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FROM ALCHEMY TO REVOLUTION: A CONVERSATION WITH CARL A. RASCHKE

Carl A. Raschke is professor of religious studies at the University of Denver and senior editor of *The Journal for Cultural and Religious Theory*. He is the author of numerous books and articles that have defined the field of religious theory in the postmodern era. His early book entitled *The Alchemy of the Word* (published in 1979 and reissued as *The End of Theology* in 2000) was among the first serious studies of deconstruction and theology in the discipline. His recent books, including *GloboChrist* and *The Next Reformation*, have reached well beyond the academy to inform emerging Christian communities on the global stage. In 2012, Raschke published *Postmodernism and the Revolution in Religious Theory*, a work that resituates the concerns of postmodernism in the context of a new, revolutionary semiotics of the sign.

Raschke is a contributor to the *Political Theology* blog (www.politicaltheology.com/blog) and regular contributor to the *Journal for Cultural and Religious Theory* (www.jcrt.org), which he was instrumental in founding in 1999.

Victor Taylor: *The Alchemy of the Word* (republished as *The End of Theology*, 2005) was, as I have said on previous occasions, the "first" book of postmodern theology. That was in 1979 and no one at the time was really using the word "postmodern" in theology. "Deconstruction" was the preferred term. However, in that work, you do more than give a deconstructive reading of already available theological concepts and issues--that is you didn't treat deconstruction as a method of criticism. In many ways, deconstruction becomes "postmodern" when it re-radicalizes hermeneutics . . . when it opens the interpretive horizon to a multitude of "little narratives," as Lyotard would have described it. Could you describe the intellectual-historical context for your insights? What led you to see the "postmodern" in deconstruction?

Carl Raschke: In 1977 when I first started writing *The Alchemy of the Word* the two dominant, cross-disciplinary theoretical discourses in the English-speaking world were Anglo-American analytical philosophy and Marxism - or at least the kind of socio-cultural, "humanistic" Marxism that had been fashioned in the previous generation by the Frankfurt School and strongly influenced the New Left during the 1960s. At the end of the Vietnam era these discourses seemed spent and obsolete.

Within the much narrower ambit of what was then known as "philosophical theology" a kind of neo-Kantian constructivism, focused on reviving in some ways the Romantic concept of the "productive imagination," prevailed. Everyone was quoting the line from Wallace Stevens "God and the imagination are one." Ray Hart, Langdon Gilkey, Gordon Kaufman, and David Tracy were the leading theological lights of this period, and they all worked off this same type of neo-Kantian, neo-romantic theological hermeneutic. It was also about the time that Paul Ricoeur - especially after taking on a chair at the University of Chicago - became all the rage. As someone who had been browbeaten into acknowledging analytical philosophy as the only way to philosophical truth at Harvard in the same way that contemporary evangelicals are indoctrinated into the pseudo-intellectual arcana of "inerrancy," yet who found neo-Romantic constructivism both airy and somewhat pretentious, I was looking for a "third way" that would (1) be faithful to the subtleties of the cultural linguisticism pioneered decades earlier by Saussure (2) lay the foundation for a new, sophisticated theory of meaning (i.e., "semantics") that left the banal logicism of analytical philosophy behind in the dust while not succumbing to the airy pseudo-metaphysics of the imagination popular during that period.

In the summer of 1977 I had my initial "aha" experience through an intensive reading of the later Heidegger (the Heidegger after the so-called *Kehre*), which were just coming out in a stream of recent translations in the early and mid-Seventies. The Heideggerian philosophy of language (not so much the well-known *Dasein*-analytic of the 1920s, with which everyone was familiar, including myself) produced in me almost a Sinai-like "revelation" in me at the time; It allowed me to (1) understand the genuine philosophical limitations of the legacy left by Russell and Wittgenstein (2) marry what we now call "Continental philosophy" (at that time it was still called "phenomenology and existential philosophy", a designation still retained in the well-known name of the Society for Phenomenology and Existential Philosophy, which is still alive and vital nowadays) to a more sophisticated theory of linguistics. It was out of this process that I began writing the book on Halloween 1977. The book was written in a short period of time, though I didn't find a publisher until about 18 months later.

During the time I was writing I started to share my insight with a local faculty reading group, which included a young Continental philosopher Jere Surber who is still my colleague at the University of Denver. The group was organized primarily around reading and sharing ideas regarding the latest trends in literary and cultural theory. We had just finished with the latest book by Claude Levi-Strauss, and Jere suggested we might want to

read Derrida's *Of Grammatology*. Virtually no one at the time outside of literary theory had any idea who Derrida was, or what "deconstruction" meant. I picked up the book only to remain *au courant* in the context of the group, but as I read I realized that the Derridean theory of signification implicit in *Of Grammatology* improved considerably on Heidegger, and that it offered certain solutions that could not be found in the vast earlier literature known as "structural linguistics." Keep in mind that the word "postmodernism" was not at all in use at the time. Charles Jencks had just coined it to christen contemporary architecture. The general term for the context in which Derrida appeared was then "post-structuralism," and it was more often than not associated with Foucault, who was hotter than Derrida. The word "postmodernism" didn't really come into fashion until Lyotard published *The Postmodern Condition* in 1985. By then it was simply a broad term for the new trends in French literary and cultural theory. Lyotard used it to describe what Foucault would have termed the "episteme" of that period.

Reading *Grammatology* spurred me to go back and get hold of Derrida's *Speech and Phenomena*, which was considered more intelligible by the few "Continental philosophers" of the period who were familiar with it. Most philosophers had no idea who Derrida was (to this day many Anglo-Americans still don't consider him a legitimate "philosopher") until Richard Rorty, who was a prominent defector from the same analytical tradition, wrote about him in an article in 1979. It was Rorty who was the first to give Derrida some kind of legitimacy in English-speaking eyes.

In a nutshell, putting Derrida into *Alchemy of the Word* was an afterthought (an add-on for what might be called a "new and improved Heidegger"), but it was an incredibly fruitful afterthought.

Victor Taylor: This is an intriguing history of relating divergent disciplines and contexts, especially in terms of exactly how various discourses are brought into conversation under very precarious conditions. I recall our mutual late friend Charlie Winquist saying that wanted to study continental philosophy but could find only theology. You were able to access these discourses “locally,” through a faculty reading group at DU, but how would you characterize the reception of the result? That is, when people in the field read *Alchemy* what did they get or miss in your view?

Carl Raschke: It was not clear at the time how many people read the book, since it was technically a Scholars Press monograph. Most of the key scholars in the field at that time read SP publications, but only them. As far as I know, more people have probably read it as a backlist and in the reprint form than probably read it in the early 1980s.

It should also be noted that in the 1970s and early 1980s there was little recognition in either philosophy or religious studies of a significant phenomenon known as "Continental philosophy." That term only gained currency (though it had been around before) in the 1990s. The operative term at the time was "philosophical theology," as distinguished from

"philosophy of religion", the latter of which usually carried the implication of a series of problems and issues largely addressed through the analytic or empirical traditions. Few use that term anymore, which has been replaced by the expression "Continental philosophy of religion," or "Continental theology." As I've indicated before, the general word for Continental philosophy when Derrida first came on the scene was "existential philosophy" and/or "phenomenology."

In *Alchemy* I talked far more about the importance of Heidegger than Derrida, who was then as well as now associated almost totally with the phrase "deconstruction." As I discuss extensively in my new book coming out next year, and to a lesser extent in the one on which I am currently working, the genealogy of the phrase "deconstruction" can be traced directly to Derrida's efforts to play the anti-Husserlian refrains in Heidegger in a totally new key that was largely informed by structural linguistics and Lacanian semiotics. The way in which even prominent scholars use the term "deconstruction" today has little to do with how Derrida originally intended it. If you read closely everything Derrida wrote before about 1978, that becomes pretty clear. The term "deconstruction" has been so diffused and bastardized these days I increasingly try not to use it.

Alchemy sought to carry forward with as much attention to Heidegger as Derrida what was really at stake in the latter's early writings. But a number of early theological "entrepreneurs" - Mark C. Taylor in particular - instantly seized on the kinds of themes I developed in *Alchemy*and used much of Derrida's rhetoric to foment a much different sort of agenda. The early Taylor was transfixed by Thomas J. J. Altizer, who is the true *gris eminence* behind the so-called "theological turn" of the last twenty years. The genetic makeup of such movements as "secular theology as well as the latest version of "death of God theology", for which Taylor carried the torch through most of the Eighties and Nineties, is overwhelmingly Altizerian, not Derridean. No one, believe it or not even John Caputo, has really appropriated what was most radical in the early Derrida. Virtually all of the current crop of "deconstructive theologians", if there are such creatures, are really old-style left-wing Hegelians in disguise - something at least Taylor himself has admitted, though others are oblivious of their own patrimony. Altizer, of course, has always admitted it, and been proud of it.

But Derrida, like Deleuze, laid the groundwork for the ultimate collapse of the Hegelian project, first foreshadowed in Heidegger's proclamation of the "end of philosophy." The subtitle of *Alchemy* of course was "Language and the End of Theology." I don't know any prominent theological type to this day who has the barest recognition that what Derrida actually meant by deconstruction itself necessitates a companion proclamation of the "end of theology." Nor did they take seriously anything I really advanced in the book, other than to use it an occasion to get the now bygone Derrida bandwagon rolling. Theology hasn't really undergone a revival in the last fifteen years. It never went away. it would, however, as I predicted in the book thirty years ago, take a long while for the wheel to stop turning, even if the force behind theology was no longer applied. The proclamation of the "end of

theology" is analogous the proclamation that "God is dead" by Nietzsche's madman. As the madman says, it takes a long while for the news to reach us. Like the Japanese soldier who hid out in the jungle for decades after the end of World War II, our "theologians" still haven't gotten the news.

Victor Taylor: Post-structuralism, coined by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, in her translation of *Of Grammatology* still remained within a narrow context of "after structuralism"; that is, "after" Lévi-Strauss, Lacan, and Barthes. Lyotard carved out an entirely new meaning for the "post," beyond its temporal reference. "Deconstruction," as you mentioned, was very much a part of the Heideggerian tradition. In fact, in his "Letter to a Japanese Friend" Derrida discusses his desire to stay close to Heidegger's "destruktion" or "Abbau." Here is Derrida's reflection from the "Letter." Would it be fair to say that *Alchemy* was interested in the "end of theological structure?

"At that time structuralism was dominant. 'Deconstruction' seemed to be going in the same direction since the word signified a certain attention to structures (which themselves were neither simply ideas, nor forms, nor syntheses, nor systems). To deconstruct was also a structuralist gesture or in any case a gesture that assumed a certain need for the structuralist problematic. But it was also an antistructuralist gesture, and its fortune rests in part on this ambiguity. Structures were to be undone, decomposed, desedimented (all types of structures, linguistic, 'logocentric', 'phonocentric' - structuralism being especially at that time dominated by linguistic models and by a so-called structural linguistics that was also called Saussurian - socio-institutional, political, cultural, and above all and from the start philosophical)."

Carl Raschke: It was a little more complicated than that. Structuralism was by and large a European - one might even be more restrictive and say "French" - obsession, even though it had its own coterie of American disciples. Most of the latter congregated in literary criticism and literary theory, which is why Derrida first secured his American beachhead among the Yale School that included Paul de Man, Geoffrey Hartman, and J. Hillis Miller. Even the majority of so-called "post-structuralist" literary theorists, who gained notoriety in the late 1970s, did not see themselves as offering primarily what Derrida called "anti-structuralist" gestures. "Post-structuralism" was a term coined in France in the late 1960s, and it referred primarily to the ongoing impact of Derrida's 1966 lecture "Structure, Sign, and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences." From the very beginning the "post-structuralist" movement, later fuzzed in its range of connotation as it was re-baptized "postmodernism," was closely associated with Derrida. And Derrida, as the quote below indicates, was doing something unique.

The real context for the insemination of post-structuralism in this country was the simple fact that more and more scholars in the humanities were fed up with the regime of analytic philosophy. It is hard to imagine from the vantage point of 2012 how thoroughly dominant

and pervasive analytic philosophy was in the academy from the early 1950s until well in to the 1970s. Continental philosophy, whether French or German, was considered a weird kind of "cult." I did my doctoral work at Harvard, and I remember a brief conversation I had at a party with Willard Quine, one of the most famous analytic philosophers of all time. I told him I was doing my PhD dissertation on Kant, and as a response he sniffed, "oh, that mystic." However, just as French post-structuralism was the intellectual by-product of the political turmoil in France during the late 1960s, its adoption by the American academy not quite a decade later can be seen as a kind of methodological revisionism that mirrored the cultural revolution that had largely run its course by 1975.

Philosophy and what was then known as "philosophical theology", however, was probably the last bastion of the academy to take an interest in "post-structuralism," or to even hear about it for that matter. I personally had never heard about it until 1977, and that was because I was at the time part of an interdisciplinary faculty reading group at my university, dominated by literary theorists. What I had been doing ever since I started publishing academic papers about 1974 was to try to find a philosophically sophisticated - and legitimate - alternative to analytic philosophy. I was already steeped in Hegel, Heidegger, and the phenomenological tradition, but I knew that such a tradition was powerless to challenge analytic philosophy on its own terms - as a philosophy of language. Any innovation in philosophical method at the time had to be focused solely on language. Wittgenstein had already "hypnotized" us into making that assumption. Earlier in the decade I had begun to plunge into the various philosophical theories of the imagination, especially if they had specific application to the theory of language, as in the case of Owen Barfield and Philip Wheelwright.

However, it was the spate of translations into English of Heidegger's later works on language during the mid-1970s by Joan Stambaugh that really forced me to start thinking in new directions. To be honest, my main interest in *Alchemy* was Heidegger, not Derrida. As far as I was concerned, Derrida as a "post-structuralist" was originally intended to play the "bad cop" in interrogating analytic philosophy, while Heidegger remained the "good cop". In the 1970s Heidegger was always the "kinder and gentler" form of fallback for literary theorists who wanted to resist the "scientizing" trend of analytic methodology (that of course was long before the whole 1980s controversy over Heidegger's Nazism blew up). Because "deconstruction" was construed then mainly as a more radical kind of "hard theory", focused exclusively on the game of signifiers without a smidge of the essential ingredient literary theorists called "pathos," it played the suitable bad cop role, so far as I was concerned. And because Derrida in *Speech and Phenomena* made it clear he was taking Husserl and Heidegger to a new level, the choice was obvious for me. Please remember that the subtitle of *Alchemy* (which in the 1990 republication became pretty much the actual title) was "Language and the End of Theology." I chose the expression "end of theology" deliberately because it imported into my critique the terminology of Heidegger's own core project of "overcoming metaphysics". It also had a provocative implication, which was bound to gain attention. Since most academics were unfamiliar with the more technical (and

less colorful) connotations of the actual phraseology which Heidegger adapted from the Hegelian dialectic, the strategy worked well.

However, Derrida was, while thoroughly novel and trendy, perceived as bit weird throughout the 1970s, while Heidegger's star, despite the introduction of the late Heidegger to English speakers, was slowly fading. At the same time, it was Richard Rorty, the "bad boy" analytic philosopher who scandalized the American philosophical association with publication of his prize-winning book *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* in 1980, who actually made Derrida respectable in the more cutting-edge philosophical and theological circles. Rorty had written an article or two in the late 1970s that introduced Derrida to the philosophical world and treated him in a very approving manner. It was Rorty's endorsement of Derrida (even though the two thinkers had entirely different agendas) in my estimation that actually kindled widespread interest outside literary circles. It was also the sensation surrounding Rorty and his appearance at an AAR plenary (which I, as I recall, moderated) that stimulated initial interest in *Alchemy*.

By the mid-1980s no one knew or cared much any more about "post-structuralism," and nowadays only a few connoisseurs of contemporary French intellectual history are conversant with the debates over "structure" that raged in France from about 1966 to 1973. If one is interested in that original context of the debates, I strongly recommend Deleuze's important essay on structuralism that can be found in the collection of essays in English titled *Desert Islands*.

Victor Taylor: I would like to ask more about your next book *Force of God*, but before I do I'd like to follow up on the Derrida and deconstruction issue. As you know, I'm working on a volume entitled *Divisible Derrida*, which shares some of your understanding of Derrida's (mis) appropriation by various interests. Nevertheless, Derrida and deconstruction did open religious studies to other fields and disciplines that it would not have "contacted" or would not have as significantly contacted were it not for post-structuralist thought. For example, religious studies today largely remains "area studies," but Derrida and deconstruction made for a prolonged interaction between religion and Continental philosophy, leading, in my view to a new field of "religious theory." Even so-called area studies today are heavily influenced by post or de colonial theory that is very much influenced by deconstruction and Derrida. My question, then, has more to do with this future of Derrida and deconstruction than with a "fidelity" to what Derrida meant or emphasized. That is, could a "real" Derrida, in "true" deconstructive fashion, be "on the way" or "to be"? Will we have a better understanding of Derrida when a field or concern emerges that is beyond the context of his thinking?

Carl Raschke: I would agree that Derrida has influenced other fields in the humanities in a salutary manner as well as given an unprecedented boost to religious theory and interdisciplinary studies. However, in my estimation the causal connection is a little more indirect. It was the pre-eminence and fame of Derrida more than anything else sparked a

fascination in the Anglophone world with Continental philosophy as a whole. Because of Derrida's notoriety academic publishers began commissioning translation of other major French thinkers (specifically Deleuze, but of course later such figures as Badiou). Lacan, of course, was known before Derrida, and his impact also shaped the mounting interest in Continental thought. If you look at the level of "influence" on interdisciplinary studies in the Anglophone world as late as 1990, Lacan had somewhat more of a presence in interdisciplinary studies as well as Marxist thinkers such as Althusser. Derrida was still considered a little "out there" (with the exception of avante-garde literary theorists). And there were also suspicions that he was a tool of conservative and anti-Marxist interests, which of course was totally unfounded. On the other hand, conservatives thought he was a tool of left-wing interersts, but that double-bind more the consequence of the perceived obscurity of his writings along with the fact that he didn't seem easily deployable toward any current "ideological" bent. When I taught my first graduate seminar on Derrida in 1999 I only had three students, all from philosophy. Six years later the class was full, and it was mostly students from a wide range of fields in the humanities. I think the difference was by then Derrida was not only a famous person, but he had written a lot that touched on political theory, questions of higher education, etc. But many of these same interdisciplinary students to this day don't get deconstrucition, and increasingly don't even care.

You mention postcolonial theory, which is an interesting case. Gayatri Spivak, who really "founded" what we now term postcolonial theory, was a faithful student and translator of Derrida. However, today she is frequently cited mainly for her pioneering work while reviled concomitantly for her "obscurity" (i.e., her early Derridean discourse and style). Identity, globalization, and so-called "borderlands" theory have come to overshadow much of the postcolonial conversation. And the somewhat recent fashion of changing the modifier "postcolonial" to "decolonial" (pushed largely by Walter Mignolo, who is not in any way Derridean) derives more from historicist and ethnongraphic premises than philosophical ones. But, again, Derrida made the reading of Continental philosophy in certain disciplinary contexts as a critical auxiliary exercise not only respectable, but necessary. The indirect value of Derrida for postcolonial theory in that sense has been immense.

The long-range impact of Derrida's theories in my estimation has more to do with a general paradigm shift than with the future of "deconstruction" as a specific philosophical or theoretical enterprise. Deconstruction has been much like Einstein's theory of relativity. It changed forever the way we look at and do theory, even though its immediate application is not as extensive. Since Derrida theory can no longer pretend to be - to use Hegel's term - a "positive science." It can only be about fluid boundary conditions, vanishing points, erasures, shifting parameters, "mobile metaphhors" (Nietzsche), and circulating as well as "sliding signifiers" (Lacan). The notion of the determinate entity or the fixed idea has gone the way of the ether in physics. The general principle - if we can call it that - of "deconstruction" comes down simply to *shift happens* (if I'm allowed here to be a little flippant).

As to the last question, I think the more Derrida is consistently read by philosophers and in an omnibus, rather than a merely selective, way that we will have a better understanding of not only what he has been saying, but what the broader implications of thought are. One of the problems all along has been that Derrida has rarely been as Derrida. He has been read for the sake of various academic and even ideological agendas, most of which are now going into eclipse. Hegel was right about the owl of Minerva taking flight at dusk, and that applies to Derrida as well.

Victor Taylor: I think that you are right to point out the intellectual commerce that one finds in Derrida studies. I've always found a tension in this wide field between those who wish to find a methodology in Derrida and then apply it . . . imitate Derrida . . .more or less . . . and those who saw what Derrida was trying to do, trying to open and then work to accomplish something related. We've devoted a lot of time to Derrida, but it has been to point to the latter, I think. *Alchemy*, early on, and your more recent work has been oriented, as I see it, to keeping a conversation going in the context of religious theory. In your forthcoming book, *The Revolution in Theory*, you begin and end with a call to think "actively." It is Heideggerian in a sense . . . thinking beyond philosophy, beyond the closure of discourse. You place a great deal of emphasis on "religious theory's" potential as an "active force." It is almost apocalyptic in tone. Religious theory uniquely "discloses" the status of other discourses, political, economic, etc. Are you emphasizing an apocalyptic force?

Carl Raschke: The reason I put so much emphasis on religious theory is not so much because I want to emphasize theory, which in some ways has been "overtheorized" since the advent of deconstruction, but because the religious remains to this day in need of a profounder theoreticization. Generally speaking, *The Revolution in Religious Theory* maps the general terrain of postmodern theory in the past several decades and shows how such theory has evolved from a preoccupation with "difference", which can be traced to the post-structuralist revolt against all variants of conceptual totalism, to a consideration of the "event". In this new book I develop for the first time the notion of the religious as an *event horizon* for all our theoretical acts of signification. I deliberately choose the well-known scientific term for black holes in the universe, because I want to stress that we are not dealing simply with just another phenomenon in the universe like microbes or dust clouds. We are dealing with a force or energy - I use Deleuze's well-known term "active force" from *Nietzsche and Philosophy* - that has real effects in the world.

The re-Islamization of the Middle East is a case in point. When the "Arab Spring" suddenly erupted well over a year ago the conventional wisdom was that we had finally witnessed the beginnings of some kind of Islamic Enlightenment, where religion would finally be trumped by the values of secular democracy and pluralism as well as the assertion of a certain version of the European notion of "human rights". The same wisdom of course confidently maintained that the Muslim Brotherhood, which has been fighting Western secularism since the 1920s, was not a major player. Of course, we now know the opposite

was true. In earlier books such as *GloboChrist* I show how this same force is playing itself out in terms of the expansive growth of evangelical and Pentecostal Christianity in Europe's former colonial domain, though that book (given the requirements of the publisher) is as much "theological" as it is analytical.

In my forthcoming book *Force of God: Religion, Globalization, and the Crisis of Liberal Democracy* (working title) I argue that the Enlightenment is over, and that the "singularity" of the religious will increasingly be the motivating factor in historical change. The current fashion in Continental philosophy of religion - and the religious academy is more susceptible to the dictata of fashionistas than Justin Bieber's twitter followers - trends toward various retro renderings of "atheistic materialism" in trying to revive somehow the golden age of Western secularism. But these obsessions strike me more as the final (secularist) orgy in the last days of Pompei. As I've written and said on numerous occasions Derrida got it right in 1993 when he proclaimed the return of the religious. He was probably speaking, however, with a certain double-mindedness about what that meant in the long run. His characterization of it as a sort of autoimmune pathology probably betrays his own secularist bias, but it did shift the discourse, even if somewhat unintentionally. I myself think we need to be more serious about the meaning of this "force" than was Derrida, who despite Caputo's reinvention of him as "Saint Jacques" was more concerned really with the political than the religious. Even after 9/11 happened Derrida was far more beset by the actions of the Bush administration than by the implications of the new militant Islamism for world order. Bush and the neo-cons have now faded from the historical stage, but the “return of religion" is casting an ever broader shadow by the day.

The force is not only still with us. It is reshaping the planet, and it is not at all a "religion without religion." It is religion in the most element sense - the singularity of passionate motivation and political commitment. It is something we have not seen since the Westphalian peace of 1648, when the wars of religion ended and the infant Enlightenment was birthed. We are, to paraphrasae Nietzsche in one of his aphorisms from *The Gay Science* as the run-up to the madman's announcement of the catastrophic "event" of God's death, in a new horizon of the infinite where all the familiar sightings of boundaries and landfalls have suddenly vanished.

Victor Taylor: Could I follow up on this notion of a vanishing horizon? Recently Žižek has made a great deal of the ways in which the Occupy Movement has been dismissed by those on the Right and Left. The shared criticism is that the Occupy Movement has no "plan," no "vision" of the future, or no "formula." One could say that a "political" movement without a goal is limited; however, one could just as easily say, as Žižek does, that the future cannot be seen from where we are . . . that certain things must be revealed about Capitalism, ideological structures, et al before a sense of the future can be determined. Perhaps this where politics could learn something from religion? Could a theorizing of religion from your view significantly contribute to the formation of a future politics? More than let's say a Derridean perpetual deferral of the future?

***Carl Raschke*:** Of course, per your question that is exactly the tack I take in my forthcoming book *Force of God: Political Theology and the Crisis of Liberal Democracy*. Loosely defined, "political theology" - a category that has gained sudden prominence in the last two decades in academic thought - means the investigation of religion as the key to the solution of political issues. I won't elaborate on what is happening - or not happening - in this particular field. If anyone is interested, they can go to the blog www.politicaltheology.com/blog where I have posted already a number of reflections and analyses on this kind of question, including an overview of both the current and next books. But as a direct answer to the question, I can say the answer is a definite "yes." Why exactly?

First, let's examine the classical legacy. If anyone reads Aristotle's Politics carefully, they must realize that the fundamental issue around which circulate his well-known views is the question of how to discern "the good" (*to kalon*) as the guiding principle for the formation of the polis. Now I am not at all advocating any of the classical solutions - either implicitly or explicitly - which have occupied philosophers in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, particularly figures like Alasdair Macintyre. But the question of the good is ultimately a political question, as both Plato and Aristotle understood, and since Augustine at least we have been compelled to admit, even in the epoch of triumphal secularism, that questions of "faith" are vital, if not absolutely essential, to crafting some kind of appropriate answer. That in my mind is the underlying message of Charles Taylor's monumental musings on the problem of the secular, though I personally believe it is a lot clunkier and complicated than he makes it.

Now, let's return to Derrida. It is not because he had this insatiable craving to be fashionable that he moved during the 1980s from the preoccupation with the meaning of texts to what might be termed political philosophy in the conventional sense. The "religious turn" was merely a natural outcome of the political turn. Political theorists ceased in the eighteenth century constructing grand "thought experiments" à la *Plato's Republic* that might somehow offer a blueprint for how sovereignty might be ultimately codified and the "good" enforced. Derrida seemed to have realized, especially when he waded during the early Eighties into the controversy over Heidegger's politics, that how one construes intellectual legacy has at minimum indirect political consequences. Accused as he was of cultural conservatives of corrupting the youth after the fashion of Socrates, he probably had to say something in his defense, which of course he did. It was in this context he seemed to have discovered that "deconstruction" is isomorphic with theological iconoclasm as well as the kind of "eschatologism" that powered Marx. His declaration in *Spectres of Marx* that "the time is out of joint" is more profound than many realize.

As a deconstructive political thinker, Derrida is perhaps more relevant than then long term than even Žižek. As I've already insisted throughout this interview, what matters in Derrida

is not mainly "what was", but what still remains "to come." Derrida wears the prophetic mantle in a form of which no Western intellectual has been deserving since Nietzsche. *L'avenir* is "eschatological|" insofar as it implies the full indeterminacy of an event-ful futureness that continues to shock and surprise us.

Is it possible to talk, finally, about how a theorizing of religion can "contribute to the formation of a future politics?" The answer unfortunately is a decided "no." The future, as Ernst Block reminds us, is radically open. So politics does not belong to the sphere of discourse we call *l'avenir*. The *politeia* is always, as the Greeks remind us, about striving for the good in the best way we can formulate it, given current circumstances. But does religion "remind" us that politics per se, which is always present, fails when confronted with the power of the future? Yes, decidedly! The future is constituted by the event, and the event is by definition indeterminable. It is the temporal trajectory of time-bound ("political") incidents connected in accordance with the overflow of the actual consequences of these unpredictability "eventualities" that the religious mind relegates to the mind of God. A future "politics" is impossible. A political theology of the future is possible.

Politically speaking, that is what we can take away from Derrida.

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