

# 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 to 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*

© 2001, 2005 by Blackwell Publishing Ltd  
Editorial matter and arrangement © 2001, 2005 by Graham Ward  
"Musée des Beaux Arts", © 1940 and renewed 1968 by W.H. Auden, from *W.H. Auden: Collected Poems* by W.H. Auden. Used by permission of Random House, Inc.

BLACKWELL PUBLISHING  
350 Main Street, Malden, MA 02148-5020, USA  
108 Cowley Road, Oxford OX4 1JF, UK  
550 Swanston Street, Carlton, Victoria 3053, Australia

The right of Graham Ward to be identified as the Author of the Editorial Material in this Work has been asserted in accordance with the UK Copyright, Designs, and Patents Act 1988.

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise, except as permitted by the UK Copyright, Designs, and Patents Act 1988, without the prior permission of the publisher.

First published 2001  
First published in paperback 2005 by Blackwell Publishing Ltd

*Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data*

The Blackwell companion to postmodern theology / edited by Graham Ward.  
p. cm. – (Blackwell companions to religion)  
Includes bibliographical references and index.  
ISBN 0-631-21217-5 (alk. paper) – ISBN 1-4051-2719-8 (pbk : alk. paper)  
I. Postmodernism theology. II. Ward, Graham. III. Series.  
BT83.597.B53 2001  
230'.046 – dc21

2001037469

A catalogue record for this title is available from the British Library.

Set in 10 $\frac{1}{2}$  on 12 $\frac{1}{2}$  pt Photina  
by SNP Best-set Typesetter Ltd, Hong Kong  
Printed and bound in the United Kingdom  
by TJ International, Padstow, Cornwall

The publisher's policy is to use permanent paper from mills that operate a sustainable forestry policy, and which has been manufactured from pulp processed using acid-free and elementary chlorine-free practices. Furthermore, the publisher ensures that the text paper and cover board used have met acceptable environmental accreditation standards.

For further information on  
Blackwell Publishing, visit our website:  
[www.blackwellpublishing.com](http://www.blackwellpublishing.com)

To

Martha, Grace and Nicola

*ὕμεις γάρ ἐστε ἡ δόξα ἡμῶν καὶ ἡ Χαρά*  
(1 Thess. 2.20)





# Contents

List of Contributors	x
Introduction: "Where We Stand" <i>Graham Ward</i>	xii
<b>Part I Aesthetics</b>	<b>1</b>
1 Postmodern Theology as Cultural Analysis <i>Mieke Bal</i>	3
2 The Man Who Fell to Earth <i>Gerard Loughlin</i>	24
3 Communion and Conversation <i>Regina M. Schwartz</i>	48
4 The Ends of Man and the Future of God <i>Janet Martin Soskice</i>	68
5 "Lush Life": Foucault's Analytics of Power and a Jazz Aesthetic <i>Sharon D. Welch</i>	79
<b>Part II Ethics</b>	<b>105</b>
6 The Midwinter Sacrifice <i>John Milbank</i>	107

7	Postmodernity and Religious Plurality: Is a Common Global Ethic Possible or Desirable? <i>Gavin D'Costa</i>	131
8	The Christian Difference, or Surviving Postmodernism <i>Stanley Hauerwas</i>	144
9	Justice and Prudence: Principles of Order in the Platonic City <i>Catherine Pickstock</i>	162
10	Visiting Prisoners <i>William C. Placher</i>	177
11	Suffering and Incarnation <i>Graham Ward</i>	192
12	Earth God: Cultivating the Spirit in an Ecocidal Culture <i>Mark I. Wallace</i>	209
<b>Part III Gender</b>		229
13	An Ethics of Memory: Promising, Forgiving, Yearning <i>Pamela Sue Anderson</i>	231
14	Is Macrina a Woman? Gregory of Nyssa's <i>Dialogue on the Soul and Resurrection</i> <i>Virginia Burrus</i>	249
15	"They Will Know We are Christians by Our Regulated Improvisation": Ecclesial Hybridity and the Unity of the Church <i>Mary McClintock Fulkerson</i>	265
16	On Changing the Imaginary <i>Grace M. Jantzen</i>	280
17	Companionable Wisdoms: What Insights Might Feminist Theorists Gather from Feminist Theologians? <i>Serene Jones</i>	294
<b>Part IV Hermeneutics</b>		309
18	Shattering the Logos: Hermeneutics Between a Hammer and a Hard Place <i>Daniel Boyarin</i>	311
19	The Renewal of Jewish Theology Today: Under the Sign of Three	324

	<i>Peter Ochs</i>	
20	Intending Transcendence: Desiring God <i>Edith Wyschogrod</i>	349
<b>Part V Phenomenology</b>		367
21	Transfiguring God <i>Richard Kearney</i>	369
22	Presence and Parousia <i>Jean-Yves Lacoste</i>	394
23	The Formal Reason for the Infinite <i>Jean-Luc Marion</i>	399
24	Religions as Conventions <i>Joseph S. O'Leary</i>	413
<b>Part VI Heideggerians</b>		425
25	The Self-Saving of God <i>Thomas J. J. Altizer</i>	427
26	The Subject of Prayer: Unwilling Words in the Postmodern Access to God <i>Laurence Paul Hemming</i>	444
27	The Christian Message and the Dissolution of Metaphysics <i>Gianni Vattimo</i>	458
<b>Part VII Derrideans</b>		467
28	The Poetics of the Impossible and the Kingdom of God <i>John D. Caputo</i>	469
29	Anti-Discrimination <i>Don Cupitt</i>	482
30	Is There a Postmodern Gospel? <i>Walter Lowe</i>	490
31	Indian Territory: Postmodernism Under the Sign of the Body <i>Carl Raschke</i>	505
	Index	517

# 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.<sup>1</sup>

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.

## 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*.<sup>2</sup> 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)<sup>3</sup> 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 "post-modernity." 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.<sup>4</sup> 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.<sup>5</sup>

Unlike Jameson, I do want to continue to maintain a distinction between postmodernism and postmodernity.<sup>6</sup> It is not a watertight distinction, but it is functional and, as I will demonstrate, helpful. I follow Lyotard in seeing postmodernism 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 nonfoundationalism, 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.<sup>7</sup> 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 dissemina-



tion of floating signifiers.<sup>8</sup> 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,”<sup>9</sup> 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.<sup>10</sup>

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,”<sup>11</sup> 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."<sup>12</sup> 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 post-modernism."<sup>13</sup> 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."<sup>14</sup> Touraine, albeit in a different way, joins forces with that neoliberal thinker Jürgen Habermas.<sup>15</sup> 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 post-modern 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.<sup>16</sup>

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.<sup>17</sup> 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."<sup>18</sup> 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.<sup>19</sup> 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 implodes, 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.”<sup>20</sup> 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.”<sup>21</sup> 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 paranoidias 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<sup>22</sup> 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.<sup>23</sup>

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 fulfilment, 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.<sup>24</sup> 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.<sup>25</sup> 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 stigmatas and sacramentalisms, through philosophies of charity and appeals to the “social divine?”<sup>26</sup> 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.”<sup>27</sup> 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."<sup>28</sup> 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."<sup>29</sup> 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"<sup>30</sup> 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 important 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 postmodern 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 academics 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 challenge Nicholas Boyle speaks of when he states that "Post-Modernism is the pessimism 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 shattering the bourgeois identity."<sup>31</sup> In other words, without the radicality that a theological 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 theological discourse can make in postmodernity when "the historical *modus vivendi* called secularism is coming apart at the seams."<sup>32</sup>

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 postmodernism 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.<sup>33</sup> 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 *poesis*. 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 theology<sup>34</sup> – 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.<sup>35</sup> 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.<sup>36</sup> 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 darkneses 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.<sup>37</sup>

## Notes

- 1 *Thomas Carlyle: Selected Writings*, ed. Alan Shelston (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1971), pp. 63–4.
- 2 Nicholas Boyle, *Who Are We Now? Christian Humanism and the Global Market from Hegel to Heaney* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1998). See the essay by Stanley Hauerwas in this volume which treats this book in more depth.
- 3 See his *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, trans. Geoffrey Bennington and Brian Massumi (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1988). For his work on aesthetics see *The Inhuman*, trans. Geoffrey Bennington and Rachel Bowlby (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1991) and *Lessons on the Analytic of the Sublime*, trans. Elizabeth Rottenberg (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1994). Lyotard's work on aesthetics forms an important philosophical backdrop to those essays treating works of art in part one of this volume.
- 4 For Jameson, compare his early book *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (London: Verso, 1991) with his collection of essays *The Cultural Turn* (London: Verso, 1998). For David Harvey, compare his early book *The Condition of Postmodernity* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1989) with his volume *Justice, Nature and the Geography of Difference* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1996).
- 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.
- 7 See Stephen Toulmin, *Cosmopolis: The Hidden Agenda of Modernity* (Chicago, IL: Chicago University Press, 1990).
- 8 See Michel Maffesoli, *The Contemplation of the World: Figures of Community Style* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), pp. 61, 72.
- 9 Guy Debord, *The Society of Spectacle* (Detroit, MI: Black and Red, 1977), axiom 6.
- 10 Michel de Certeau, *The Capture of Speech and Other Political Writings*, trans. Tom Conley (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), p. 4.
- 11 *Ibid.*, p. 10.
- 12 *The Collected Philosophical Works of Descartes*, vol. 1, trans. John Cottingham et al. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), p. 181.
- 13 Alain Touraine, *Critique of Modernity*, trans. David Macey (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1995), p. 172.
- 14 *Ibid.*, p. 198.
- 15 See *ibid.*, pp. 336–43 for an account of how Touraine differs from Habermas with respect to rethinking democracy.
- 16 Slavoj Žižek, *The Fragile Absolute: Why the Christian Legacy is Worth Defending* (London: Verso), pp. 18–19.
- 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.

- 18 See Ernesto Laclau, *New Reflections on the Revolution of our Time* (London: Verso, 1990), pp. 16–18. In their different ways both Levinas and Laclau are searching for that orientating exteriority. See section 3 of Levinas's *Totality and Infinity*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1969).
- 19 See Bruno Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern*, trans. Catherine Porter (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993).
- 20 Karl Marx, *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy* (New York, 1970), p. 20.
- 21 Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, *Hegemony and Social Strategy* (London: Verso, 1985), p. 8.
- 22 See Susan Stewart, *On Longing: Narratives of the Miniature, the Gigantic, the Souvenir, the Collection* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1984), p. 23.
- 23 See John Frow, *Time and Commodity Culture: Essays in Cultural Theory and Postmodernity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), p. 86.
- 24 See my essay "Suffering and Incarnation" in chapter 11 of this volume.
- 25 For a clear account of this logic see Henry Kipps, *Fetish: An Erotics of Culture* (London: Free Association Books, 1999), p. 24.
- 26 See the work of the contemporary French social anthropologist Michel Maffesoli.
- 27 Michel Serres, *Angels: A Modern Myth*, trans. Francis Cowper (Paris: Flammarion, 1993), p. 288.
- 28 Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, trans. Steven Rendall (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), p. 186.
- 29 *Ibid.*, pp. 187–8.
- 30 Michel de Certeau, *On Signs*, ed. Marshall Blonsky (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1987), p. 202.
- 31 Nicholas Boyle, p. 318.
- 32 William Connolly, p. 19.
- 33 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*.
- 34 See David Ford (ed.), *Modern Theologians* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1997).
- 35 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.
- 36 The term is adopted from Manuel Castell's discussion of postmodern architecture in *Rise of the Network Society* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1996).
- 37 *Thomas Carlyle*, pp. 84–5.



## PART I

# Aesthetics

1	Postmodern Theology as Cultural Analysis	3
2	The Man Who Fell to Earth	24
3	Communion and Conversation	48
4	The Ends of Man and the Future of God	68
5	“Lush Life”: Foucault’s Analytics of Power and a Jazz Aesthetic	79





## CHAPTER 1

# Postmodern Theology as Cultural Analysis

Mieke Bal

Mieke Bal is probably one of the best-known academics in the Netherlands today, recognized not only for her contributions to many disciplines (biblical studies, hermeneutics, literary studies, aesthetics, feminist theory) but also her frequent appearances on Dutch television. Her intellectual range is awe-inspiring. Her work is characterized by its interdisciplinary breadth. In the mid to late 1980s, having published in English her book first produced in Holland in 1980, *Narratology: Introduction to the Theory of Narrative* (Toronto, 1985), she began working on a series of studies of narratives from the Hebrew Bible which employed literary analytical skills. Her familiarity with structuralist and poststructuralist forms of criticism, linguistic and genre analysis, and her commitment to feminist theory came together in three autonomous but interrelated publications six years later. The first of these, which explicitly developed from her interests in narratology, was *Lethal Love: Feminist Literary Readings of Biblical Love Stories* (Bloomington, IN, 1987). Here she took narratives concerning women – Delilah, Tamar, Ruth, and Eve – and refigured them for feminists in a way more sophisticated, but nevertheless complementary, to the work done in the United States by Phyllis Trible. In the second book, *Murder and Difference: Gender, Genre, and Scholarship on Sisera's Death* (Bloomington, IN, 1989), she employed Umberto Eco's semiotic theory – where signs are considered to constitute a series of overlapping cultural codes in which reality is represented – to argue for the possibility of a distinctively feminine authorship for the song of Deborah. Here, possibly, one could find a woman's song in a man's epic. This suppressed feminine voice she investigated further in what is her most mature study, *Death and Dissymetry: The Politics of Coherence in the Book of Judges* (Chicago, IL, 1986). In examining (even deconstructing) the obsession evident in the Book of Judges with military and political chronology, Bal paid attention to the accounts of *lady* killers and *lady killers* (as she puts it in the following essay). In doing so she

exposed the repressed other side of the chronological obsession: the theme of gender-bound violence. Her series of books came to something of a conclusion with her edited volume *Anti-Covenant: Counter-Reading Women's Lives in the Hebrew Bible* (Sheffield, 1989).

In the 1990s Bal developed her interests in terms of much broader concerns with cultural production itself. Her explicit methodological employment of theory led to an appreciation of the theoretical as a cultural practice of interpretation, a cultural engagement attempting not simply to offer analysis but also critique. This account of the value of the theoretical informed a collection of essays (coedited with Inge E. Boer) entitled *The Point of Theory: Practices of Cultural Analysis* (Amsterdam, 1994). Bal's interest in narrative, particularly biblical narrative, never waned, but simply took another turn. For her Northrop Frye Lectures in Literary Theory she chose to look at the production of biblical scenes (featuring Susanna, Hagar, Samson, and Delilah) in the paintings of Rembrandt. These lectures were published in the beautiful volume *Reading "Rembrandt": Beyond the Word-Image Opposition* (Cambridge, 1991). Until this point Bal's attention had focused on the literary, but now she became increasingly interested in the visual and the nature of the relationship between the visual and the verbal. This raised theoretical questions about what it is to read. If her Rembrandt explorations led to an account of how to read visually, then her later book on Proust provides an account of how to look discursively. In *The Mottled Screen: Reading Proust Visually* (Stanford, CA, 1997) she examined Proust's fascination with the optical – figured in references to paintings, telescopes, magnifying glasses, magic lanterns, and photography – and the way this affected his highly visual writing. Throughout this new development in Bal's work a continuity remains, based upon her commitment to gender studies. Even in her Proust volume she draws attention to how the poetics organizing Proust's *A la recherche du temps perdu* issue from the appearances and disappearances of Gilberte/Albertine.

Bal's exposure to art museums following her research for her book on Rembrandt became the basis for a series of reflections on collective memory and the framing of the past. These were published in two books: *Double Exposures: The Subject of Cultural Analysis* (New York, 1996) and *Acts of Memory: Cultural Recall in the Present* (Dartmouth, MA, 1999). We see the further development of these reflections in the essay that follows.

## Points of Departure

Western culture as we know and live it today was built on several interlocking structures, one of which was theological, specifically, Christian. Present-day culture in the West, therefore, cannot be understood without theology. *Post-modern theology is the study of this presence of the past within the present.*

For all our postmodern protestations in the form of either post-Enlightenment atheism, postcolonial religious pluralism, or even, as is deplorably fashionable today, sentimental returns to a God generated by millennial anxiety, the cultural present is unthinkable, indeed, unimaginable, without an understanding and acceptance of three premises. First, Christianity is there; that is, here (in Europe and the Americas, at least). Second, Christianity is a cultural structure that informs the cultural imaginary, whether one identifies with it in terms of belief and practice or not. Third, Christianity is just that; hence, it is neither the only cultural structure nor the only religious structure around. While these premises define the cultural present, it is my assumption in this essay that they also underlie any possible postmodern theology. In other words, theology in our time must be a cultural discipline, and the study of religion must be a branch of cultural analysis, whose boundaries with other cultural disciplines are porous and provisional. In such a conception, no privilege can be granted to any particular religious tradition or any cultural structure – such as religion – over any other – such as politics, education, or “culture” in the narrow sense, as the practices and products of the imaginary.

This position is grounded in a number of further premises. The first of these premises concerns history as the study of the past. The importance of history lies not in attempts to reconstruct the past but in understanding the present. Understanding culture serves the purpose of making the world we live in understandable and thereby a place with more freedom, with all kinds of choices. Knowledge of the past derives its relevance from this ongoing presence of the past within the present, not as its precursor or source but as an ineradicable, integral part of the present. The pervasive presence of religion in the past is therefore a presence in the present as well, a presence that no one can escape, that informs politics and education, moral behavior and juridical decisions alike.<sup>1</sup>

A second further premise concerns the cultural disciplines. If “culture” is the object of study in the disciplines of art history, literary studies, classics, and such social disciplines as anthropology, then the endeavor, again, must be an understanding of the present as integrative and dynamic. This conviction entails a need for interdisciplinary work as an indispensable framework for any study within separate disciplines. Moreover, no field within this large arena can afford to limit itself to its traditional self-identity. The fundamental permeability of fields of study concerns both the “medium” – literature cannot be isolated from visual art, for example – and the social area – “high” and “popular” art cannot be isolated from each other. Visual and verbal culture interpenetrate, as do everyday culture and the more contemplative, imaginary cultures of leisure. Religion is part and parcel of the cluster constituting this fundamentally mixed culture.

While this position precludes any practice of theology in separate endeavors, it also makes the study and understanding of the religious legacies whose offshoots pervade Western culture an indispensable element of the analysis of culture. It is a flaw in current academic practices such as cultural studies that they underestimate the importance of the integration of what used to be

“theology” or “religious studies” in any attempt to grasp how we live the past inside the present.

I have argued and explored these premises in earlier work, which I can only refer the reader to here. In a recent study, I made an argument for the consequences of this position for historical work in the domain of visual art (*Quoting Caravaggio: Contemporary Art, Preposterous History*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999). Earlier, I was involved in exploring ways in which biblical literature could be interpreted as both strange – “old” and “foreign” – and relevant to today’s post-Enlightenment culture (this work is probably why I have ended up in this volume). Elsewhere, I explored the interrelations of verbal and visual culture (1991 around Rembrandt; 1997 around Proust), and the negotiations carried out in the present to deal with that mixture, specifically in the practice of exhibiting. For the purposes of this volume, I would like to present one spin-off from that earlier work and touch upon one later development of it, in order to argue for the importance of the integration of the traditional topics of study in a radically different analytical setting which – why not? – might go by the name of “postmodern theology.”

Theology, then, is the name for a specialization within the domain of cultural analysis that focuses, from the point of view of the integrative premises outlined above, on those areas of present-day culture where the religious elements from the past survive and hence “live.” Consequently, a postmodern theology must account for those aspects of that special domain that are “other” to the past. If the field of study is the Bible, then postmodern theology must account for the social meanings, including the “literary,” political, and artistic ones, of biblical literature in today’s world – within the context of the heritages of other religions, other cultures. Sometimes the field of study is what is traditionally called “art history,” namely those portions of visual culture that represent or evoke, or otherwise engage, religious traditions, or, to put it differently, those elements of religion that function in the visual domain. This field includes medieval stained-glass windows as well as films such as Robert Duvall’s *The Apostle* (1997). But the visual can no more be distinguished from expressions in other media than fictional or aesthetic objects can be from objects of everyday life. Postmodern theology is liable to study gospel traditions and convent life, denominational schools and the ideological makeup of charitable foundations, and the presence of religious discourse in lay politics and religious tenets in the practice and theory of law. But to make this field less large and muddled, without falling back onto the traditional text-based sources, let me confine the discussion here to postmodern “visual theology.”

It is obvious that the cultural heritage of Western art is to a large extent bound up with past religious purposes and events. In such cases the work to be done by a postmodern theology with such imagery is to account for it, that is, to examine and analyse it in order to understand the effective and affective result of encounters in the present with such “works of art.” For the sake of integrating the premises indicated above, I will select the cases for my demonstration from the latter domain, not traditionally considered directly theological.

In the limited space of this contribution I will outline two case studies that I have conducted recently within which these premises have proved productive. The first concerns an attempt to articulate an approach to some of Caravaggio's paintings of religious subjects. This is a spin-off of my book on the painter as revised by contemporary art. The paintings attract flocks of tourists, many of whom profoundly enjoy the images without necessarily sympathizing with the religious content, or even recognizing, let alone understanding, it. Far from deploring this "loss of tradition" as conventional art history would tend to do, or explaining the meanings of the original work, the attempt, then, is to offer an explanation for – and to argue on behalf of – the continued relevance of elements of our visual culture that are not understood today in the terms of the past (nor need they be). The second case study concerns an inverse itinerary: to present an image that, far from suffering a loss of tradition, suffers from an excess of it. Here, I was dealing with an image that is already overgrown with the weeds of later ideological reception. The goal was to bring to this image a fresh understanding, in a culture which is not only post-Enlightenment in its overt atheism, but which is also – or should be – post-misogynistic in its confused reception of the narratives that came to us from older religious traditions.

## **Caravaggio Today**

There's a dogma in the discipline of art history which says that images from the past must be understood in terms of the artists' and patrons' intentions. In the many cases where the documentation is insufficient and intention diffuse, such as where the Italian master Michelangelo Merisi da Caravaggio is concerned, this dogma is particularly problematic. We know that many of his images represent biblical scenes or religious moments: conversions, callings, or devotional scenes. It is relatively easy to track down the precise meanings of the details in such images; for example, in terms of the patron's wishes to make a stand in favor of a theological fine point that matters to the religious order that commissioned the painting. Such research, standard in the history of art, pertains to what I would call a modernist theology, one based on historical reconstruction and the purity of theological meaning as directly derived from theological documents.

At the same time, however, today the most striking aspect of Caravaggio's work is seen to be the profound sensuality of his representations of the human body, especially the male body. It is a well-known fact that, although the painter depicted scenes figuring, for example, the Virgin and Mary Magdalene, no female nude by his hand is known. His male figures, on the other hand, saints or not, are often sensuously depicted nude or semi-nude bodies. The status of this aspect of such paintings cannot be accounted for in the terms that are offered by modernist theology or art history. This sensuality cannot be attributed to the artist's

overt intention, especially not in cases of commissions by religious authorities, but neither can it be construed as unintentional. We simply don't know and perhaps shouldn't care; instead, we ought to accept that the mind is unreadable and does not dictate meaning and effect. Instead, it seems more important to recognize that the tension between the paintings' sensuality and their religious content is the product of the present and its dogmas. For it is our time, not Caravaggio's, that appears to find a tension between these two areas of human experience. As if to disavow the aspect of Caravaggio's paintings that troubles scholars most today, art-historical work labors to make the case for either the artist's deep religiosity or his faithful execution of his patrons' wishes.<sup>2</sup> What I referred to above as modernist theology is not "pure" theology, but an active, polemical repression of bodily and sensuous aspects of life from theology. This repression has its counterpart in art history's reluctance to acknowledge the importance of studying the tradition of the female nude and its many variations and ramifications.<sup>3</sup>

My interest is not in contesting the artist's religiosity, of which we know nothing apart from his paintings, or the influence of his patrons on their iconography. What I find relevant for the articulation of a postmodern theology would be, rather, the acknowledgment of the scholars' deep commitment to "save" the art from itself. This commitment has nothing to do with any theological "truth" – God – Christian or other. The compulsion to explore Caravaggist iconography in the most subtle theological detail in order to "reconstruct" its historical meanings is in fact profoundly anachronistic, either as art history or as theology. For it is based on a division between body and spirit which is, I contend, *not* historical, but rather an anachronistic projection from a more recent past, often indicated by the term "Victorian," which is still rampant in present-day morality.<sup>4</sup> To be sure, such studies can be relevant and useful for their precision and the underlying acknowledgment of a mixed-media culture in the past. But instead of, or in addition to, such studies, I see the sensuality in Caravaggio's images as being utterly compatible with, indeed, an integrated part of a baroque religious sensibility that was, so to speak, the everyday life of the Counter-Reformation. More importantly, it accounts for the images' appeal to viewers in the present. And, according to my premises, its theological relevance, if any, must be anchored in that appeal. Far from leading to anachronistic interpretation as my work has often been accused of doing, I contend it is only from this "presentist" perspective that a historical account can be meaningfully attempted.<sup>5</sup>

Perhaps trying to satisfy his clients' wishes or, at other times, only paying lip-service, this artist was, for all we know, primarily a painter invested in probing the possibilities of his art from the perspective of his lived reality. This reality included – we must surmise from what we see – the presence of sensually rich, enticing bodies in his representations. Caravaggio's images are profoundly and decisively erotic. It can only be on and in such bodies that the religious content took hold. If theological interpretation is to be meaningful, its task is to account for this bodily aspect of religious experience, not to dismiss it as idiosyncratic or to privilege one domain over the other.



The sensuality and religiosity must be taken together, not only to account for Caravaggio's specificity as a painter, but more importantly, to learn from these images something about religion as lived experience instead of dead, authoritarian letter. This lesson concerns what has been called "relationality."<sup>6</sup> And if religion, etymologically if not essentially, concerns relationality, then chances are that the very sensuality of Caravaggio's paintings is their theological content, for which the references to the dogmatic position he was commissioned to depict is no more than a frame.<sup>7</sup>

As it happens, contemporary – postmodern – conceptions of art are also more invested in art's relational potential, its performativity, than in its iconography. Thus the bond between a theological interpretation of images based on traditional religious content and an account of art's powers has more than an incidental common ground in relationality. We can learn something from painting, not as a transparent medium of representation but as alternative semiotic production. Painting offers something we don't know, or have forgotten: something books don't teach us but images can; something, ultimately, that, in more senses than one, *matters*.

By exploring sensuality and representation together, Caravaggio was the first to make utter illusionism into a statement on the body. Two of his works on religious subjects give a sense of what this entails. *The Crucifixion of Saint Peter* and *The Conversion of Saint Paul*, both from 1601–2 and both large canvases (230 × 175 cm), were commissioned as a set. They were painted to be companion pieces in the Cerasi Chapel of the Church of Santa Maria del Popolo in Rome, where they are still found today. The site, the hanging, and the duration of their time in this chapel constitute a frame in the double sense. In the first place, these paintings in their past and present site also suggest what Caravaggio's bodily illusionism does *not* entail. Here, there is no narrative "in the third person," no telling stories of others that concern us only for the lesson drawn from them by church authorities. There is no referential illusion that the temporality of the image is safely ensconced within the historical past of the dramatic events. The painstaking theological–iconographic analysis carried out in a spirit of modernist historiography, correct and therefore valuable as it otherwise is, utterly fails to account for this defining aspect of the works.<sup>8</sup> Yet, here they are, in this church, where thousands come to see them. In order to benefit from these paintings-in-situ, we must endorse the obvious fact that tourism, not religion, the lust for art not for God, sensuous visual appeal not spirituality, brings most viewers into this church, and to these paintings. So what experience do they solicit and enhance that might have cultural, even specifically theological, relevance today?

First, there is the site itself, the conditions of viewing that allows or forbids. To see the paintings fully, one needs to stand between them, something the casual visitor, under pressure of time because of the 100-lire piece inserted into the automatic lighting machine, is not allowed to do. As far as temporality is concerned, this pressure ironically makes up for the limited access, for on this utterly mundane level one is made acutely aware of bodily frustration and the

effect of duration. Instead of standing between them, one cranes one's neck and feels the pressure of seeing quickly, amidst so many others, and obliquely. A lack of access is inherent to this viewing experience; a sense of the partial and the transient, the impossibility of possessing these images, to stare at them at leisure, to own and objectify them.

The second relevant aspect of the experience concerns the kind of representations the images offer. These are figurative paintings, proposing not just a fictional happening but a specific bias towards that happening as well.<sup>9</sup> To summarize the result of a long analysis of their painterly mode as it clashes with their *mise-en-scène*, these two paintings are totally *illusionistic* in their texture yet totally *artificial* in their figurativity. This disjunction between illusion and realism sharpens the qualification of illusionism as a tool for attracting the embodied look which the figuration further elaborates. Both scenes are utterly theatrical. This theatricality solicits a look that is both engaged and devoid of mimetic illusion. This is powerfully visible, for example, in the figure of Peter. He is lifting his head and shoulder to look away in boredom at having to pose in an uncomfortable position for too long. Similarly, Paul is displaying his muscles, tense from holding up his arms for the length of time it takes to paint him so painstakingly. Thus, the figures don't come to us as saints from biblical stories but as people, actors playing these saints, in a play staged for us.

Why is that important? The tension between illusionistic painting and artificial, anti-narrative figuration has been brought to awareness most effectively not by art-historical commentary but by Derek Jarman's 1986 film *Caravaggio*, another visual work of art, made in and for our time. The transformation of the acting friends and assistants who set up the *tableaux vivants* for Michele as he paints, into the actual paintings that result, is a precious tool for art history classes, for it drives home a sense of the performativity that mediates between illusion and theatricality. And while this film seems to be indifferent to theological knowledge, it seems less in tension with the paintings-in-situ than with the art-historical iconographic readings that ignore their frame and their actual effect. For it turns the sensuality of the studio, the intimacy of lived reality in which the paintings were made, into a plausible way of being with the stories of the apostles.

The clash – or harmony – between illusionism and theatricality impels the viewer to look differently at the details of the scene and the painter's work. Peter's fingernails are dirty but his hand does not bleed, is not pierced by the nail. And, in case you are mistaken, the arbitrary spatial direction of the nail, doubly oblique, confronts you with the impossibility of reconciling but also of ignoring the two modes of representation at stake. For the nail is bent away from the wood and towards the picture plane. Thus it drives home the point that it does not connect to the wood to which it is supposed to fix the hand. Instead, the posing man is holding it, but, due to the duration of the session, loosens his grip, forgets to keep it straight. This is a real man, not a legendary saint or a historically remote narrative figure. It is a man who does odd jobs, who, just one or two years ago, saw a turn-of-the-century celebration, who perhaps witnessed the burning