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to Graham Ward, 'The Future of Religion'

Elizabeth A. Castelli

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## Divining the Future Places of Religion: A Partial Response to Graham Ward, “The Future of Religion”

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. . . Any radical critique [entails] a rereading of the sacred texts against the passionate urging of a different question, a different practice, and a different desire.

—de Lauretis (1984: 107)

### TEMPORALITIES OF RELIGION, OR WHY DO WE CARE SO MUCH ABOUT THE FUTURE?

I OFTEN WONDER ABOUT the anxious attention that scholars of religion pay to questions of the future of our enterprise. It strikes me as a curious, self-reflexive, almost ascetical exercise: Is this attention, itself, a religious undertaking? One thinks of the long legacies of prophecy and divination, one thinks of apocalyptic fantasies and utopian hopes. Or is this attention paid to the future rather an atoning effort aimed at resolving a past that has now been so thoroughly deconstructed and critiqued and finally reduced to a quaint and repudiated artifact of, well, bad faith?

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Is it a sign of the (end) times, a nearly theological reflection on afterlives—post-Enlightenment, postmodern, post-secular?

I wonder about this attention to the future, because it seems to me to fall into the category of what historian Daniel Rosenberg and anthropologist Susan Harding have recently, in their anthology *Histories of the Future*, called “future-nostalgia.” Citing “an efflorescence of future fantasies” that emerged during the eighteenth century, Rosenberg and Harding observe that these fictions were actually “morality plays for the present” (Rosenberg and Harding 2005: 5). Such fictions mediate for the social imagination utopian desires: technological innovations and the moral resolution of the intractabilities of the present’s messiness (Jameson 2005). Future fantasies offer critique, resolve incongruities and injustices, and tell us about the now—only better.

In “The Future of Religion,” Graham Ward begins temporally by analyzing the philological range of *religio*, juxtaposing the past (“in Augustine’s *De vera religione* [389 CE], religion is part of a semantic system that would include faith, piety, worship, and the ethics and aesthetics of the Good and the Beautiful”) and the present (“Today, on the other hand, religion is part of a semantic system that would include myth, spirituality, mystical experience, reenchantment, holistic notions of health, and self-help”). In this construction, the past appears unified and coherent, lofty and philosophical. The present presents itself as a pastiche of incommensurate and apparently randomly selected mediations tied inexorably to consumer capitalism, part desire-driven self-indulgence and part kitsch.

But we are urged, perhaps, to feel better about the future that will eventually grow out of the kitsch of the now by three future projections: “We are going to see a rise in Western Europe in those wishing to study religions and a new cultural respect for such study among academics and intellectuals more generally”—Butler, Eagleton, Žižek, Agamben, and Vattimo named as important trendsetters in this regard. “The assumed relationship between secularity and neutrality will be increasingly questioned”—and therefore the liberal Enlightenment project will be, presumably, supplanted. “There will be an increasing polarization between those who talk of spirituality and those who talk of faith”—surface will give way to depth, eclecticism to systematics, practice to belief. We encounter, in this future fantasy, the promise of a return to a philosophical mode for religion.

## TOPOGRAPHIES OF RELIGION OR THE QUESTION OF WHERE WE ARE

Ward’s essay emerges out of European problematics and conversations, and mine from a setting in the United States that offers a slightly different vantage point for considering the stakes involved in “the future

of religion.” It has become a commonplace to notice that the United States, because of both the legal constraints on the official establishment of religion and the country’s complex and various history of immigration, has always been a singularity among developed countries for its high degree of purported religiosity. Insofar as “secularism” has played a role in US society and politics, it has done so, as Janet Jakobsen and Ann Pellegrini have argued, as something more akin to “*Christian* secularism,” representing a tacit mainline Protestant consensus that has in the last decades been increasingly fractured by the public emergence of other powerful religious voices both from within and beyond the Christian frame (Jakobsen and Pellegrini 2000; Asad 2003). Meanwhile, the current US administration has left its bloody footprints trailing across the world stage, all the while excelling in efforts to infuse public discourse with biblically orthodox religious rhetoric; mobilizing religious certainties in the service of political and military goals, thereby effectively wedding theoconservatism to neoconservatism in a marriage of convenience; eroding, by recourse to accusations of religious intolerance or persecution, the legitimacy of those dissenters who would dare to challenge their point of view or to speak from nonreligious grounds.<sup>1</sup> Here, one does not worry about the politically evacuated superficialities of those who embrace individualized and eclectic “spirituality” over against a more ponderous, tradition-grounded “faith.” One worries instead about the terror effects of a future-obsessed, “faith-based” politics, politics that fuse “capitalist greed and transcendental revenge into a theopolitical machine of resentment” (Connolly 2005: 884). As Ward says, “It is a matter of where we are, who that ‘we’ consists of, and who is naming the ‘we.’”

### SOME CLOSING OBSERVATIONS

The project of defining “religion” has run its course, if the course is framed primarily by philology and etymology, by generalizing abstraction. To theorize “religion,” it seems to me, requires a turn away from considering the object of study as the product of semantics or of thought. It requires reconceptualizing “religion” as an effect of doing, as the product of habits of enactment and performance, as the affective and embodied traces of lived orientations. Such an approach requires sensitivity to the politics and ethics of naming and knowledge construction alongside a

<sup>1</sup> These efforts have been well documented in numerous publications, but see most recently, Connolly (2005); and Runions (2005). Thanks to Meg McLagan for bringing the Connolly essay to my attention.

deep and robust grounding in the (often colonial) histories of the production of the category of “religion” as the object of knowledge (Masuzawa 2005). It gives privilege of place to indigenous and local categories of narration and analysis while recognizing that the intellectual and rhetorical strength of such systems of knowledge is sufficient for them to enter into conversation and debate with other systems of knowledge, including “Western” theoretical idioms.

The future of the study of religion would do well to include a renewed theoretical engagement with the category of “secularism.” Such an engagement would move beyond constituting secularism as religion’s opposite (or “post-secularism”’s precursor and prerequisite). It would attend to the history of the category, to the immediate and pressing questions of the role of religion in the public sphere and the intersections of religion and politics, and to a deconstructive project that would illuminate secularism’s traditional disavowals and would explore the uncanny return of secularism’s repressed.<sup>2</sup>

In the end, if I had to reduce my recommendations for the future of the study of religion to a small handful of evocations, they would be these: “gods and monsters,” “shock and awe,” and “the affective and the everyday.”<sup>3</sup> To make the kinds of contributions that will matter in the worlds that will likely emerge out of the present global situation, the future study of religion needs to attend to the radical double-edgedness of conviction and the actions it inspires, the world-making and world-destroying capacities of ritual action and religious thought, and the ordinary, quotidian mediating propensities of religious practices and languages in individual experience and social life.

Elizabeth A. Castelli

Barnard College at Columbia University

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<sup>2</sup> In addition to Jakobsen and Pellegrini (2000), Asad (2003), see also Connolly (1999). Thanks to Kathleen Skerrett for recommending this book to me.

<sup>3</sup> On gods and monsters: Ingebreten (2001), Beal (2002), Kearney (2003). On religion and/as shock and awe, see the epilogue of Rubenstein, (2006).

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