluative truths. That is, he believed that there are universal standards or norms for these sorts of truths. His “Theory of Forms,” in its various manifestations, is an attempt to articulate and elucidate his realist intuitions about logic, mathematics, and value. On the other hand, Plato also believed that what we refer to as empirical truths are hopelessly confused because the phenomena themselves do not have a fixed determinate nature, but can be legitimately described in more than one way (479a). For example, someone who is tall by everyday standards might well be too short to be a center for an NBA team. Empirical observations are inherently dependent for their meaning on their empirical context, which itself is inconstant. Plato is not a realist regarding empirical claims and, hence, he rejects the idea of empirical knowledge. Sense perception yields opinion, which in his view is an unstable halfway house between ignorance and knowledge.

In the *Republic*, Plato draws a distinction between the visible and the intelligible as an ontological distinction between two different realms of existence (509d). Consequently, the fixed transcendental standards for logical, mathematical, and evaluative truths belong to a different realm, or world, than the empirical phenomena of everyday life. Nonetheless, Socrates speaks of the transcendental standards as somehow present in a confused and ambiguous state in these phenomena. For example, when we correctly judge that someone is beautiful or ugly, it is because s/he participates in or partakes of the Form of Beauty or Ugliness—or both at once. Unfortunately, there is no explanation of what participating in or partaking of actually means. Nor, in general, is it clear how an unchanging reality can be manifested in something that both is and is not at the same time. This same problem haunted Christian Platonism, where the nature of the relationship between a transcendent God and God’s creation is ultimately a mystery.

The problems with the “Theory of Forms” come to a head in Socrates’ account of the Form of the Good in the *Republic*. In that dialogue, Socrates de-

scribes the Good as “the unhypothetical first principle of everything” (511b). That is, the Good is the unconditioned self-authenticating condition of all the intelligible Forms. Socrates declines to even attempt to offer a reasoned account of the Form of the Good (506d). Instead, he compares the Good with the sun. The sun provides the light by means of which we can see that which is visible and is also the ultimate cause of the growth of plants and animals on earth. Similarly, the Good is that which enables us to understand the other Forms and intelligible mathematical entities, while at the same time being their origin.

The image of the sun is one of those cases where Plato’s poetic gifts swamp his critical philosophical acumen. It suggests that the Good is a kind of existing thing, alongside of other existing things, which at the same time is not really a particular existing thing at all. Once again I think Plato introduces an idea in the attempt to articulate an important philosophical intuition.

Plato, like many other ancient Greek philosophers, believed that the cosmos is a rationally intelligible totality that includes everything that exists, including human beings. This belief implies the possibility of what in contemporary science is referred to as a “theory of everything” or a “final theory.” Such a theory would have to satisfy what Leibniz called the principle of sufficient reason in which nothing exists simply as a brute, unexplained fact. Everything in the totality that is the cosmos would have an explanation. Plato’s conception of the Form of Good as the unconditioned condition of everything is his version of Leibniz’s principle of sufficient reason. The idea of the Good, like the idea of Forms in general, is a placeholder for a detailed rational account of logic, physics, and ethics that would elucidate these areas of inquiry and their inter-relationship.

Plato never gives us such an account. What he does provide are bits and pieces of the picture in his investigations of specific philosophical issues that arise in particular contexts. Unfortunately, these bits and pieces do not fit together to form a seamless whole, which does raise the question of the viability of a holistic understanding of the cosmos.

I want to briefly turn to another important Platonic doctrine—the immortality of the soul—that played an important role in Christian Platonism. The dramatic setting of the *Phaedo* is the day of Socrates’ death, and he and his friends engage in a discussion of the question of whether the soul is immortal. This is a long and complex dialogue that considers a number of different conceptions of the soul, as well as the meta-philosophical issue of what sorts of arguments are appropriate to answering this question.

In response to the latter, Socrates rejects the various theories of causality proposed by his predecessors and contemporaries, such as Anaxagoras, in favor of what he calls the safe form of explanation associated with the idea of the Forms. According to the safe answer, something is beautiful, for example, because of the presence of the Form of Beauty in it, or alternately, because it

shares in Beauty (97b–100e). This sounds like a tautology—a person is beautiful because s/he shares in beauty—but it introduces a robust bit of metaphysics. Similarly, when a human being is alive, s/he partakes of the Form of life, which is what gives them life. Socrates then identifies the Form of Life with the soul and identifies the human soul with the true self—that is, with that within us that is virtuous or vicious, rational or irrational. Forms in and of themselves are eternal and unchanging. Therefore, the Form of Life, the human soul, the true self, is immortal (105c–107a).

Simmias, one of the interlocutors, has reservations about the conclusion of this argument “in view of the importance of our subject and my low opinion of human weakness.” And Socrates responds, “You are not only right to say this . . . but our first hypotheses require clearer examination, even though we find them convincing” (107a–b).

Socrates’ response can be read as an expression of what has been called “fallibilism”—the view that our convictions are fallible, and may have to be modified, or given up entirely in the light of future evidence or analysis. Fallibilism is not the same as Academic Skepticism, because it does endorse accepting theoretical conclusions, whereas the latter recommends suspending judgment regarding philosophical doctrines. Nonetheless, adopting a fallibilistic reading of Plato’s doctrines does narrow the apparent gap between the skeptical and the doctrinal interpretations of Plato’s texts. As Julia Annas has concluded:

Skeptical Academics have to regard doctrinal Platonists as underestimating the problems that have to be overcome before we can finally commit ourselves to the truth of Platonic doctrines. Doctrinal Platonists have to think that the skeptical Academics overestimate these dangers. But each side can in principle respect what the other is doing.⁷

Christian Platonism

The movement that was to become Christianity faced two issues having to do with self-identity: on the one hand, the followers of Jesus had to define themselves in terms of their relationship to both Second Temple Judaism and the Judaism that was emerging after the destruction of the Temple in 70 CE; on the other hand, the members of the Jesus movement also had to define themselves politically, culturally, and intellectually in terms of their relationship to the Greco-Roman world. While I shall focus primarily on the conceptual aspects of this task, it must be kept in mind that these aspects were an integral part of a larger quite complex context.

The concept of God, or the divine, figured prominently in the cosmologies of the Middle Platonists, the Stoics, and the Aristotelians. Their concern was not with the question of whether the divine existed, but with its role in a rationally

7. Annas, *Platonic Ethics*, 23.

intelligible cosmos. In turning the concept of the divine into a rational cosmological principle, these philosophers rejected the ordinary, everyday religious beliefs and associated practices of the Greco-Roman world. In this respect they cleared the ground for a more philosophically oriented form of religion, which, I would suggest, was one of the reasons that early Christian thinkers were willing to utilize the conceptual resources of Greek philosophy. Early Christian thinkers were eclectic, appropriating Stoic, Aristotelian, and Platonic ideas, but it was the latter that was most influential in the first few centuries.

Belief in the immortality of the soul, where the soul is understood in Plato's sense as the true self, was widespread in the Greco-Roman world in which Christianity developed. Care of the soul, understood in these terms, is far more important than wealth or political power that serves only the needs and desires of the body. This Platonic conception of an immaterial soul provided a way to conceptualize the Jewish idea that human beings have been created in the image of God; it also provided the basis for a philosophical explanation of how human beings can have a relationship with an immaterial transcendent God. That is, if God is transcendent, then we as human beings can only have a relationship with God if we in some sense can transcend our all too human nature.

The belief that the soul is the true self that survives the death of the body is also a way of dealing with the obvious fact that we do not live in a just world where the righteous flourish and the wicked are punished for their misdeeds. This belief does have an effect on the lives of those who accept it in that it provides a reason for taking moral considerations into account even when that involves sacrificing one's own needs and interests, or one's life. In addition, it is also a way of making philosophical sense of Jesus' emphasis on the heart, as opposed to purely external standards of behavior.

Plato's conception of an immortal soul is systematically interconnected with his conceptions of the Form of the Good in the *Republic* in that the soul is one of those parts of the cosmos that are subsumed under the Good. It was very natural for Christian thinkers to synthesize this philosophical conception of the Good with the God of Abraham. For example, Platonic Forms, which function as the norms of knowledge and conduct, became ideas in the mind of God, through which God informs the material world so as to make it intelligible and provides us with the norms by which we are to live. Plato's dichotomy between the intelligible and the visible realms in the *Republic* became a way to explicate, on the one hand, the distinction between a transcendent God and his creation and, on the other hand, how the latter is a manifestation of the former. Furthermore, the myth of the cave where the prisoner journeys upward out of the shadows into the sunlight was interpreted in religious terms as the journey of the soul seeking to achieve union with God. In this view, the journey upward is a spiritual journey in which the soul is transformed.

Despite the attractiveness and plausibility of trying to meld Platonic philosophy with Christian belief and practice, I think the product was intellectually

unstable from the outset. Doctrines drawn from dialogues such as *Phaedo* and *Republic* were turned into dogmas by Christian thinkers with apparently no awareness that these doctrines might have to be modified or abandoned in the light of new evidence and arguments. Plato never provides anything like an argument for the idea of the Forms in his dialogues. Instead, this idea, like the idea that learning is recollection, is introduced at various points in different dialogues to serve various purposes.

Many have read Plato as a stark dogmatist regarding the Forms and other related doctrines, such as the immortality of the soul. I have suggested a more charitable reading for two reasons. On the one hand, the idea of Forms is empty of content. To believe that there are transcendental principles of justice, for example, does not tell us what those principles are or how to recognize them when we come across them. If we look at the positive account of justice as developed by the character Socrates in Books 2–4 of the *Republic*, the Forms do not make an appearance. Instead, Socrates bases his account on some observations about human nature and society and some thought experiments. This account stands or falls on its merits, like those provided by Aristotle, the Stoics, Hobbes, Locke, Marx, and John Rawls.

On the other hand, given Plato's own practices as a philosopher, he either is or ought to be a fallibilist regarding philosophical doctrines. His dialogues all begin in particular contexts with different people of varying philosophical abilities and perspectives. Many of the dialogues just break off without a final conclusion (*Euthyphro*); others do reach a conclusion that is not all that conclusive (*Phaedo*). In none of the dialogues does the character Socrates assume a "god's eye" perspective on the issues being discussed, as does Aristotle in his treatises. In all of the dialogues the readers or listeners are silent participants who are invited to continue the discussion after the written dialogue ends. If there is any criticism to be made of Plato, it is that the discussions never end. There is no last word. From a Platonic perspective the problem with Christianity is that there have been far too many "last words." When one dogma is rejected—papal infallibility—it is replaced by another dogma—the inerrancy of the Bible, a "paper pope."

Academic skepticism was also a product of Plato's own philosophical practices. Once the second-order practice of examining the rational basis of first-order beliefs and practices has been established, skepticism about the legitimacy of the latter is a permanent possibility. And there may be no viable theoretical alternative. For example, I think the attempt to meld the God of Abraham, as depicted in the Bible, with Platonic philosophical doctrines was a theoretical non-starter from the outset. Plato's conception of the Good and the Hebraic conception of God were fished from very different streams, such that Christian Platonism was always a strange unstable mix of *logos* and *mythos*. Plato's own writings are a mix of *logos* and *mythos*, but the latter is always in the service of the former, as he emphasizes in Book 10 of the *Republic*.

It does not follow, however, that what was needed is some other body of philosophical doctrines. For an Academic Skeptic the most rational policy is to resist the urge to explicate and justify first-order Christian beliefs and practices by means of philosophical theories. In the last analysis, Christian belief and practice has to stand or fall on its own merits, as does scientific or ethical belief and practice.

Concluding Remarks

At the outset of this paper I raised the question of why Plato's thought is largely ignored by those in contemporary philosophy who are attempting to make a case for religion or spirituality in our world. I think there are at least two reasons for this.

On the one hand, a form of dogmatic doctrinal Christian Platonism continued to be influential into the twentieth century in universities and colleges in the English-speaking world. This is the Platonism of Benjamin Jowett, whose translations and Christian interpretation of Plato's dialogues were the standard texts in courses on Plato. This is also the Platonism attacked by Nietzsche and Heidegger and those they have influenced in the contemporary world. And it has only been in the past few decades that the readings of Plato that I have discussed have taken hold, primarily among Plato scholars.

On the other hand, a form of philosophical idealism has dominated a great deal of contemporary thought in both the Continental and the Analytic traditions. Thomas Nagel has described this as the view that "the first person, singular or plural, is hiding at the bottom of everything we say or think."⁸ What Nagel has in mind is the idea that language and thought are socially constructed, and these are to be understood in terms of what *we* say, where "*we*" refers to some linguistic community. A variant of this view is that the common element is a shared "form of life," or "vocabulary," or "worldview." There is, in this view, no common meaning or truth outside of some linguistic framework that at bottom rests on a shared body of social practices and attitudes. Those for whom what *we* say is the last word frequently say things like, "there is no way to step outside of our thoughts" or "truth is always relative to one's linguistic framework."

If we identify idealism with Kant and Hegel, then what Nagel and I are referring to is a form of naturalized "linguistic idealism." Don Cupitt, for example, has defended this form of idealism, and it is also present in the work of the very influential American philosopher Richard Rorty. In Rorty's view, Plato is confused or wrong-headed in that, while Plato thinks he is in pursuit of transcendental truth existing "out there," he is in fact succeeding, when he

8. Nagel, *Last Word*, 3.

does succeed, in creating a new vocabulary within an already existing linguistic community. For Rorty, there is no “out there” to which our assertions do or do not correspond. There is and can only be the linguistic community of which one is a member.⁹ The views of Rorty have had a great deal of influence in the humanities, but have been largely rejected, or simply ignored, in the sciences. This is yet another example of the conflict between the “two cultures” first described many years ago by C. P. Snow. My money is on the science side of this conflict.

The natural sciences are now our primary authorities for understanding nature, including human nature. In particular, the Neo-Darwinian Theory of Evolution in conjunction with the results of Cognitive Science over the past few decades has in effect turned our understanding of human nature upside down. Despite rumors to the contrary, there is such a thing as human nature and it is a product of our evolutionary history. Not only do genes, operating in conjunction with our environments, determine the physical properties of individual human beings, there is evidence that some of our most basic ideas about space, time, and causality are “hard-wired” into our brains as a result of the process of evolution.

Furthermore, genes, which are embedded in DNA and RNA molecules, function in accordance with the laws of chemistry, which themselves are explicable in terms of the laws of physics. Hence, a large number of scientists and philosophers are convinced of the truth of a bottom up form of materialism, where the concept of matter is understood to refer to the fundamental sub-atomic constituents of the universe. In our present situation, any positive account of religion or spirituality is going to have to go through the sciences.

Of course, Plato would reject contemporary materialism. But many would say that his thought is simply irrelevant to our emerging scientific world. I believe that this is not the case. Rebecca Goldstein has argued in her delightful and insightful *Plato at the Googleplex*, that Plato would have been very much at home in contemporary mathematical physics and Cognitive Science, where he would have had some very pointed and relevant questions about the role of mind in nature.

9. Rorty was a swashbuckler who avoided academic jargon and did not mince words. A good account of his criticisms of Plato can be found in the first chapter of *Contingency* (1989).

Works Cited

- Annas, Julia. *Platonic Ethics, Old and New*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1999.
- Goldstein, Rebecca Newberger. *Plato at the Googleplex: Why Philosophy Won't Go Away*. New York: Pantheon, 2014.
- Hornblower, Simon and Antony Spawforth. *The Oxford Classical Dictionary*. 3d ed. New York: Oxford University Press, 1996.

- Nagel, Thomas. *The Last Word*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1997.
- Press, Gerald A., ed. *Who Speaks for Plato: Studies in Platonic Anonymity*. Lanham MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2000.
- Rawls, John. *A Theory of Justice*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1971.
- Rorty, Richard. *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989.

Hylotheism

Life as a Slide Show

Jarmo Tarkki

It is fair to state that religion and the word “god” do go together, although it has often been noted that of the major world religions, Buddhists do not worship gods or a God, and in Jainism there is no need for a creator God because the universe is believed to be eternal. While all religions do not have a clear concept of the divine or God, all beliefs in God are nestled in religion.

There is no doubt that the word “god” exists. But does “God” exist is another question. Does the word “god” designate an object or being (realism) or is it a name for the highest values or dimensions of human existence (non-realism or anti-realism, e.g., Ludwig Feuerbach)? Traditional theology has been quite preoccupied with the attributes of God, because God’s being, whatever it might be, was outside of human comprehension.

The word “god” in Wittgensteinian terms is an open-ended term; it has no one particular meaning until it is specified in a clearly defined matrix. Thus the tetragrammaton, YHWH, is one of the religious “theonyms” used by the Israelites to describe the national God of Israel. In this matrix, “God” has a particular meaning, although over time that meaning has changed considerably.

“Hylotheism” is a term used by Alvin J. Reines to describe his own understanding of the word “god.” While others use the term occasionally to denote various forms of pantheism and panentheism, Reines’s use of hylotheism has a very specific meaning. To illustrate where hylotheism is placed in relation to other interpretations, a mental “God-map” is helpful.

There are four categories under which historic expressions of the divine can be classified: theosupernaturalism, theopanism, theonaturalism, and atheonomatism.

Theosupernaturalism

In theosupernaturalism God is generally conceived as a person, a self-conscious being separate from the universe, external to the creation. Because the creator God is not part of the creation, there is absolutely nothing positive we can ever know about this God. Everything that we know, including knowledge itself, ideas, imagination, fantasies, and dreams are part of the universe or the totality

of the creation. Therefore, by definition any ideas that we may have about this God are something other than the true, utterly unknowable creator God who is outside of any direct human experience.

According to kataphatic theology, the infinite is known only through God's self-revelation. Both Judaism and Christianity are revelation-based religions: God appeared to Moses in a burning bush, in Christianity the second person of the Holy Trinity, Logos, becomes incarnate. But even here the very essence of God remains unknown.

According to apophatic or negative theology, the only things we know about God are descriptions of what God is not. We could, for example, state that God is not not-wise, but we could not say that God is wise, because we have no way of imagining what divine, external to the creation, wisdom might be. To say that a wall is blind is meaningless because walls do not have the potentiality of seeing. To say that God is wise would be analogous to saying that walls are blind. Logically, apophatic theology (we can say that x is not not- x , but we cannot say that x is x) does not make much sense and therefore apophatic theology at times seems funny, which it is, but it is fun.

Johannes Scottus Eriugena (c. 800–c. 877) was much influenced by Pseudo-Dionysius of Areopagite (late fifth or early sixth century), a very influential theologian and philosopher whom Thomas Aquinas alone reportedly quoted over 1700 times. Eriugena's translation of Dionysius' work, *Corpus Dionysii*, a gift given to Charles the Bald's father, Louis the Pious, by Michael the Stammerer in 827, rekindled interest in apophatic theology in the Middle Ages. Dionysius' influence is clearly present in Eriugena's reported statement at Charles the Bald's court in 840 that summarizes apophatic theology succinctly: "We do not know what God is. God Himself does not know what He is because He is not anything. Literally God is not, because He transcends being."

Maimonides (1138–1204), arguably the greatest Jewish philosopher of the Medieval Age, concluded his own meditations on apophatic theology claiming that we have understood the term "God" properly if and when the word "God" is uttered and absolutely nothing comes to our mind. I prefer this theology because I have not been able to figure out on my own what the term "God" actually means. Perhaps, at least in the Maimonidean sense, I have come closer to understanding what the true "God" is as I continue to become less and less knowledgeable about the true God. Lloyd Geering stated essentially the same thing: "The God that is known is an idol. The God who can be defined is no God."¹

Interestingly, God defined as totally separate from the universe, cannot exist, and cannot be, by definition a being like we are. Existence is an attribute that can be predicated only of the creation, just as all beings are part of the creation.

1. Geering, *Reimagining God*, 15.

Thus God is not an existent being, but something utterly different. What some thinkers, for example, Thomas Aquinas, have stated is that we cannot say that God exists, but we can say God is.

Apophatic theology has also gained meaningful popularity in postmodern theology. At least it gives the appearance of being sophisticated in spite of the fact that we are attempting to describe the indescribable. It is similar to Kant's "das Ding an sich," the thing-in-itself that is by definition permanently unknowable. But how would we know that something is unknowable beyond the tools of knowing? Apophatic theology, in attempting to define the word "God," suffers from a form of what G. E. Moore called "naturalistic fallacy"; to say that God is not not-wise is to say something about human wisdom without saying anything about God. Should we take Wittgenstein seriously and conclude "Wovon man nicht sprechen kann, darüber muß man schweigen?"²

Theosupernaturalism among the Israelites started as polytheism, belief that there are many gods. Over time polytheism evolved into henotheism, admission that there are many gods, but only one tribal God is considered to be supreme. The first commandment is an expression of this phase of the evolution in the understanding of the divine. Belief in one God, monotheism, developed during the postexilic period, during the time of the Second Temple (538 BCE onwards). The monotheistic God is a person, a self-conscious being who performs miracles at will. True believers can specifically request miracles. Using priests, saints, or the Virgin Mary to obtain miracles is believed to be advantageous.

Over time monotheism developed into theistic absolutism, that is, God is the omnipotent, omniscient, and omnibenevolent supreme being. This is the concept that exposes itself to a myriad of problems. Perhaps the most challenging one is omnipotency. Can God create a rock that is so large that God cannot lift it up? Regardless how the question is answered, God of theistic absolutism is in trouble. Or can God be not God? Can x be not- x and still remain x ? Is the God of theistic absolutism liberated from the rules of logic? If so, then God would indeed be beyond any human comprehension. If not, then something would rule supreme over the Supreme Being, that is, rules of logic—unless, as has been suggested, the rules of logic are part of the nature of God.

A second major challenge is the problem of theodicy: whatever God wills must be good because God is omnibenevolent. Whatever God wills must happen because God is omnipotent. Because God is omniscient, God is well aware of the moral quality of what is willed. So all things that appear to us as evil must in fact be good. Failure to see everything as good is due to our imperfect knowledge; the ways of God are mysterious, secret, and unknown to us.

However, if we were able to identify E. S. Brightman's "dysteleological surd," something that is so inherently and intrinsically evil that absolutely no good can

2. Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, no. 7.

conceivably emerge out of it, then theistic absolutism would be refuted. Reines offers two examples: the Holocaust and a child born with AIDS. How could we express these in terms of good, some good that inherently resides in these instances? How could one “improve” the Holocaust?

The “four horsemen” of modern atheism, Richard Dawkins, Daniel Dennett, Sam Harris, and Christopher Hitchens, have successfully and triumphantly challenged theistic absolutism. While they all do a great service to modern theology by debunking theistic absolutism, we must keep in mind that few, if any, serious modern theologians have attempted to defend theistic absolutism as described by the four horsemen, for the exact reasons they present.

Theonaturalism

God is conceived, as above, separate from the universe, as the creator of the natural universe or is an essential part of processes that bring the natural universe into existence. While God can be conceived of as a person or impersonally, there are no miracles. Natural laws govern the universe without divine interruptions. Certain forms of deism and hylotheism are examples of theonaturalism. Deism emerged during the Age of Enlightenment as a more rational and more justifiable view of the divine than theistic absolutism. The leaders of both the French and American revolutions were influenced by this fashionable philosophy of its own time.

According to the classical form of deism, God is a person who created the universe, set it in motion (as an Aristotelian prime mover), and subsequently left it alone; natural events occur naturally without divine intervention, there is no supernatural providence over the creation, nor is there any supernatural divine revelation. This concept avoids the pitfalls of theodicy; of course, there is evil in the world because God is not present nor has anything to do with anything in the entire creation.

Theopanism

God is conceived not separate from the universe. Pantheism and pantheism are examples of theopanism. Giordano Bruno presented an idea about an infinite but immanent God. The Catholic Church preferred another view and burned him at the stake in 1600. In 1675 Baruch Spinoza in *The Ethics* popularized what Charles Hartshorne called “Classical Pantheism.” Many thinkers, and even American presidents, have embraced pantheism. William Herndon, Abraham Lincoln’s law partner and friend, wrote:

Mr. Lincoln’s religion is too well known to me to allow even a shadow of a doubt; he is or was a Theist and a Rationalist, denying all extraordinary, supernatural inspiration or revelation. . . . At one time in his life, to say the least, he

was an elevated Pantheist, doubting the immortality of the soul as the Christian world understands that term. He believed that the soul lost its identity and was immortal as a force. Subsequent to this, he rose to the belief of a God, and this is all the change he ever underwent. I speak knowing what I say. He was a noble man—a good great man for all this.³

Pantheism, the view that God includes the universe in God's being and that it extends beyond the universe, is embraced by many modern thinkers, notably Jesus Seminar scholar Marcus Borg.⁴

Atheonomatism

Atheonomatism, which includes atheism and agnosticism, is the view that the word "God" has no meaning in reality; "God" does not refer to an actual being, there is no designative usage for it. In this regard some remarkable Christian theologians were atheonomatists, but not atheists, as for example Thomas Aquinas, who argued that God has no body, God is nobody and thus not a being. Martin Luther argued similarly, writing in the explanation of the first commandment in his Large Catechism: "Whatever your heart clings to and confides in, that is really your God." Luther, along with many others, was a nominalist or non-realist. The word "God" does not refer to a real being but is a name for all that is of highest value in our lives. In this sense both Aquinas and Luther were atheonomatists, in good company with atheists and agnostics.

While for atheists the word "God" produces an unpleasant effect, for Abraham Cronbach it created pleasant effects. He used the term "God" in the sense of it creating impressions without any designative use. In this regard Cronbach was not an atheist while being an atheonomatist.⁵

Hylotheism

According to Alvin J. Reines, the term "God" as it is commonly used refers to that which brings into existence that which is. For both the perceived, through our senses, and conceived, through our minds, world, whatever the reason is that produces or makes these experiences possible is termed "God." God is the creator of our world experience.

Sensa and selfa

Our world is brought to us in part through our five senses; the world is perceived by us. What we experience as our world is a collection of individual

3. Adams, "'Pantheist' Lincoln would be unelectable today."

4. Borg, *The God We Never Knew*.

5. Cronbach, *The Realities of Religion*, 37–38. Cronbach would, e.g., tell children: "God

sensum, in plural *sensa* or sense-data. *Sensa* are a product transmitted to us through our five senses from the extramental world.⁶ Propositions that carry information about the extramental world, *sensa*, are subject to verifiability. *Sensa* constitute evidence that is not self-data.

Another part of our experienced world is intramental, that is, all those world experiences that we did not receive as *sensa*, are called *selfum*, in plural *selfa* or self-data. *Selfa* form the evidence that make up our intramental life, they occur in our psyche alone. Experiences that occur in the psyche alone are not perceived, they are only conceived and are not subject to verifiability.

Both *sensa* and *selfa* exist only as long as they are present in our awareness, for as long as we are aware of them. The only entities that we experience are *sensa* and *selfa*, and together they form what we call being.⁷ Therefore, without *sensa* and *selfa*, that is, if only one of them is experienced, there is no being. Perception and conception, *sensa* and *selfa* together, are a necessary matrix for being.

A misinterpreted *selfum* is a *selfum* that has been understood as a representation of the extramental world.⁸ The assessment of what *selfa* are misinterpreted is subjective, no objective evidence can be brought to support the claim that a specific *selfa* is or is not provided from the extramental world.

Thus I consider reports of mystical experiences of the divine or spirits of the dead as *selfa*. Efforts to make them extramental result from misinterpreted *selfa* and are therefore futile; *selfa* are by definition subjective. However, someone who claims to have had mystical experiences may indeed consider them to be *sensa*. Because no objective evidence is available to prove or disprove them, these claims are simply *dixit* evidence to those who have been told about the mystical experiences but who have not had any direct experience of what has been reported. Arguments about these are generally spectacularly unproductive, and one might be wise to stay away from arguing about someone else's *selfa*.

loves you." The point was not to tell the children anything about a being called God but to say: "I like you." This impressive use of the word "God" may be familiar to many in the clergy.

6. Whether the extramental world exists apart from our experiencing it is irrelevant here. Whatever the causes for sensing the extramental world are, the important point is that we have that experience.

7. George Berkeley: *Esse est percipi, (aut percipere)* ("to be is to be perceived [or to perceive]"). Reines would argue, "to be is to perceive and conceive."

8. Illusions, hallucinations, and delusions would be examples of *selfa* that become misinterpreted if they were to be taken as representations of extramental reality. Are there misinterpreted *sensa*, *sensa* that are understood to be representations of intramental world? Reines does not consider this, perhaps because it would be rather strange if a person would consider something perceived and empirically verifiable to be solely in the intramental world. Perhaps a solipsist would argue that, but then for solipsists all that there is would be intramental.

Hylotheism: God as the Enduring Possibility of Being

The term hylotheism has occasionally been used to refer to forms of pantheism and panentheism, in which God and the material universe are one. Here *hyle* is interpreted to mean “matter” or “corporeality” or even “extension.” However, Alvin J. Reines uses the term *hyle* in the Aristotelian sense of “potentiality” or “possibility of being.”

Two forms of existence can be distinguished: the possible and the actual. Thus, for example, clay is matter but at the same time possesses the capacity of being formed into a bust. Clay possesses potentiality but lacks actuality, it is a not-yet-bust. But clay has endurance far beyond a bust. So while a bust has actuality, it lacks endurance. A hylotheistic deity, as defined by Reines, is the “enduring possibility of being” that has both endurance (possibility of existence endures) and actuality in any being (*sensa* and *selfa*). Possible existence endures but suffers from lack of actuality. Being possesses actuality but does not endure. In the hylotheistic deity the two distinct forms of existence are combined.

For Reines, hylotheism must be chosen over other views of deity by Occam’s razor; unnecessary assumptions should be eliminated and the simplest of competing views should be preferred over more complex ones. There is no compelling reason to predicate of the godhead the following three attributes: personhood, omniperfection, and the absolute power to overcome nothingness.⁹ The only assumption in hylotheism is that it postulates that there is someone who is experiencing something and in that experience potentiality is actualized. Whenever a potentiality is actualized, that is where hylotheistic deity occurs and is therefore verified. In other words, whenever we either perceive or conceive the world, the existence of hylotheistic deity shows up to provide the show.

Hylotheistic deity is obviously not a person, a self-conscious being, but rather a pure process¹⁰ through and in which the world is experienced. Perhaps the easiest way to imagine hylotheism is to think of a slide projector. Every slide presents a new possibility of existence. Once a particular slide is shown, it actualizes as a picture, a picture that mere moments earlier was only a potentiality. As long as there are slides, the show will go on. One could imagine one’s life as a very long slide show. The divine occurs in the process of slides moving from

9. No objective evidence exists for any of these attributes. Reines believes that their source “is unconscious projection of parental imagoes onto extramental reality.” Reines, “Hylotheism: A Theology of Pure Process,” 258–59.

10. According to Reines, process theologies are hybrids, not pure. The divine is described as partly static or immutable and partly dynamic or mutable. A hylotheist conceives the deity as entirely and always becoming. Deity is about *venir*, as John Caputo would state. Reines, “Hylotheism: A Theology of Pure Process,” 264.

potentiality to actuality. The hylotheistic deity has no existence apart from this very process, in fact, the process is the deity.

Challenges

Reines proposes that any concept of God should be subject to empirical evidence. He sees that hylotheism is based on empirical evidence, for every actual experienced moment confirms being, being that is produced or “created” by *sensa* and *selfa*.

Reines points out repeatedly that hylotheism is his personal view and should not necessarily be anyone else’s view. His major work in the philosophy of religion is centered on the notion of polydoxy. According to this view, everyone has the right to his or her own religious views, and no one has the right to take that right away from anyone else. A person’s religious freedom ends where another person’s religious freedom begins. Reines hesitated to bring up his own God-view, and he did that somewhat reluctantly at the repeated requests of his students.

One of the challenges is how should we understand *hyle* in hylotheism. What exactly is the “enduring possibility?” Do we even have to assume that there is nothing else but *sensa* and *selfa*, why should we assume that there is a possibility for them? We do have knowledge of *sensa* and *selfa*. That is what our “doing being” (or simply being alive) is all about.

Another challenge is Reines’s requirement of having both *sensa* and *selfa* present to constitute “being.” What if a person has lost all five senses and cannot even potentially experience *sensa*? That person would still be a person, a self-conscious being, albeit that existence is very difficult for us to imagine. Conceivably that person would have some *selfa*. However, given Reines’s description of “being,” that person would not be a being. What would this person then be—a half-being?

Thirdly, hylotheism is challenging to explain and not easily comprehended. It requires philosophical knowledge that most people do not have. Also, many of the details are subject to challenges in addition to the aforementioned ones. Many of these relate to epistemological questions. Some of them have been stated by David Day Griffin in his article “Modern and Postmodern Liberal Theology: A Response to Alvin Reines.”

Conclusion

Hylotheism, in spite of the many challenges, is a concept of God that commands our attention. Alongside some other views, modern versions of pantheism and panentheism, John Caputo’s “weakness of God,” and others, hylotheism is one of the more solidly argued views.

I am deeply indebted to Alvin J. Reines,¹¹ a one time student of Paul Tillich and a Maimonides expert teaching at Hebrew Union College, his many writings, and personal friendship that started in 1978 and continued until his death in 2004. I had the fortune of being his teaching assistant and editor of some of his works. Not only did I learn immensely from him about philosophy, and Jewish philosophy in particular, but I learned how to argue vigorously, robustly, and loudly. This kind of rabbinical tradition of creative learning was rather different from my pietistic Finnish Lutheran tradition, where solemn and pious silence was often preferred and mistaken for profundity. It feels good to be liberated from my roots.

11. Some of Alvin Reines's writings can be found in full text here: <http://polydoxoinstitute.org/>.

Works Cited

- Adams, Guy. "'Pantheist' Lincoln would be unelectable today." *The Independent* (April 16, 2011).
- Borg, Marcus. *The God We Never Knew: Beyond Dogmatic Religion to a More Authentic Contemporary Faith*. San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1997.
- Cronbach, Abraham. *The Realities of Religion*. New York: Bookman, 1957.
- Geering, Lloyd. *Reimagining God: The Faith Journey of a Modern Heretic*. Salem OR: Polebridge, 2014.
- Griffin, David Day. "Modern and Postmodern Liberal Theology: A Response to Alvin Reines." Pp. 289–308 in *Jewish Theology and Process Thought*. Ed. Sandra B. Lubarsky and David Day Griffin. Albany: State University of New York Press, 1996.
- Reines, Alvin J. "Hylotheism: A Theology of Pure Process." Pp. 255–87 in *Jewish Theology and Process Thought*. Ed. Sandra B. Lubarsky and David Day Griffin. Albany: State University of New York Press, 1996.
- Reines, Alvin J. *Polydoxy: Explorations in a Philosophy of Liberal Religion*. Buffalo: Prometheus Books, 1987.
- Reines, Alvin J. "The Word God." *Polydoxy* 4,1 (1979).
- Wittgenstein, Ludwig. *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*. Mineola NY: Dover Publications, 1999.