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THEORIZING RELIGION II

A postmodern theology is not defined by the object of its inquiry. It is a textual production in which the author is written into the work as a theologian by implicating the text in the exigencies of the unrestricted scope of theological inquiry. The postmodern theological text will be marked and sometimes re-marked by fissures wrought by limiting questions, poetic indirections, and figures of brokenness. Theology can be reread and rewritten with the benefit of these levers of textual intervention that do not allow an easy forgetfulness of the origin of theological thinking as a work of language and desire.¹

THE JOURNAL FOR CULTURAL AND RELIGIOUS THEORY, an “academic web publishing experiment,” posted its first issue in December of 1999. In the inaugural essay by Carl A. Raschke, appropriately entitled “Theorizing Religion at the Turn of the Millennium: From the Sacred to the Semiotic,”² a challenge was posed to the wider field of religious studies to address, finally, the serious implications of poststructuralist linguistic theory within the dominant modes and methodologies informing “religious studies scholarship.” With Raschke’s timely call to begin “theorizing religion,” the premier issue established the *JCRT* not as a boutique publication designed to simply record the conversations of a sub-discipline within religious studies, “postmodern theology,” but as a space of intellectual invention. “Theorizing religion,” as Raschke described it in his essay, was only in part a reassertion of the far-ranging critiques of “religious studies” made by “linguistic turn” theologians of the previous two decades. “Theorizing religion,” in and after postmodernism, as the essay makes clear, needed at “the turn of the millennium” to address new concerns and this required a radical change in perspective that demanded a bringing together of a varieties of theoretical discourses from across the humanities. Where postmodern theological “theory” remained in the Western

¹ Charles E. Winquist, *Epiphanies of Darkness: Deconstruction in Theology* (Colorado Springs, Co.: The Davies Group Publishers, 1998), 119.

² Carl A. Raschke, “Theorizing Religion at the Turn of the Millennium: From the Sacred to the Semiotic,” *The Journal for Cultural and Religious Theory*, vol. 1, no. 1 (December 1999).

theo-philosophical tradition, religious “theorizing” was destined to “go global,” further advancing a “new cycle of scholarship” defined as “religious theory.”

The study of religion is semiotic at its core, because it is not about “words” and “things” as philosophy and logic conveniently regard them. The study of religion is about the way in which the logical and grammatological constraints of the process of representation are removed, yet remain “significant” at the same time. As Genosko observes in his overview of the new cycle of scholarship in both semiotics and cultural studies, the pursuit of the humanities at large is a wandering in the “theater of representation.” And “all representation is theological, a matter of filling gaps.” When one begins to frame the “theory” of religion as a theory of semiosis, or how the mimetics of representation function *in extremis*, then one can do philosophy of religion, if not “philosophical theology”, in a whole new manner—as *religious theory*. Religion itself is a latticework of sign-functions and signifying elements that transcend the grammatics of common sense. These signifying elements do not coalesce into some kind of metaphysical object, as Durkheim and others have always believed. The mysterious, yet theoretically inconsequential, construct of “the sacred” belies this means of misconstruing the subject regions to which we append the label of religion.³

This “new cycle of scholarship” begins with the shift from the sacred to the semiotic, which marks a critical exposure of religious studies to the radical reversals that had been experienced by other disciplines in the humanities. Put simply, religious studies, as a wide field of inquiry, had to simultaneously accept the intellectual consequences of the postmodern “linguistic turn” and rapidly “work through” them toward a project circumscribed by the cultural semiotic—a procedure it indirectly had undergone, albeit “unconsciously”: “Religious studies,” Raschke writes, “was in itself a semi-conscious, deconstructive move against Protestant thinking, all the while remaining bound to the Protestant, pietistic, and anti-hegemonic norms of its Protestant predecessors. In short, what religious studies, in contrast to most humanities ‘disciplines’, excluding so-called ‘area studies’, has decidedly lacked is *theory*.” In this respect, religious studies, as a broader field of inquiry, was a result of *deconstruction*—just without a theoretical awareness of it. Raschke’s inaugural essay, then, can be read today on multiple levels. First, it reintroduces the inevitability of semiotics in the study of religion, with the idea that the potential for radical reversibility had been built into the field at its inception. Second, it demonstrates the ways in which semiotics led to the *deconstruction* of social science and sectarian based inquiry. And, third, it makes clear that any formulation of “study” within religion contains a set of assumptions (philosophical investments) that must be rendered visible by theoretical analysis. Taken together, these three levels, in their separate yet related ways, call into question the “conditions”—historical,

³ Raschke, 2.

methodological, and philosophical—of all inquiry within religious studies, broadly defined, which is to say “not just within theology.”

Six years after the publication of Raschke’s “Theorizing Religion at the Turn of the Millennium,” it is important to provide a more detailed account for this “whole new manner” of philosophical approach that first became visible in the 1970s with a Derrida-inspired redefinition of religious study as an analysis of the “lattice-work of sign-functions and signifying elements”⁴ corresponding to the “sacred.” Among the first of these deconstructive scholarly works to push this theory driven inquiry was Raschke’s 1979 *Alchemy of the Word* (republished as *The End of Theology*, Davies Group Publishers, 2002) that developed a new *deconstructive theology* that was not simply a “negative theology.” The scholarship of Mark C. Taylor and Charles E. Winquist would closely follow upon that work and come to establish a new field of study, postmodern theology, although “theology,” over time, would be construed as a much larger concern. This re-affirmation and extension in 1999 of that earlier project prepared the way for new possibilities for thinking that are “religiously” theoretical. While poststructuralist theories of language and culture were well established in other fields and disciplines, literary studies for instance, “religion,” as Raschke notes in his piece, remained largely resistant to this important line of inquiry. The poststructuralist dismantling of the global disciplinary *status quo* that began in the late 1970s and 80s with the works of Michel Foucault and Jacques Derrida was unavoidable, however, and these changes in thinking had a tremendous influence on religious studies scholarship in particular. While the institutional apparatuses of religious studies resisted theorizing, the intellectual community at-large relaxed its adherence to the presuppositions of social scientists, historiographers, comparativists, etymologists, folklorist, and mythologists. In a manner of speaking, there was no going back—the study of religion, even within the aforementioned approaches, was, in sense, already taken to be “theoretical” and any so-called transparent methodology was rigorously subjected to critique by the scholarly community. The more visible or self-aware theoretical turn within postmodern religious studies, however, was more than a clarification of disciplinary practices and investments; it was, as postmodern theologians of the 1970s, 1980s and 1990s have demonstrated, a “reformation” in religious scholarship. For Raschke, continuing from the implications of this “linguistic turn” theology, the “inaugural” moment of the *JCRT* was as much about reaffirming the possibility of a new way of thinking “theoretically” in and after postmodernism as it was an announcement of a new venue for academic publishing.

⁴ Raschke, 2.

Since our premier issue, the editorial staff has used each “introductory” essay to move the debate about “religious theory” forward. In April 2004, the *JCRT* published a series of manifestoes on “religious theory” emphasizing the relevance of theoretical inquiry to religious studies, the humanities in general, and geo-politics post 9/11. This ongoing project of re-theorization represents a continued effort to meet the challenge of our mission as a scholarly endeavor. Can we say, today, that the field of religious studies has been sufficiently “theorized”? Absolutely not. Has theoretical inquiry moved off the margin? Become, in manner of speaking, intellectually dominant even though the September through October 2005 issues of *Openings*, for instance, post no “theory” positions? Yes, we can say that, with some trepidation. While major university presses and first tier journals regularly publish theoretical scholarship, the space for intellectual inquiry and the terrain of custom (institutions) are not necessarily co-extensive; that is to say, the positions or concerns of the intellectual community may be distant from institutional schemes of categorization and their supporting rules of organization. In other words, the resistance to theorizing religion is now on the institutional level rather than the intellectual level, which corresponds to the state of theory across the academy (see *The Future of Theory*, Lambert and Taylor, eds., *The Journal for Cultural and Religious Theory*, vol. 4, no. 2). One, therefore, cannot measure success in “theorization” by some rate of institutional acceptance. The intellectual tide has (linguistically) turned and while academic departments, agents of institutional interests, may be slow to acknowledge this radical shift in scholarship toward the “theoretical” the spaces of intellectual inquiry decidedly have moved forward. The *JCRT*, after six years of steady work, has played a significant role in this move toward making issues in *religious theory* the prevailing intellectual concern. We must still wait, sadly, for *religious theory*, which is the “cutting-edge” of the discipline, to have adequate institutional representation.

As we look to a future in which theoretical concerns will be more urgent, we also must be attentive to the past and the important developments and milestones in the history of religious theory and “theoretical inquiry” in general. The *JCRT*, like any journal or school of thought or institution, is the result of history or the histories of those who have shaped it. In many ways, our challenges are the same as any journal trying to advance beyond the *status quo* of its field—only in this instance it is the *status quo* of multiple fields of inquiry. If such ventures are to be successful then they must remember their histories and, at the same time, strive to surpass these histories, if not overcome them. From the beginning, those instrumental in founding the *JCRT* envisioned something much more than niche journal. Although the *JCRT* may have been conceived as a postmodern theology journal, it became much more than that even before it published its first issue. I recall an early planning meeting in Syracuse in which I described my vision of

the *JCRT* as something akin to an “art gallery.” At the time, I was attempting to see the potential of an online journal that was dedicated to theoretical inquiry, not just disciplinary inquiry. Although I would be more practical today, I still see the “gallery” model as useful, if not laudable. Like a “gallery,” a journal has a twofold responsibility: (1) to be relevant to the intellectual concerns of its time and place and (2) to be dedicated to finding these concerns. With a diverse and stellar advisory board and an intellectually vibrant editorial staff the *JCRT* has accomplished both of these tasks and we have many to thank for this, including Carl A. Raschke, Gregg Lambert, and John D. Caputo. We will continue down this path and our future issues will include interviews with Slavoj Žižek, Jean-Luc Marion, and Gianni Vattimo. We also will have special issues on religion and literature and religion and politics. Along with these features, the *JCRT* will continue to publish the highest quality scholarly research that is available. We also will push the boundaries to introduce new thinkers and new modes of expression into the conversation. In “theorizing religion,” we are saying “yes” to thinking. It is something all of us at the *JCRT* learned from the late Charles E. Winquist: “... are we willing to say *yes* to desire by experimentally developing strategies and tactics within our discursive and thinking practices to constantly intertwine the given of actuality with the given of possibility? If we say *yes*, there are no safe texts. There is no identity to which we can return. The eternal recurrence of the same is the repetition of difference. The courage to say *yes* resides in the desiring knowledge that we can never exhaust what it means to say *yes*. In that moment of thinking courage, maybe we understand Nietzsche when he says to his demon: “You are a god and never have I heard anything more divine.”⁵

⁵ Charles E. Winquist, “The Ambiguous Gift of Desire,” *The Journal for Cultural and Religious Theory*, vol. 1, no. 1 (December 1999).

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