IN SEARCH OF A NON-DOGMATIC THEOLOGY

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In another respect, it is our epoch which has discovered theology. One no longer needs to believe in God. We seek rather the “structure,” that is, the form which may be filled with beliefs, but the structure has no need to be filled in order to be called “theological.” Theology is now the science of nonexisting entities, the manner in which these entities—divine or anti-divine, Christ or Antichrist—animate language and make for it this glorious body which is divided into disjunctions.

—Gilles Deleuze, The Logic of Sense

By the “end” of theology, we should warn here, we do not necessarily mean simply the termination, or even the actual demise, of the kind of reflective habit that has been plied by theologians in the Occident for centuries....Theologians will continue to theologize, even though the genuine impetus for theological work has dampened. The end of theology refers not to the cessation of theological work, but to the onset of a fundamental question of the raison d’etre for what historically has been known as “theology.”

—Carl Raschke, The End of Theology

As the two epigraphs above suggest, there is still a certain stubborn confusion with regard to the meaningfulness and possibility of theological thinking in a postmodern age—namely, does the postmodern mark the “discovery” or “end” of theology? Perhaps it depends on what is meant by the term theology.

Critics have rightly pointed out that theological thinking is intrinsically value-laden, and thus, that the study of this tradition is unavoidably a political act. Theological study and politics are deeply intertwined and form a complex web that reflects not only back onto the particular religious tradition under scrutiny as intended, but also on its perception of other religious traditions, values, and convictions with which it might have much or little in common. A theology of world religions, for instance, would reflect not so much the actual “the-
ology" of the world’s religious traditions, as much as it would reflect the perceived similarities and differences of a given religion in relation to the given theology of the theologian in question. This is to say nothing of the relative adequacy or inadequacy of a theological lens of inquiry for certain religions that may eschew the kind of rationalization of beliefs and practices that is more characteristic of an orthodoxic religious sensibility than an orthopraxic one. After all, are not questions concerning the “meaning” of the Zen koan already a misguided appropriation, if not an outright betrayal, of the koan itself?

This concern with the ideological underpinnings of theology is only compounded when one realizes that the larger field of Religious Studies emerged historically out of a theological origin, and thus, much of the current field is still largely determined by the prototype of Christian theology. Has this “theological residue” to the academic study of religion left its taint on the field such that the supposed dispassionate study of a diversity of religious phenomena and traditions is in fact a cloak for the ideological reentrenchment of a particular theological perspective? Must the field of Religious Studies rid itself altogether of theological study if it is to be granted a legitimate place within the academic community? When the historian of religion, Sam Gill, argues that Religious Studies “requires the profanation of the religious,” does this necessarily preclude theological study? Or might theology still have value even in the midst of the current (and perhaps belated) pluralistic milieu?

Furthermore, there is the important though often overlooked difference between the study of theology and what might be termed theological study. The former treats the theological tradition as data to be learned, absorbed, and comprehended; the latter actually thinks theologically, which, borrowing the description from Charles Winquist, means to think with the desire for a thinking that does not disappoint, to think in extremis, to ask what is real and important. To study theology, one might assume the role of the historian, literary critic, anthropologist, sociologist, etc. To study theologically, on the other hand, the horizon of thought, by definition, is unrestricted and unregulated, and thereby, one discovers in the course of history, in the canons of history, in the convergences and divergences of cultures both ancient and modern, and in the shifts and trends of this and any given society, data that might be theologically rendered. Thus, by pondering the value of theology to the academic study of religion, it is not only a question of what sort of theology might be enfranchised, but also, and perhaps more importantly, what sort of thinking and whether the study of theology might become theological.
The confusion and highly politicized debate about the nature and role of theology is not unlike the confusion surrounding the term “postmodern” itself. In what has become by now common wisdom, “postmodernism” was first announced as a cultural condition in which the state of knowledge had been de-legitimized and was left in search of new criteria of assessment and a new rationale for assent. This announcement was voiced by the French cultural theorist, Jean-François Lyotard, in a now famous work entitled, *The Postmodern Condition*. Lyotard describes the postmodern condition by its “incredulity toward metanarratives,” its suspicion of any founding or overarching story that provides the rationale by which a particular worldview, perspective, or value system is given absolute credence and legitimization. Most notably, in reference to “postmodernism,” has been the operative metanarrative of the Enlightenment, in which the story is told of inevitable and unlimited social progress through the exercise of reason and the practice of private virtue. The postmodern unraveling of this story of progress, its expose into the potential tyranny of reason, its relativizing of objective scientific truth has also led to what many believe to be a crisis in confidence, the suspicion that there is no truth and that all values, because they are relative, are presumed equal.

Such suspicion is to be expected when undergoing such a fundamental shift in the modes and meaning of intelligibility. For our purposes however, we might look through this fear to the profound shift in our cultural consciousness that is taking place, and then ask ourselves what this means for the continuing viability and value of theological thinking. The shift has to do with our comportment in relation to truth: no longer is the primary concern the meaning of truth—as if one was already in possession of the truth or as though truth itself was static and unchanging—but rather is with the conditions that make possible the meaningfulness of a certain truth, and the reasons for a particular truth’s compelling value—which is to say, that due to the cultural realization of diversity and the accompanying epistemological realization that no single perspective gives full expression to truth writ large, then each truth must in turn justify itself in accordance with its either pragmatic or ethical rationale. As the Jewish philosopher Emmanuel Levinas has taught us, truth must be made accountable, which is the meaning of his claim for “ethics as first philosophy.” A crisis in confidence indeed, but incredulity need not translate into unbelief, and most certainly not into inaction.
One must be clear about what is and what is not being said by this cultural analysis of the postmodern condition. It is true that in accordance with the postmodern condition truth is pluralistic and made relative by the acknowledged diversity of truths. But that is not to say that there is no truth. The former is an epistemological point in that it is making a case for what can and cannot be known, and how; the latter is an overextension of its epistemological jurisdiction, and more often than not, is a mistake made by those with an insufficient appreciation of true nature of the epistemological problematic. Likewise with belief, from a postmodern perspective, belief is founded and made possible by doubt and the epistemological reality of uncertainty. Belief is not knowledge, though it does make knowledge possible. And the incredulity toward metanarratives that Lyotard describes does not invalidate belief; far from it, for it is precisely such incredulity that heightens the awareness of the role stories play in the making of meaning and the logic of sense; paradoxically, the incredulity toward metanarratives is the proliferation, not the end, of stories, such that no single story carries absolute, foundational status. As the cultural philosopher, Gianni Vattimo explains in *After Christianity*:

This is the main paradox of Nietzsche’s philosophy: his announcement of the death of God, really the announcement of the end of all metanarratives, does not preclude the possibility that many gods might be born. Perhaps we have not mediated sufficiently on the explicit assertion by Nietzsche that “it is the moral Go who is denied,” that is, God as ground, the pure act in Aristotle, the supreme watchmaker and architect of the universe in Enlightenment rationalism. 

Finally, this epistemological uncertainty that is being described need not suggest absolute moral equivalency; on the contrary, by raising the question of truth and the conditions that make truth not only possible, but also compelling, one has begun the transvaluation of values through which genuine ethical inquiry begins.

Put otherwise, the issue with postmodernism is not the absence of truth, as some mistakenly presume, but rather the plain fact of multiple truths, and the inability, or at least the difficulty apart from various forms of coercion, to resolve the clash of incommensurates. Similarly with a non-dogmatic theology, its desideratum is not the dismantling of belief or the discrediting of religion, but rather the critical reflection on a whole multitude of beliefs and the plu-
rality of religions, all of which do not necessarily cohere, and may even conflict. It still follows the basic Anselmian theological formula of “faith seeking understanding,” only it is fissured by a post-critical faith, which means a pluralistic, multiform faith, a theological recognition akin to psychology’s insight into the divided self. As a consequence, the theological reflection on a multiform faith cannot be the straightforward explication of a simple truth. It must be both more and less than that. More in the sense of its expansiveness, its attempt to account for the more of sense, the saying behind the said, the meaning of the meant. More in the sense of doing justice to the intrinsic mystery, complexity, and ambiguity of faith, the openness to what might be, the hope for justice, the passion for the impossible. But less in the sense of caution against saying too much, of confusing knowledge with belief, of making an idol out of God, and of reducing theology to its dogmatic content.

It is by being both more and less that a non-dogmatic theology might be both non-dogmatic and theological simultaneously. Two points of reference in order to illuminate this understanding: First, the postmodern Christian theologian, Merold Westphal, distinguishes between “thin” and “thick” theologies. By a thin theology, he means the more formal, transcendental theology that has been emptied of, or has filtered out, the “positive substance of particular [religious] traditions,” what John Caputo has described as a “religion without religion.” This thin theology is the sort of religious reflection one finds in the work of Martin Heidegger and Jacques Derrida, as their thinking follows the general structure of theology and their thematics take on an overtly religious character. However, the point of their reflections is not the advancement of any particular belief; it is more the case that they set beliefs in motion and thus play theology against itself. By a thick theology, Westphal means the kind of thinking that begins from “the theistic affirmation of God as a personal creator”; it is “robustly theistic and faithfully biblical.” Westphal is not disparaging to either one or the other, though his concern is primarily with the ramifications of a thick theology’s appropriation of a radical hermeneutic, specifically, whether it might then still serve its theistic and biblical interests.

While not disparaging, neither does Westphal acknowledge the effect an appropriation of a radical hermeneutic would have on a traditional thick theology; in fact, and this is the problem, it is as though both the thick theology, and the belief upon which it is predicated, remains utterly unchanged. On one level, one might ask what the point of such an appropriation is, whether it is in fact confirmation or simply redundant? On another, more sinister level, one might
wonder whether there is any real difference between appropriation and exploitation, and, so long as theology only borrows from hermeneutics the means to say what it already believes, whether it is even an honest dialogue partner at all? And this is the point of a non-dogmatic theology's attempt to be both more and less; for, like Westphal, it acknowledges the differences between kinds of theological thinking, but unlike Westphal, it is not content to settle between either-or; it instead at least strives to speak honestly from the plurality of its beliefs, and by so doing, the "robustly theistic" takes on the more formal question of its own possibility, which eventuates not with oppositional atheism, but the still more complex cultural condition of religious pluralism. Put simply, in order for theological thinking to matter, it must be responsive to the actuality of belief, and religious belief, even, and perhaps especially, when "robustly theistic and faithfully biblical," is always already plural, dialogical—in short, in play, and theology must think accordingly. The line between the thin and thick theologies Westphal describes has been blurred, and there is no going back to a uniform faith. Again, as Vattimo writes:

[The Babel-like pluralism of late-modern society have made the thought of a unified world order impossible to conceive. Now, all the metanarratives—to use Lyotard's well-taken expression—that claimed to mirror the objective structure of being have been discredited. . . . It [the end of metaphysics] is above all associated with a series of events that have transformed our existence, of which post-metaphysical philosophy gives an interpretation rather than an objective description. 8]

According to Vattimo's interpretation, as our thinking has changed in response to the postmodern condition, so too is our existence transformed. Thinking matters, such that the theological appropriation of a radical hermeneutic cannot but help transform the very faith from which it originally sprung.

Which brings us to our second example from Stanley Fish, in his article entitled, "Postmodern Warfare." The title itself is significant, indicating the fundamental duplicity of warfare in a postmodern age—on the one hand, the war he has in mind is the United States' declared "War on Terrorism"; on the other, it is the undeclared, pre-existing, and ongoing Culture Wars, for which the terrorists attacks on September 11, 2001 was but an event that would become ammunition for "our warrior intellectuals." Fish cites a slew of cultural commentators
and pundits who simultaneously pronounced the end of postmodernism in the wake of 9/11, and conflate postmodernism with establishing the cultural conditions in which terrorism thrives and goes unpunished. But as Fish explains, postmodernism, as a cultural condition, is not a political conviction, and one might just as well be a postmodern war-hawk as a postmodern cultural relativist. “After all,” Fish writes,

postmodernism is a series of arguments, not a way of life or a recipe for action. Your belief or disbelief in postmodern tenets is independent of your beliefs and commitments in any other area of your life. You may believe that objectivity of an absolute kind is possible or you may believe that it is not, but when you have to decide whether a particular thing is true or false, neither belief will hinder or help you. What will help you are archives, exemplary achievements, revered authorities, official bodies of evidence, relevant analogies, suggestive metaphors—all available to all persons independently of their philosophical convictions, or of the fact that they do or do not have any.9

But of more immediate interests to our concerns is Fish’s commentary on the nature of the U.S.-declared war effort as a “religious war,” notwithstanding official protestations to the contrary. And for Fish, it is here that the declared postmodernist is at a distinct advantage in accurately assessing the situation at hand, for it is the postmodernist who insists on localized standards of intelligibility, and who therefore is attendant to the clash between the insider and the outsider especially in matters of religion.10 As Fish explains, “The problem is not that there is no universal—the universal, the absolutely true, exists, and I know what it is. The problem is that you know, too, and that we know different things, which puts us right back where we were a few sentences ago, armed with universal judgments that are irreconcilable, all dressed up and nowhere to go for an authoritative adjudication.” Therefore, Fish continues:

The question, “Is this a religious war?” is not a question about the war; it is the question that is the war. For the question makes assumptions Al Qaeda members are bound to reject and indeed are warring against: that it is possible to distinguish between religious and non-religious acts from a perspective uninflected by any religion or ideology; or, to put it another way, that there is a perspective detached from and above
all religions, from the vantage point of which objective judgments about what is and is not properly religious could be handed down. . . .

It is the difference between political strategy and religious reflection, and unfortunately, many if not most religious scholars have simply fallen in line with the official national policy, while never acknowledging the vast internal discrepancy not only with Islam itself, but for all religions.

After all, Islam, like the category of religion, is a construct, a second-order abstraction, an umbrella term useful for cataloguing and comparing, but lacking in actual descriptive power. There is no such thing as Islam, per se, just as there is no such thing as religion, but only religions. This is the point made by Edward Said in such works as Orientalism and Covering Islam. As he writes in the introduction to the latter:

One of the points I make here and in Orientalism is that the term “Islam” as it is used today seems to mean one simple thing but in fact is part fiction, part ideological label, part minimal designation of a religion called Islam. In no really significant way is there a direct correspondence between the “Islam” in common Western usage and the enormously varied life that goes on within the world of Islam, with its more than 800,000,000 people, its millions of square miles of territory principally in Africa and Asia, its dozens of societies, states, histories, geographies, cultures.

Said also articulates the dangers of this theoretical naïveté:

In many instances, “Islam” has licensed not only patent inaccuracy but also expressions of unrestrained ethnocentrism, cultural and even racial hatred, deep yet paradoxically free-floating hostility. All this has taken place as part of what is presumed to be fair, balanced, responsible coverage of Islam. . . . There is an unquestioned assumption that Islam can be characterized limitlessly by means of a handful of recklessly general and repeatedly deployed clichés. And always it is supposed that the “Islam” being talked about is some real and stable object out there where “our” oil supplies happen to be found.
Yet still, outsiders to the worlds of Islam continue to distinguish between “true” and “false” Islam, repeating President Bush’s famous formulation from soon after the September 11 attacks, that the terrorists have “hijacked” the religion of Islam; that the U.S. war is not with Islam but with the perverters of Islam; and thereby avoiding the messy implications that even authentic religious convictions sometimes lead to abhorrent behavior.

Therefore, when Andrew Sullivan describes Islam as a “great religion that is nonetheless extremely inexperienced in the toleration of other ascendant and more powerful faiths,” Fish is right to point out that when Sullivan says “great” he actually means “potentially great,” and its true potential, at least according to Sullivan’s line of argument, lies in its possibility to be Westernized, which, in this case, means secularized and privatized. And when Jane Eisner decries Islam for failing to “master modernity,” she presumes a truly modern religion would be a “nonsectarian belief in the freedom of the individual to think, speak, and act in his or her best interests.” Fish’s rejoinder to Eisner is that “She is not, as she would have it, defending all beliefs against an intolerant exclusionism but attacking belief in general, at least as it commits you to the truth of a conviction or the imperative of an action. The only good belief is the belief you can wear lightly and shrug off when you leave home and stride into the public sphere.”

In this analysis of our current global political conflict, which carries with it, and is perhaps driven by, an overtly religious agenda, Fish echoes a sentiment from two centuries ago, voiced by the one many consider to be the founder of modern religious thought, Friedrich Schleiermacher, in his speeches to the “cultured despisers” of religion. For Schleiermacher, the generalized religious abstraction of natural religion revealed the “meager and lean religion” of modern culture, a religiosity that was in fact in contrast to the animating spirit of religion which Schleiermacher found still pulsing through the determinate, positive religions. It is why, in his first speech, that his defense of religion began with a challenge to the “cultured despisers” for them to be even more thoroughgoing in their contempt for religion; for if they were, they would discover the “voluntary ignorance” for which they were guilty, and recognize that the religion that they abhor was not religious at all, at least not as Schleiermacher variously defined it as a desire for the infinite, as an intuition of the universe, and as the recognition or the feeling of one’s absolute dependency. And in the fifth and final speech, they would realize that the natural religion they championed as the antidote to religious fanaticism and dogmatism
was also a betrayal of religion by seeking a source outside itself to understand itself (in the case of natural religion, the outside source was the principle of reason). As Schleiermacher explains, religion must be understood from the “inside out,” “only through itself.” So given, it must constantly be alert for “two hostile principles that have sought to distort and conceal the spirit of each religion everywhere. . . .” He continues:

In all places there have soon been those who have circumscribed its [the religious] spirit in individual dogmas and wanted to exclude from religion whatever was not yet formed in accord with this circumscribed spirit; and there have been such people who, whether from hatred of polemics or to make religion more agreeable to the irreligious, whether from misunderstanding and ignorance of the matter or from lack of sense, decry everything unique as dead letters in order to set off toward the indeterminate. Guard yourselves against both; you will find the spirit of a religion, not among rigid systematizers or superficial indifferentists, but among those who live in it as their element and move ever further in it without nurturing the illusion that they are able to embrace it completely.¹⁹

All of which leaves us with one final question, or one final challenge if you will: Is the search for a non-dogmatic theology any different from Sullivan’s and Eisner’s championing of a “nonsectarian belief,” or from the cultured despisers affirmation of a natural religion. My answer to this all important question, is that yes, there is a difference, and that it is this difference that makes all the difference in addressing two even more fundamental questions—namely, is theological thinking still viable and valuable in the contemporary world, and if so, how? The difference is the third way between denial and affirmation, the desire to be both more and less than theologies of the past, or in Schleiermacher’s words, to guard against both the “rigid systematizers” and the “superficial indifferentists.” So in contrast to Sullivan who claims that we must deny “the ultimate claims of religion” in order to “preserve true religion itself,” a non-dogmatic theology affirms the ultimate, is drawn in by its peculiar internal logic, is swept up by its vision of promise, but even while being drawn in and swept up by that encounter, the non-dogmatic theologian is still firmly implanted in this world where still other claims of ultimacy lie, a pluralistic world of competing and irreconcilable truths wherein a religion may be true, but still diverse, still
internally variegated, and therefore still and forever indeterminate. The irony then is that one approaches a non-dogmatic theology not by rejecting dogmatism or denying belief, not by abstracting from the positive religions that which is most common or most palatable. Instead, a non-dogmatic theology begins to emerge only in the openness to belief, in the wonder and awe-inspiring fear of the mystery of religion, whereby dogma is deconstructed. In that process, the ultimate is still allowed its absolute status through which it impresses its peculiar brand of truth on the believer (for if not, its truth could never be understood), but simultaneously, the ultimate is also made relative by still other theologies: To believe absolutely, and to reflect non-dogmatically.

It is this double, if not duplicitous, nature that allows for understanding with or without agreement, for sympathetic judgment, and for discernment in the midst of ambiguity. It is what allows the thinker to see, and perhaps even sympathize with, the logic, despair and conviction of the suicide bomber, even while rejecting it as an acceptable mode of conduct. It is important to note that this is to say nothing of its truth or falsity; both saints and villains might be truthfully and authentically religious, and the difference between the one and the other cannot be settled simply through appeals to universal reason. It is less a matter of truth than it is a matter of pragmatics, of the actions that happen to an idea and the ethical evaluations that follow. This is the consequence of the paradigmatic shift that has taken place from philosophies of consciousness to philosophies of language, this is the ethical turn that in many ways defines the postmodern, and this is why even a thick theology, by its genuine engagement with the world, must think differently, which means that it must ask the reflexive question of its own nature and possibility, and thereby, the distinction between the thin and the thick theology is dissolved such that even a dogmatic theology might become non-dogmatic.

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It is within the swirl of these questions and concerns that the contemporary study of theology must carve out its own place and defend its value. A genuine theology, whether religious or secular, will prove both its viability and value. By genuine, I mean that the theology in question must be genuinely reflective, not only as a (quasi-)transcendental critique in the sense that it reflects back on its own conditions of (im)possibility, but also as a kind of pragmatism in the sense that it bounces back and forth in between thought and the experience of reality, where the one is responsible for the other, and vice versa unto infinity. It is
like the mirror in the barbershop, in which there is a deliberate juxtaposition so that one reflection reflects another until finally the viewer is able to see from all directions simultaneously. Is this not, after all, the original, if not final, allure of theology, that one can somehow attain a God’s eye view; or, if not so ambitious, at least the recognition of where and how one falls short? Somewhere along the line, however, this original theological desire turns to a more critical approach where theology is made into a tool, where it is the interrogative rather than the descriptive task of theology that is decisive. In Tillichian fashion, theology might be seen as an instrument of cultural analysis in which questions of ultimacy reveal the depth dimensions of a culture. In the spirit of Bonhoeffer and the death-of-God theologians who followed in his wake, theology might be considered a spur for moral awakening in which a people are called to action by a theological reading of the signs of the times, in which a people are called to bear the responsibilities of their faith and doubt. Or, borrowing the terminology of contemporary religious theorists, theological thinking might be described in terms of the “erring” of Mark C. Taylor, the “jouissance” of Julia Kristeva, the “pure pleasure” of Jean-Luc Marion, and the “love” of John Caputo. These are just some of the ways that a theology deconstructed by the death of God puts itself back together again—or better yet, discovers the distinctive promise of a broken-apart theology for an always fragmented world.

So, to return to the questions of whether theology is still viable and valuable—whether it is still fit for living and whether it makes any difference at all—the answer must be that it depends. It depends on whether the theologian understands what s/he is up against. We live in a mixed-up world in which people are still killing and loving one another in the name of God, in which there are believers and unbelievers alike who are still longing for a religion in which they can believe, in which scholars of religion are talking about religion’s end and its return simultaneously. It depends on what one means by theology, on whether theology can be both theological and non-dogmatic.

It also depends on a certain level of theological complexity. When the French theorist, Gilles Deleuze, writes that “it is our epoch that has discovered theology,” what does he mean, after all? It must mean more than Nietzsche’s reversal of Platonism, for, according to Deleuze, Nietzsche’s own reversal must somehow be overturned or, better yet, dispersed, because in the end Nietzsche simply replaced heights with depths and thus left the duality still standing. Perhaps, therefore, the newly discovered power of theology lies in its equivoca-
tion. What does Deleuze mean when he follows up this assertion with another, saying “One no longer needs to believe in God?”—A theology with or without God? A God with or without being? A religion with or without the historical faiths? How does one make sense of these seeming absurdities? Following Deleuze even further, one might ask whether there even is a theo-logic of sense. When the absolute claims of God have been rendered relative by the ever-growing awareness of the increasingly variegated worlds of religion, what sense is there to be made of the theological language of heights or depths, when what we are really speaking of, when all we really know, is an apparent infinite array and dispersal along the surface? What does one mean by still speaking of the Word of God in the face of contrasting scriptures? What logic is there to sense after the discovery that sense is only made, not discovered, that our words and concepts are phantasms and simulacr, that “Theology is now the science of non-existing entities?”

In other words, this search of a non-dogmatic theology is a curious one indeed. It is caught in the cross-fire of infinitely reflecting images, and it knows no alternative but to chase them all one at a time. The words live and breathe by their inadequacy, for they only propel the search for a more sufficiently complex language befitting a violently intense world. Theological thinking remains viable and valuable because the world in which we live still makes a claim on us, and demands our best and most thoughtful response. An ecumenical and more pragmatic theology for the world in which we live would be one that thinks non-dogmatically, for dogmatism, whether politically or religiously motivated, has proven time and again unable to deliver on its promises of unification and clarification. Thus, after the “end” of this certain kind of theology, in the midst of a culture that we now know is both more secular and more religious than we once imagined, there is the possibility for a more relevant and more effective kind of theological thinking, one that affirms the interrogative value of a tradition that thinks in and through formulations of extremity, one that desires and demands meaning in the face of both its absence and excess, and finally, one that enables the reflective and reflexive capabilities of religious discourse to the point that even the language of secularity is exposed to its own theological striving.

Notes

5. David Hume makes a similar point about “the proper sphere” of skepticism. On the one hand, Hume praises skepticism as the “one species of philosophy which seems little liable to this inconvenience,” by which he means the philosophers’ tendency to “reason [themselves] out of all virtue as well as social enjoyment.” For with skepticism, Hume insists, every passion is mortified “except the love of truth; and that passion never is, nor can be, carried to too high a degree.” On the other hand, though Hume is proudly a skeptic himself, he also recognizes the need for his philosophical skepticism to be mitigated by what he calls the “doctrine of necessity.” Otherwise, even skepticism, which is by definition a caution against excessive passion, might become excessive: “For here is the chief and most confounding objection to excessive skepticism, that no durable good can ever result from it; while it remains in its full force and vigor. We need only ask such a skeptic, What meaning is? And what he proposes by all these curious researches? He is immediately at a loss, and knows not what to answer . . . When he awakes from his dream, he will be the first to join in the laugh against himself, and to confess, that all his objections are mere amusement, and can have no other tendency than to show the whimsical condition of mankind, who must act and reason and believe; though they are not able, by their most diligent enquiry, to satisfy themselves concerning the foundation of these operations, or to remove the objections, which may be raised against them.” In Hume, An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding (Chicago: Open Court, 1988), pp. 84–85, 190–191.


8. Vattimo, Against Christianity, p. 15.


10. As Fish writes, “Although it might not at first be obvious, the substitution for real religions of a religion drained of particulars is of a piece with the desire to exorcise postmodernism. In both instances, what is feared is the absence of a public space or common ground in relation to which judgments and determinations of value can be made with no reference to the religious, ethnic, racial, or national identities of the persons to whom they apply,” p. 37.

11. Ibid., p. 37, 35.

12. This point has been made most persuasively by the historian of religion. J. Z. Smith, who writes, “While there is a staggering amount of data, of phenomena, of human experiences and expressions that might be characterized in one culture or another, by one criterion or another as religious—there is no data for religion. Religion is solely the creation of the scholar’s study. It is created for the scholar’s analytic purposes by his imaginative acts of comparison and generalization. Religion has no independent existence apart from the academy.” In Jonathan Z. Smith, Imagining Religion (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), p. xi.


14. As quoted in Fish, p. 36.

15. Fish’s rejoinder: “Privatization and secularization are not goals that Islam has yet to achieve; they are spectres that Islam (or some versions of it) pushes away as one would push away death,” p. 36.

16. As quoted in Fish, p. 37.
17. Ibid.

18. It is perhaps needless to say that Schleiermacher’s contempt for natural religion was at least equal to the “cultured despisers” contempt for the positive religions. As Schleiermacher explains, “the essence of natural religion actually consists wholly in the negation of everything positive and characteristic in religion and in the most violent polemic against it. Thus natural religion is also the worthy product of an age whose hobbyhorse was a lamentable generality and an empty sobriety, which, more than everything else, works against true cultivation in all things.” In *On Religion, Speeches to its Cultured Despisers*, trans. Richard Crouter (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), p. 110.

19. Ibid., p. 113.


27. Ibid.


29. For example, consider the early Christian church’s first efforts to define its beliefs. Rather than successfully reuniting the fragmented Roman empire as the Emperor Constantine wished, it led instead to a prolonged period of argument, violence and bloodshed that saw the identity of the Christian movement transformed from that of being the persecuted to being the persecutor. For a vivid account of this history, see Richard E. Rubenstein, *When Jesus Became God: the Struggle to Define Christianity During the Last Days of Rome* (New York: Harcourt, 1999).