The Blackwell Companion to Postmodern Theology

Edited by
Graham Ward
University of Manchester
“Connecting theology to a variety of disciplines and intellectual traditions, this companion provides an exciting sample of the current work of postmodern theologians. Many of the essays are ground-breaking, as the fields of theology and religious thought move forward into the next century. This is a valuable sequel to Ward’s The Postmodern God!”

Robert Gibbs, University of Toronto

“If you think you know what postmodern theology is, or think you don’t know, either way these remarkable essays will change your mind: written by Jews, Christians and atheists; indebted to Plato, the Bible and Augustine; haunted by Heidegger, Levinas, Foucault and Derrida; dealing with jazz, the Shoah, the ecological crisis, the American prison system and many other topics; some long and patient, others short and cryptic, all asking to be read more than once; . . . You may still not know at the end but you will certainly have seen the variety and vitality of what theologians are doing, in these postmodern times, and the zest with which they do it.”

Fergus Kerr O.P., Regent of Blackfriars, Oxford

“Among the delights of this collection are the essays that dare to reconsider some of the ‘bad guys’ in the official postmodern story: thus Catherine Pickstock endeavours of rescue Plato from his Nietzschean decriers by rereading the Republic through the Laws to offer an account of Plato’s politics as liturgical rather than totalitarian; while Jean-Luc Marion even seeks to learn from the much-despised Descartes.”

Literature & Theology

“[A] useful and exciting volume, bringing together the work of religious scholars and theologians across a wide spectrum, creating space for their current work independently from a given theme, showing them sometimes in agreement, sometimes in heated argument with each other.”

Anglican Theological Review
Blackwell Companions to Religion

*The Blackwell Companions to Religion* series presents a collection of the most recent scholarship and knowledge about world religions. Each volume draws together newly-commissioned essays by distinguished authors in the field, and is presented in a style which is accessible to undergraduate students, as well as scholars and the interested general reader. These volumes approach the subject in a creative and forward-thinking style, providing a forum in which leading scholars in the field can make their views and research available to a wider audience.

Published

*The Blackwell Companion to Judaism*
Edited by Jacob Neusner and Alan J. Avery-Peck

*The Blackwell Companion to Sociology of Religion*
Edited by Richard K. Fenn

*The Blackwell Companion to the Hebrew Bible*
Edited by Leo G. Perdue

*The Blackwell Companion to Postmodern Theology*
Edited by Graham Ward

*The Blackwell Companion to Hinduism*
Edited by Gavin Flood

*The Blackwell Companion to Political Theology*
Edited by Peter Scott and William T. Cavanaugh

*The Blackwell Companion to Protestantism*
Edited by Alister E. McGrath and Darren C. Marks

*The Blackwell Companion to Modern Theology*
Edited by Gareth Jones

*The Blackwell Companion to Christian Ethics*
Edited by Stanley Hauerwas and Samuel Wells

*The Blackwell Companion to Religious Ethics*
Edited by William Schweiker

Forthcoming

*The Blackwell Companion to the Study of Religion*
Edited by Robert A. Segal

*The Blackwell Companion to Eastern Christianity*
Edited by Ken Parry

*The Blackwell Companion to Christian Spirituality*
Edited by Arthur Holder

*The Blackwell Companion to the Bible and Culture*
Edited by John Sawyer and Paul Fletcher

*The Blackwell Companion to the New Testament*
Edited by David Aune

*The Blackwell Companion to Contemporary Islamic Thought*
Edited by Ibrahim Abu-Rabi
The Blackwell Companion to Postmodern Theology

Edited by
Graham Ward
University of Manchester
To
Martha, Grace and Nicola

υμεῖς γὰρ ἐστε ἡ δόξα ἡμῶν καὶ ἡ χαρά
(1 Thess. 2.20)
## Contents

List of Contributors x  
Introduction: “Where We Stand” xii  
*Graham Ward*

### Part I  Aesthetics  

1 Postmodern Theology as Cultural Analysis  
*Mieke Bal*  
3  

2 The Man Who Fell to Earth  
*Gerard Loughlin*  
24  

3 Communion and Conversation  
*Regina M. Schwartz*  
48  

4 The Ends of Man and the Future of God  
*Janet Martin Soskice*  
68  

5 “Lush Life”: Foucault’s Analytics of Power and a Jazz Aesthetic  
*Sharon D. Welch*  
79

### Part II  Ethics  

6 The Midwinter Sacrifice  
*John Milbank*  
107
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chapter</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Author</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Postmodernity and Religious Plurality: Is a Common Global Ethic Possible or Desirable?</td>
<td>Gavin D’Costa</td>
<td>131</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>The Christian Difference, or Surviving Postmodernism</td>
<td>Stanley Hauerwas</td>
<td>144</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>Justice and Prudence: Principles of Order in the Platonic City</td>
<td>Catherine Pickstock</td>
<td>162</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>Visiting Prisoners</td>
<td>William C. Placher</td>
<td>177</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>Suffering and Incarnation</td>
<td>Graham Ward</td>
<td>192</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>Earth God: Cultivating the Spirit in an Ecocidal Culture</td>
<td>Mark I. Wallace</td>
<td>209</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><strong>Part III Gender</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13</td>
<td>An Ethics of Memory: Promising, Forgiving, Yearning</td>
<td>Pamela Sue Anderson</td>
<td>231</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14</td>
<td>Is Macrina a Woman? Gregory of Nyssa’s <em>Dialogue on the Soul and Resurrection</em></td>
<td>Virginia Burrus</td>
<td>249</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15</td>
<td>“They Will Know We are Christians by Our Regulated Improvisation”: Ecclesial Hybridity and the Unity of the Church</td>
<td>Mary McClintock Fulkerson</td>
<td>265</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16</td>
<td>On Changing the Imaginary</td>
<td>Grace M. Jantzen</td>
<td>280</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><strong>Part IV Hermeneutics</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18</td>
<td>Shattering the Logos: Hermeneutics Between a Hammer and a Hard Place</td>
<td>Daniel Boyarin</td>
<td>311</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19</td>
<td>The Renewal of Jewish Theology Today: Under the Sign of Three</td>
<td></td>
<td>324</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Peter Ochs

20 Intending Transcendence: Desiring God
   Edith Wyschogrod

Part V  Phenomenology

21 Transfiguring God
   Richard Kearney

22 Presence and Parousia
   Jean-Yves Lacoste

23 The Formal Reason for the Infinite
   Jean-Luc Marion

24 Religions as Conventions
   Joseph S. O’Leary

Part VI  Heideggerians

25 The Self-Saving of God
   Thomas J. J. Altizer

26 The Subject of Prayer: Unwilling Words in the Postmodern Access to God
   Laurence Paul Hemming

27 The Christian Message and the Dissolution of Metaphysics
   Gianni Vattimo

Part VII  Derrideans

28 The Poetics of the Impossible and the Kingdom of God
   John D. Caputo

29 Anti-Discrimination
   Don Cupitt

30 Is There a Postmodern Gospel?
   Walter Lowe

31 Indian Territory: Postmodernism Under the Sign of the Body
   Carl Raschke

Index
List of Contributors

**Thomas J. J. Altizer** is Professor Emeritus of Religious Studies at the State University of New York.

**Pamela Sue Anderson** is Fellow in Philosophy and Christian Ethics, Regent’s Park College, Oxford.

**Mieke Bal** is Professor of the Theory of Literature, University of Amsterdam, and A. D. White Professor-at-Large, Cornell University.

**Daniel Boyarin** is Professor of Talmudic Culture at the University of California, Berkeley.

**Virginia Burrus** is Associate Professor of Early Church History at Drew University.

**John D. Caputo** is David R. Cook Professor of Philosophy at Villanova University.

**Gavin D'Costa** is Reader in Christian Theology at the University of Bristol.

**Don Cupitt** is a Fellow of Emmanuel College, Cambridge.

**Mary McClintock Fulkerson** is Associate Professor of Theology at Duke University, Divinity School.

**Stanley Hauerwas** is the Gilbert T. Rowe Professor of Theological Ethics at Duke University, Divinity School.

**Laurence Paul Hemming** is a lecturer in Systematic Theology at Heythrop College, University of London.

**Gavin Hyman** is Lecturer in Religious Studies at the University of Lancaster.

**Grace M. Jantzen** is Research Professor of Religion, Culture, and Gender at the University of Manchester.

**Serene Jones** is Associate Professor of Theology at Yale Divinity School.
Richard Kearney is Professor of Philosophy at University College, Dublin and Visiting Professor of Philosophy at Boston College.

Jean-Yves Lacoste is a Life Fellow of Clare Hall, Cambridge.

Gerard Loughlin is Senior Lecturer in Christian Theology, Ethics, and Philosophy of Religion at the University of Newcastle upon Tyne.

Walter Lowe is Professor of Systematic Theology at the Candler School of Theology, Emory University.

Jean-Luc Marion is Professor of Philosophy at the University of Paris, Sorbonne and Visiting Professor at the University of Chicago.

John Milbank is the Frances Myers Ball Professor of Philosophical Theology at the University of Virginia.

Peter Ochs is the Edgar Bronfman Professor of Modern Judaic Studies at the University of Virginia.

Joseph S. O’Leary teaches Philosophy of Religion at Sophia University, Japan.

Catherine Pickstock is a Lecturer in Philosophy of Religion at the University of Cambridge and a Fellow of Emmanuel College, Cambridge.

William C. Placher is Charles D. and Elizabeth S. LaFollette Professor in the Humanities at Wabash College, Indiana.

Carl Raschke is Professor of Religious Studies at the University of Denver.

Regina M. Schwartz is Professor of English at Northwestern University and Director of the Institute of Religion, Ethics, and Violence.

Janet Martin Soskice is Lecturer in Christian Theology at the University of Cambridge and Fellow of Jesus College, Cambridge.

Gianni Vattimo is Professor of Philosophy at the University of Turin.

Mark I. Wallace is Associate Professor in the Department of Religion, Swarthmore College.

Graham Ward is Professor of Contextual Theology in the Department for Religions and Theology at the University of Manchester.

Sharon D. Welch is Professor of Religious Studies and Women’s Studies at the University of Missouri.

Edith Wyschogrod is J. Newton Rayzor Professor of Philosophy and Religious Thought at Rice University.
Introduction: “Where We Stand”

Graham Ward

In the spring of 1829 Thomas Carlyle composed his eloquent, yet biting essay Signs of the Times. Much later, in 1848, Matthew Arnold would publish his own condemnation of soulless materialism and utilitarian functionalism in Culture and Anarchy, and Ruskin would follow, in 1861, with his essays in Unto This Last. But it is with Carlyle’s essay that we begin because he recognized early, before Marx, what later became known as the sociology of knowledge. He knew the importance of asking about where we stand.

We were wise indeed, could we discern truly the signs of our own time; and by that knowledge of its wants and advantages, wisely adjust our own position to it. Let us, instead of gazing idly into the obscure distance, look calmly around us, for a little, on the perplexed scene where we stand. Perhaps, on a more serious inspection, something of its perplexity will disappear, some of its distinctive characters and deeper tendencies more clearly reveal themselves; whereby our own relations to it, our own true aims and endeavours in it, may also become clearer.¹

Postmodernity promises neither clarification nor the disappearance of perplexity. It is debatable whether theology promises these things either. Nevertheless, Carlyle’s call to take stock of where we stand is pertinent, for the whole conception of there being a distinctive “postmodern theology” rests upon the notion that our thinking and our cultural/historical context are profoundly related. And part of what I wish to investigate in this Introduction is the profundity of that relationship – the ways in which theological speaking and doing are implicated in contemporary culture, both as its products and its producers.
Introduction: “Where We Stand”

Where We Are Now

In 1998 Nicholas Boyle produced a stimulating collection of essays entitled Who Are We Now? Christian Humanism and the Global Market from Hegel to Heaney. My question is different (the existence of the unity of any subject that can be so strictly identified with the interrogative pronoun “Who” is doubtful), but my theological enquiry into our contemporary situation is similar. My question is: “Where are we now?” And before I begin to answer that question with respect to what is variously termed “the end of modernity,” “late-capitalism,” “post-Fordism,” “postmodernism,” and “globalism,” I wish to distinguish between two forms of cultural transformation.

The first form is a transformation within the logics of a certain movement. This transformation might radicalize elements already apparent within an historical epoch. For example, the postmodern thinking on the aesthetics of the sublime by Jean-François Lyotard (one of the earliest to write theoretically about the phenomenon of postmodernity) extends Kant’s own analysis of the sublime in his *Critique of Judgement*. This form of transformation may develop what is already there in the tradition.

The second form of transformation is a radical break with the cultural logic of the past or present. The postmodern thinking of Michel de Certeau wishes to examine the Christ event as “an inaugurating rupture,” and several poststructural thinkers employ words like “rupture,” “diachrony,” and “event” to mark an encounter with a wholly Other whose difference cannot be calibrated within the continuities of narrative. The Other fractures the symbolic systems that constitute any given cultural milieu. Some cultural analysts suggest postmodernity performs such a radical break with respect to the thinking and practices of modernity. I, along with others, would question that. Nevertheless, the times always change and when we come to recognize that change then consciousness marks a present situation from a past one.

I believe this distinction between two forms of cultural transformation is important when assessing where we are now, or, to put it more theologically, when we read the signs of the times. For whatever label we place on the present cultural scene – and a very Westernized, Americanized scene it is – the context issues from complex forms of transformation. Put briefly, the cultural situation we find ourselves in both develops certain themes evident in modernity (like the social arena as composed of barely repressed struggles and competitions regulated through contract), but also breaks with categories that maintained the hegemony of modernity (its naturalisms, positivisms, essentialisms, dualisms, and humanisms, for example). I am going to label where we are now “postmodernity.” I do this because some of the other labels (post-Fordism, late-capitalism, even globalism) are too tied to economic discourse and I want to demonstrate that where we are now is not simply a place economists can define. To understand economics is fundamental for understanding history (Marx has taught us that), but the postmodern condition as Frederic Jameson and David
Harvey (both left-wing thinkers) now see is not simply the effect of free-market capitalism. Things are more complicated. Neither does the current fashion for describing where we are as at “the end” of something – the end of history (for Fukuyama), the end of metaphysics (for Derrida), the end of modernity (for Vattimo), the end of art (for Danto) – actually tell us anything. It simply spatializes time and maps us at the end of a promontory. Such labels can inform us about the current cultural scene in terms of the first form of transformation, but not the second. So, like Jameson, I can say

I occasionally get just as tired of the slogan of “postmodernism” as anyone else, but when I am tempted to regret my complicity with it, to deplore its misuses and its notoriety, and to conclude with some reluctance that it raises more problems than it solves, I find myself pausing to wonder whether any other concept can dramatize the issue in quite so effective and economical a fashion.

Unlike Jameson, I do want to continue to maintain a distinction between postmodernism and postmodernity. It is not a watertight distinction, but it is functional and, as I will demonstrate, helpful. I follow Lyotard in seeing postmodernity as the other side that haunts the modern – Lyotard even suggests it comes before modernism, making it possible. It is characterized, according to Lyotard, by its acceptance of the plural and the rejection of grand narratives of progress and explanation. It is also characterized by a nonfoundationality, a hybridity, an appeal to a certain excess, the employment of masks, irony, anti-realism, and self-conscious forms of representation. As such postmodernism is both an aesthetic and a critical moment within the ideology of the modern. It is, on the one hand, a matter of style – Pop Art and John Portman buildings – and, on the other, a genre of theoretical para-Marxist writing. The Baroque and Weimar culture of the 1920s has been viewed by historians like Stephen Toulmin as protopostmodern. Writers like Rabelais, Kierkegaard, Mallarmé and, of course, Nietzsche are then viewed as protopostmodern. What postmodernism suggests is that a certain social sea-change is occurring; new emphases and sensibilities are making themselves felt and older ways of looking at and explaining the significance of the world are becoming otiose or no longer credible. If I were asked what was the substance of those emphases and sensibilities, then, very broadly, I would say (and this returns us to the theological) that the death of God had brought about the prospect of the reification and commodification (theologically termed idolatry), not only of all objects, but of all values (moral, aesthetic, and spiritual). We have produced a culture of fetishes or virtual objects. For now everything is not only measurable and priced, it has an image. It is the image which now governs what is both measured and priced. And so the age of the Promethean will to power – in which human beings rationally measure, calculate, predict, and control – turns into the age of Dionysian diffusion, in which desire is governed by the endless production and disseminan-
tion of floating signifiers. Furthermore, this cultural sea-change was paralleled by the closing down of a certain political space for credible challenge. That is, it paralleled the weakening of socialism – the one discourse that, in a galloping secularism, had been able to arrest the social conscience for more than a hundred years.

We can see these two cultural changes taking place – the production of what Guy Debord, nearly thirty years before the development of virtual reality, termed “society’s real unreality,” and a realization of the ineffectiveness of any cultural critique – in an astonishing essay written by Michel de Certeau in August 1968, following the riots in Paris. The essay is called, significantly, “A Symbolic Revolution.” It argues that the May riots had left in their wake the sense of a cultural trauma and the explicit feeling of powerlessness:

Something that had been tacit began to stir; something that invalidates the mental hardware built for stability. Its instruments were also part of what shifted, went awry. They referred to something unthinkable, which late May, was unveiled while being contested: values taken to be self-evident; social exchanges, the progress of which was enough to define their success; commodities, the possession of which represented happiness.

The principles of established order have become questionable and what remains is a “hole, opened by a society that calls itself into question.” It is a hole that cannot be covered over; nor can it be avoided. No quick-fix solutions like a better division of goods or the call for true community are credible. And yet de Certeau ends his essay on a rhetorical high, speaking of “revolution,” “revision,” and “challenge.” He dispatches the sense of failure and loss by making speech itself a transformative event, replacing the political revolution with a symbolic one. A real transformation has become a virtual one. And de Certeau is too astute not to allow the uncertainties of that victory to be registered: “taking speech is neither effective occupation nor the seizure of power,” he opines. He recognizes that this rhetorical gesture only turns political and ethical values into aesthetic ones; nevertheless, this is the only way forward that he can see. Out of failure and a lack of resources a virtual triumph is fashioned which, for the moment, curtains the void, the hole. It is fashioned out of words.

I call this “hole” the implosion of secularism and it is the many consequences of that implosion that postmodernism explores and postmodernity expresses. The implosion of the secular has also facilitated a new return to the theological and a new emphasis upon reenchantment: a return not signaled by theologians but by filmmakers, novelists, poets, philosophers, political theorists, and cultural analysts. Let me define more closely what it is I mean by the implosion of secularism, because it will be fundamental for understanding the nature of the change and its consequences.
The Implosion of Secularism

First, we have to conceive of the secular according to a world of immanent values which has disassociated itself from, and in its various important discourses – the natural and human sciences – even discredited, the transcendent. It is a world grounded, resourced, and evolving according to its own internally conceived laws: physical laws like Newton’s laws of motion and Maxwell’s laws of thermodynamics; psychical laws like Freud’s Oedipal triangle; the laws Descartes believed observable by “natural light.” In order to compose and possess knowledge in such a world, there must be what Descartes describes as “the search for first causes and true principles which enable us to deduce the reasons for everything we are capable of knowing.” The world must constitute an integrated system. The secular, therefore, is conceived as a world-system, constituted by forces it is increasingly coming to understand and which integrate various aspects of its systematicity. This world began to emerge in the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries.

Second, we have to understand how it is that any system implodes. A thing is exploded when an external force is required to detonate and facilitate the explosion; an external force or principle which can tear the system apart and render it incoherent. But the radical immanence of secularism (which rejects an exteriority) cannot be exploded. Theologically, certain figures in Weimar Germany who propounded dialectical theology (founded upon a certain revelatory positivism) were trying to explode the secular, and religion as implicated within secularity. With the rallying calls of Crisis and Judgment, they challenged the secular world-system itself. One commentator on the second edition of Karl Barth’s Der Romerbrief suggested that the book was the pitching of a hand-grenade into a playground full of diehard liberals. The implosion of a system, on the other hand, comes about through internal processes, forces, or principles which no longer regulate the immanent order but overshoot it.

A worldview becomes acceptable by being internalized. Its internalization brings about its naturalization. But various forms of critical thinking – from the so-called Masters of Suspicion (Marx, Nietzsche, Freud) to the work of the Frankfurt School and the poststructural critical strategies of Foucault, Derrida, and Irigaray, among others – have challenged aspects of this naturalization. Each, in their own way, reminded the secular that it was produced, that it was self-constituted, and that such a constitution was governed by a certain cultural politics with particular ideological investments and presuppositions. Hence, the secular value-system was always unstable and fragile. The work of Bruno Latour and Alain Touraine has done much to develop our notions of the instability of modernity or the secular worldview. Their historical analyses help us to understand the cultural background of postmodernity and something of its future. Touraine, in particular, believes the crisis and collapse of modernity is due to the advancing critiques of rationalism which took a rabid turn when left-wing intellectuals in the late 1960s, disillusioned with modernity’s hopes and freedoms,
turned against it. “[A] purely critical vision of modernity became a total rejection of the very idea of modernity and then self-destructed when it became postmodernism.”¹³ I accept this, but on Touraine’s model of modernity’s collapse we are left with a choice: either to continue the nihilistic drift which will lead to the fascisms and fundamentalisms of neo-tribal diversity, or to return, a little wiser now, to modernity’s project. “If we do not succeed in defining a different conception of modernity – one which is less haughty than that of the Enlightenment but which can still resist the absolute diversity of cultures and individuals – the storms that lie ahead will be still more violent than the storms that accompanied the fall of the anciens régimes and industrialization.”¹⁴ Touraine, albeit in a different way, joins forces with that neoliberal thinker Jürgen Habermas.¹⁵ But the implosion of modernity I am arguing for leaves us with no opening to resurrect its project (though that does not deny the benefits modernity has bequeathed to us). We live in the trajectory of what is coming to us from the future; we never return to the same place twice to rethink the choices abandoned. Furthermore, all these critiques and rejections of modernity, in already accepting secular immanence, can offer nothing to overturn the system. As rational extrapolations from the secular world, they can only attempt to ground the secular more securely (fostering a divorce between literary form and intellectual content – in Hume and Schopenhauer, for example – that Nietzsche sutured). The system turns increasingly into a hideous chimera that adapts itself to absorb the challenges posed and takes delight in its own destructive powers, rather like those proliferating aliens of contemporary science-fiction films whose strength and intelligence lie in their ability to adapt, virus-like, to new conditions and to turn attacks against themselves into a mechanism for further self-development. Let me give some examples here.

In Kant the noumenal renders fragile an appreciation of the phenomenal because it makes evident its constructedness and contingency. Nevertheless, the analysis on the basis of intuitions, synthetic a priori, and the teleology of transcendental reasoning reinforces the universal power of rationality itself. The Kantian critique then provides (as Kant himself intended it would in the face of Hume’s skepticism) the metaphysics, the architectonics, for the instrumental reasoning required by ethics, aesthetics, and science. The liberating postmodern nihilisms of Baudrillard, Lyotard, and Deleuze are based upon returning to and employing this Kantian distinction and emphasizing the delights of the fragile appreciation of the phenomenal. The system adapts to serve another purpose.

Let me give a second example with respect to the critiques of commodity fetishism by Marx and various members of the Frankfurt School, for the postmodern shift from value to image fetishism is culturally pervasive. These early critiques of fetishism – in which the authentic is betrayed by the mass-produced, by the reification and alienation of the worker’s labor from the value of the object-product – did not and do not lead to the end of mass production, nor the collapse of the bourgeoisie. In fact, attention to commodity fetishism, to the processes of reification, could be absorbed and harnessed by market economics. Thus, on the one hand, the “authentic,” the “handmade,” and the “customized”
could become that which is most marketable; while, on the other, the first step towards the mass reproduction of Van Gogh’s *Sunflowers* is the production of Van Gogh’s work as an aesthetic object with a certain magic appeal, the aura of the authentic. An observation by the contemporary Slovenian philosopher Slavoj Žižek with respect to *The Communist Manifesto* and Marxian communism develops this point:

This notion of a society of pure unleashed productivity outside the frame of Capital, was a fantasy inherent to capitalism itself, the capitalist inherent transgression at its purest, a strictly ideological fantasy of maintaining the thrust towards productivity generated by capitalism, while getting rid of the “obstacles” and antagonisms that were . . . the only possible framework of the actual material existence of a society of permanent self-enhancing productivity. . . . Capitalism and Communism are not two different historical realizations, two species, of “instrumental reason” – instrumental reason as such is capitalist, grounded in capitalist relations; and “actually existing Socialism” failed because it was ultimately a subspecies of capitalism, an ideological attempt to “have one’s cake and eat it.” to break out of capitalism while retaining its key ingredient.16

The demise of socialism as a critique of capitalism is itself evidence of the way the secular system (which renders all values internally exchangeable and transferable) absorbs internal critiques.

The secular, modernity, is founded upon the strength of its integrating mechanisms. Critiques and even rejections are themselves only turns within a certain secular logic that remains itself uninjured. The most that can be achieved from such critique is the ontologizing of politics – which returns us to Hobbes or, more recently, the work of Thomas Keenan and William Connolly.17 One cannot rebuild an imploding system, nor reject it from within – just as one cannot turn a black hole back into a red dwarf, nor counter the gravitational pull from within the black hole itself. According to Touraine’s analysis, then, the alternative is a drift towards cultural nihilism, the replacement of value by image. But that alternative, too, is based on a view from within the system. Another possibility, which installs the theological project, can radically challenge the system from elsewhere, from an exteriority, or what Ernesto Laclau calls a “constitutive outside.”18 Challenged from outside, a transformation of the cultural in the second mode outlined above becomes possible.

How then does the implosion take place if critique is already inherent to, or a subspecies of, the system? I suggest it does so when the system comes to recognize itself as a system, rather than as a natural order; when it recognizes what it produces as production, rather than discovery of what is out there. How does this recognition take place? Well, modernity maintained a hierarchical order among secular values, an order predicated on a series of dualisms: public–private, mind–body, reason–passion, universal–particular, nature–culture, object–subject, in which, generally, the former was valued more highly than the latter. These dualisms and separatisms structured a space for public
action: they founded the liberal state. In postmodernity’s development of the logic of modernity, these dualisms and the hierarchical system of values associated with them have collapsed. How this collapse took place is complex to narrate, but it has something to do with modernity’s need, in the face of establishing this system of dualities, for finding ways of mediating between them. For it is not the case that “subject” and “object,” “natural” and “cultural,” “public” and “private” are on some kind of spectrum in modernity’s thinking. They are rendered essentially distinct from each other in order better to facilitate a program of public accountability (transparency). Diversity of opinion, democracy itself, is only made possible by such institutional quarantining. Nevertheless, to establish a principle of difference and contradiction as such, at the heart of what is, can lead to skepticism of the Cartesian kind: that is, how can I as a subject know with certainty that the objective world I see is really there at all? Or, read politically, why – if I can indulge my private pleasures without interruption – should I be at all concerned for the public welfare? For Descartes, God is the only guarantee of the world beyond the “I.” In the wake of the death of God, however, there is no transcendental mediation. The tools, the mechanisms for mediation between the dualisms, have to be found in-house. Methodologically, dialogue, dialectic, debate, reconciliation, synthesis, and the establishment of common self-interest offer themselves as means of mediation. So, for example, political representation of various kinds mediates between the private and the public; institutions such as the law and education mediate between nature and society; and nature itself is examined through certain constructions (like the vacuum pump) and the results published in various acknowledged journals. The implosion occurs when the processes of mediation – dialogue, dialectic, and debate – can no longer be held to operate; when certain incommensurable perspectives become apparent; when the subject increasingly loses the distinctiveness of its position and likewise the object; when the natural is seen as already cultivated; when the private is increasingly subject to social policy and internalizes a public surveillance; when the universal is recognized as representing a certain power/knowledge interest which necessarily marginalizes other interests. And so the hierarchy of values implores, with no appeal possible to an authority outside the system itself – no principle, no shared ontology, no grounding epistemology, no transcendental mediation. And so we move beyond the death of God which modernity announced, to a final forgetting of the transcendental altogether, to a state of godlessness so profound that nothing can be conceived behind the exchange of signs and the creation of symbolic structures.

The godlessness which was inherent but not fully apparent in the secular world-system is now realized and spawns a variety of responses (including public enquiries into theological questions). In A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy Marx discusses the social implosion in terms of the logic of capitalism. I find this significant because of the associations between capitalism, modernity, and postmodernity. “At a certain stage of their development, the material forces of production come in conflict with the existing relations of production.
From forms of development of the forces of production these relations turn into their fetters. More recently, Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe have written about “a new logic of the social” which has begun “to insinuate itself, one that will only manage to think itself by questioning the very literality of the term it articulates.” From these two observations we could say that the forces of secular production forged an understanding of the world whose very constructedness came increasingly to haunt and obsess it, so that the relations produced, instead of continuing to work on behalf of the system, came increasingly to shackle and finally dismantle it. Secularity then gets locked into the virtual realities it has produced; locked into the paranoias of David Cronenberg’s ExistenZ and the Wachowski brothers’ The Matrix. The godlessness which was inherent but not fully apparent in the secular world-system is now realized. The system has exhausted its own self-conceived, self-promoted symbols. The symbolic itself collapses (as Baudrillard observes, plaintively) because it is not standing in for or symbolic of anything. Liberal tolerance become post-symbolic indifference in the face of the endlessly plural and contingent relays of connections, disconnections, and erasures. In the implosion of the secular the weightless flow of signs which constructed the secular as a symbolic system views itself as such and, now, without alternative. The real is the simulated that installs an omnipresent commodification, a trading on emptiness, a pervasive cultural fetishism. Postmodernity is then characterized by simulation, the play and creation of virtual realities, the surface suggestions of depth – like the Opryland Hotel in Nashville where acres of woodland and rocky gorges, with a river, gladed pools, and waterfalls, lie beneath a great canopy of glass. The rooms of the hotel, each with their balconies, look inwards over the country idyll with its bandstands and cascades, clock-towered clapboard buildings and cobbled streets. Space collapses in carefully crafted perspectives and temporal distance dissolves; one is both resident and tourist, set adrift in a highly organized culture of nostalgia for a premodern world.

This implosion of the secular produces a vacuum without values, a horror Vacui. What de Certeau calls the hole, Heidegger called the Zeug, and Derrida and Irigaray have called the Khora. Fascination with it can transform it, too, into a commodity fetish. We need to examine this fetishism more closely, for it characterizes contemporary culture, as I have suggested, and it focuses the effects of the implosion of secularism.

Fetishism

Contemporary accounts of fetishism weave Marx’s observations on the magical nature commodities take on in the process of reification (Capital, vol. 1) into Freud’s and Lacan’s analyses of the nature of desire. For Freud and Lacan, desire does not seek its fulfillment, for that would terminate the pleasure of desiring. Desire promotes the allure and attraction of an object that stands in for what it
lacks, but its enjoyment lies in not having what it wants. The commodified object then becomes the cause of desire rather than the object of desire itself. In fact, pleasures issue from not having what you want – which produces what I have called elsewhere the cultural prevalence of sado-masochistic desire. It is significant that the structure of commodity fetishism involves both a recognition that the fetish is a substitute, not the object desired itself, and, simultaneously, a disavowal of its substitutional character. It has the grammatical structure of “I know, but even so. . . .” As Jacques Lacan pointed out, this intrinsic disavowal renders desire itself unstable. The desire can then continually displace itself onto new objects. The pleasure of not getting what you want drives consumerism. Consumerism becomes an endless experience of fetishism – as Marx was inchoately aware.

The point I am making is that the effect of the implosion of the secular is a hole that is at once longed for and disavowed. Contemporary culture both wishes to embrace the nihilism of the abyss and screen it through substitutionary images. Another way this might be put, which draws upon the work of several feminist thinkers (from Hannah Arendt and Adriana Cavarero to Grace Jantzen and Catherine Pickstock) and a statement by John Paul II in Evangelium Vitae, is that a profound necrophilia emerges: a culture of death, a longing and a frisson for oblivion. Postmodernity embraces this fantasy and is sustained by it in the same way that certain people are able to cope with the ongoing struggle with life only by repeatedly fantasizing about suicide, fatal accidents, and terminal illnesses. “Beam me up, Scottie” expresses a more pervasive desire for vaporization, a total immersion in forgetfulness.

A certain paradoxical cultural logic, the logic of fetishism, is evident in postmodernity: David Harvey (from the New Left perspective) can lament the political vacuum, while Ernesto Laclau (from the post-Marxist perspective) can find hope in the radical politicization of everything. Now you see it; now you don’t. The same fetishist logic pertains to the theological in contemporary culture. I have argued that the deepening sense of godlessness is the apotheosis both of the secular worldview and, simultaneously, the generator of theological questions, motifs, images, and mythemes articulated by a variety of secular sources in contemporary culture. What is this announcing but a certain pathological enjoyment of a postmodern sensibility: an enjoyment of the absence of God by the commercialization of God’s presence – through angels and miracles, through stigmata and sacramentalisms, through philosophies of charity and appeals to the “social divine?” In Michel Serres’s book Angels: A Modern Myth, the angels announce a pantheistic world of immanent fluxes, a world in which the Word is to be made flesh. But beyond the angelic hosts is the Most High or the All High God to whom all glory is due. Nevertheless, Serres concludes: “if our will becomes sufficiently good for us to make an agreement between us to accord the glory only to a transcendent absent being, then we will be able to live in peace.” The logic of the fetishist desire is that pleasure is found in the failure to attain what one desires: pleasure is taken in absence itself. And so the profound alienation that the hole evokes
is veiled and curtained. We will have to return to this when we examine what postmodern theology is doing.

Where does this leave us? Where do we stand? Michel de Certeau was in no doubt about the questioning which circled the hole at the heart of the social. “Our society has become a recited society, in three senses; it is defined by stories (recits, the fables constituted by our advertising and informational media), by citations of stories, and by the interminable recitation of stories.” In a recited society people believe what they see and what they see is produced for them – hence, simulacra-created belief which installs the logic of fetishism: “The spectator-observer knows that they are merely ‘semblances’ . . . but all the same he assumes that these simulations are real.” This “objectless credibility” is based upon citing the authority of others. Thus the production of a simulacrum involves making people believe that others believe in it, but without providing any believable object. There is what de Certeau calls the “multiplication of pseudo-believers” promoted by a culture of deferral, credit, and accreditation.

By the 1980s the culture of deferral and credit, the culture of the virtually real, had not yet taken on the pervasiveness which is registered our current globalism. Nevertheless, postmodernity now becomes an epochal term describing a culture in which postmodernism is seen as the dominating worldview.

Postmodernity and Postmodernism

It is exactly here that I want to argue for the helpfulness of a distinction between postmodernity and postmodernism. It is a distinction that enables us to see why so many of the postmodern theological voices in this volume have turned to various forms of postmodern critical theory to help them analyze the contemporary cultural phenomena that most concern them. Postmodernism enables us to distinguish certain elements in our contemporary world which are other than postmodern and yet, all too often, can be lumped together as characteristics of postmodernity. For example, it enables us to distinguish between globalism and postmodernity. Put briefly, advocates of globalism such as Francis Fukuyama and historians of the world-system such as Immanuel Wallerstein quite explicitly discuss their ideas in terms of the grand narratives of Hegel (Fukuyama) and Marx (Wallerstein). In fact, along with the various forms of neo-Darwinism – right-wing political and social thought and its biological equivalent in the work of someone like Richard Dawkins – and neoliberal economic progressivism, grand narratives are making something of a cultural comeback. Certain postmodern “values” or “emphases” – on simulacra, pastiche, irony, the kitsch – and certain postmodern understandings of space and time are developed considerably by what David Harvey terms “accumulative capitalism.” Nevertheless, it is important not to view these developments as antinomies of postmodernism but, rather, ways in which, within postmodernity, cultures become complex weaves of ideologies, values,
symbols, activities, and powers. The danger of tying postmodernism to
developments in capitalism and conflating postmodernism with postmodernity,
postmodernism with globalism – as Jameson, Eagleton, Harvey, and Soja do – is
that we can lose sight of postmodernism’s critical edge. Its critical edge is impor-
tant for the way it can sharpen theology’s own analytical tools, enabling
theology not only to read the signs of the times but to radicalize the postmod-
ern critique by providing it with an exteriority, a position outside the secular
value-system. That exteriority is founded upon the God who is revealed within,
while being distinctively beyond, the world-system. Without that exteriority aca-
demics in cultural studies are faced with a dilemma: how is it that critical theory,
which has been one of the driving forces behind postmodernism and which, in
many ways, appeared as a mutation in the history of Marxist thinking, leads to
and advances global consumerism? Academics in cultural studies face the chal-
lenge Nicholas Boyle speaks of when he states that “Post-Modernism is the pes-
simism of an obsolescent class – the salaried official intelligentsia – whose fate
is closely bound up with that of the declining nation-state. . . . The Post-
Modernist endlessly repeats what he believes to be his parricidal act of shatter-
ing the bourgeois identity.” In other words, without the radicality that a theo-
logical perspective can offer the postmodern critique, the postmodernist is
doomed also to inscribe the ideology he or she seeks to overthrow. The radical
critique is not radical enough. Hence the important contribution that theologi-
cal discourse can make in postmodernity when “the historical modus vivendi
called secularism is coming apart at the seams.”

When, in the early 1970s, Jean Baudrillard first introduced his thinking on
simulation and simulacra; when, in the late 1960s, Roland Barthes first turned
our attention to the empire of signs, and the erotic pleasures of surfaces without
depth or shadows; when Thomas Pynchon was composing The Crying of Lot 49
and Guy Debord began instructing audiences on the society of the spectacle,
the Cold War was still being played out, American money was still related to
the gold standard, Keynesian economics and the GATT trading agreement
still held, Mandel had not yet written his Late Capitalism, cable TV and video
were unheard of, and the linking of two or more computers so that they
might “talk” to each other was still a science-fiction fantasy. There was post-
modernism before there was postmodernity. The erection of John Portman’s
Peachtree Plaza did not catapult Atlanta into postmodernity. Neither do the
ethical concerns for alterity and difference in the writings of Emmanuel Levinas,
Jacques Derrida, Luce Irigaray, and Julia Kristeva inevitably supplement the
cultural logic of late-capitalism. On the one hand, what is happening today
is the vast commodification of postmodern sentiments. On the other, the
inevitable incommensurabilities of pluralism are coming to the fore – where
the insistence upon difference vies with narratives of historical progress towards
global democratization, the bureaucratic call to transparency and the fulfilment
of Bentham’s Panopticon dreams, the erasure of the other as nonconsumer, and
the flattening of differences in a world market. It is this very process of turning
objects into idols, fetishism itself – which is more than just a matter of analysing
economic processes – that theological discourse challenges. That is the theological difference, the theological critique. This theological difference has the potential for transforming culture in the second mode of cultural transformation I alluded to: that is, radically. That is why postmodern theology is not simply a product of the new reenchantment of the world, but an important mode of critical analysis in such a world.

The essays in this volume testify to the variety of theological responses to the critical and aesthetic contributions of postmodernism and the complex cultural logics of postmodernity. They testify also to the implosion of secularism while, simultaneously, they attempt to think creatively beyond it. Theologians are never above and beyond the cultural situation in which they work. Theological discourse not only employs the language of its times, but also inhabits many of its dreams and aspirations. Hence the question must arise as to the commodifications and fetishisms of its own projects. There is no room for a dogmatism that is not strategic, for polemic which is not self-consciously rhetorical, for categorical assertion which does not foreground its poiesis. Theology, too, is mediated and mediates, encultures and is encultured. It is a discourse which, as I have argued, has public relevance and can offer certain cultural critiques and insights. But it is a discourse. It traffics in signs and seeks to make its own beliefs believable. It must, on the one hand, make judgments while, on the other, rendering itself vulnerable to interruption, critical reflection, contestation, and engagement. There is no moral high ground.

For a long time I wrestled with the attempt to situate the essays in this volume with respect to various categories elaborated in an earlier essay on postmodern theology34 – liberal and conservative postmodern theology, postliberal and radical orthodox theology. But the categories did not hold. There are too many shades of liberal to conservative theological thinking, too many people working creatively between the positions, say, of Thomas Altizer and Don Cupitt on the one hand, and Jean-Luc Marion on the other. The development of the postliberal position, the emergence of a constructive theological project in the United States (associated with Kathryn Tanner, Serene Jones, and Mary McClintock Fulkerson, among others), has close concerns with those of radical orthodoxy. Hence, the categories collapsed because they proved unhelpful, too reductive, and too restrictive.

I had decided to present the theological voices in alphabetical order when Robert Gibbs alerted me to how the failure to provide an architecture signaled a failure to do justice to the contending differences evident in the material.35 It was he who suggested the present architecture of this collection of essays. The groupings, rather than categories, that emerged – aesthetics, ethics, gender, hermeneutics, phenomenology, Heideggerians, and Derrideans – point to important foci not only for postmodern theology but in postmodernism more generally. As I argued in my introduction to The Postmodern God, along with structuralism, Heidegger and the French phenomenologists are important genealogical roots for postmodern thinking. The turn towards encountering the Other raises ethical and political questions. And deconstruction’s attention to
semiotics rather than semantics opens up issues fundamental to aesthetics and hermeneutics. It is then no accident that these foci for critical attention in postmodern theology are prominent thematics in postmodernism itself. Nevertheless, the groupings for the essays in this volume are fluid. The theological essays of a phenomenological nature are all highly indebted to Heidegger, for example, and the concern of those in the hermeneutics group with the interpretation of founding theological texts is not intended to diminish the ethical questions with which they are also preoccupied. If the boundaries of the groups are drawn on water, then the essays within them are also transgressive and some could have been placed in another grouping entirely. The architecture of the volume reflects the postmodern emphasis upon a space of flows. But setting out the material in this way allows the differences of approach, emphasis, argument, and conclusion between thinkers to take on the prominence which makes postmodern theology diverse, creative, and not without its frictions. Robert Gibbs was right: it is important to portray some of those frictions. Putting contributions in alphabetical order would have dissipated the frictions in a very modernist fashion. Now I can see this collection as a gathering of friends and colleagues to a supper—not a formal supper where the discussion is ordered, but more a buffet supper in a British pub, where food, drink, and uninhibited conversation can circulate between a long oak bar top and a spitting log-fire. People are not ensconced in seats; rather, they stand, are flexible, and are ready to move on. Laughter and the clashing of opinions strongly held can be heard throughout, for it is distinctiveness that matters, not typology.

Accordingly, each thinker is introduced and their work to date outlined in order to provide a context for the essay they have contributed. All of the essays are from work currently undertaken by these writers, but my introductions explicitly mention their other work in order to facilitate further reading. The judgments made in these introductions are my own and are therefore inevitably partial; another editor would have written other things, sketched other portraits. Several of these thinkers have been very productive indeed over many years; where this is so, I have made a selection from the long list of their available titles. But if conversations are to begin then—lacking a venue and the ability to coordinate 31 different diaries—it is the reader who will conduct them, introducing each to each, catching the reflection of one in the eyes of another, the clink of glasses raised together, and the flush of cheeks inflamed with argument. For this is a Festschrift of its kind, for friends.

This introduction began with the words of Thomas Carlyle, so it is fitting that he should conclude it. Having outlined the darknesses and fetters of his own age and offered his analyses and critiques, Signs of the Times ends on a note of qualified optimism:

On the whole, as this wondrous planet, Earth, is journeying with its fellows through infinite Space, so are the wondrous destinies embarked on its journeying through infinite Time, under a higher guidance than ours. . . . Go where it will, the deep HEAVEN will be around it. Therein let us have hope.
Notes

5 Jameson, The Cultural Turn, p. 49.
6 I made this distinction in the essay “Theology in Cyberspace” which introduces my edited collection The Postmodern God (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1998). This Companion to Postmodern Theology is conceived as an extension of that project, so I will not rehearse in this introductory essay the historical move towards postmodernism. I concern myself here with what Foucault would term an archeological (rather than a genealogical) analysis of postmodernism and theological discourse’s relationship to it.
11 Ibid, p. 10.
15 See ibid, pp. 336–43 for an account of how Touraine differs from Habermas with respect to rethinking democracy.
17 For Keenan see Fables of Responsibility (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press); for Connolly see Why I Am Not a Secularist (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999). In Ecce Homo Nietzsche proclaims quite clearly that only after him does grand politics become possible.


See my essay “Suffering and Incarnation” in chapter 11 of this volume.


See the work of the contemporary French social anthropologist Michel Maffesoli.


Nicholas Boyle, p. 318.

William Connolly, p. 19.

The return of scientific, social, and economic Darwinism would not count against a postmodern reading of contemporary culture. What it introduces is an incommensurability between determinisms and pragmatists – Fukuyama on the one hand, Rorty on the other. The incommensurability itself would be enough to demonstrate that while determinism requires the *acceptance* of a grand narrative, it does not demonstrate the *existence* of a grand narrative. This is Lyotard’s more subtle point in *The Postmodern Condition*: it is not that construals of development, progress, and explanation have disappeared, but that with the conflict of interpretations fostered by radical pluralism – that is, where perspectives are incommensurable – they are viewed as just one way of making sense of the world. And because they are now only one way they are petits récits and not grands récits.


Gibbs was invited to contribute to the volume himself but because of other commitments was unable to do so in the time available. His eleventh-hour suggestions were nevertheless welcome and it is very satisfying to me that he made the volume after all.


*Thomas Carlyle*, pp. 84–5.