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Theology in Modernity's Wake

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When Jacques Derrida died I was called by a reporter who wanted to know what would succeed high theory and the triumvirate of race, gender, and class as the center of intellectual energy in the academy. I answered like a shot: religion.

—Stanley Fish (2005)

AS A CONSTRUCTIVE FEMINIST THEOLOGIAN whose work focuses on “the triumvirate” and draws on “high theory” including that of Jacques Derrida, this comment from Stanley Fish in a recent issue of *The Chronicle of Higher Education* caught my eye. I position my comments against that backdrop. We are said to have arrived at the end of modernity, a turn of the cosmic clock supposedly marked by such milestones as the death of the subject, the demise of metanarratives, and the loss of confidence in reason. Jacques Derrida, among other continental thinkers, is often touted as a harbinger of “postmodernity,” one mark of which is (ironically, perhaps, given the supposed demise of metanarratives) purportedly the return of the religious. As dubious as that claim may seem to those of us who study religion (when did religion disappear, exactly?), we must acknowledge that religion has gained a new prominence on the

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world scene in the last few years. And even before the geopolitical events that are largely responsible for this, academic publishing had witnessed a proliferation of books on religion by scholars of all stripes and types.¹ Whatever value might lie in that body of scholarship, religion's enhanced visibility highlights the important and distinctive contributions that theology and religious studies stand to make to both the academy and the world at large. But what obligation do scholars of religion have to the pursuit of the postmodern? In what sense, if any, do our fields of inquiry exhibit signs of modernity's decline, if not demise?

Let me repeat what I have said in other locations: I am skeptical of assertions that we are done with modernity, particularly those that claim to have mapped modernity's arrival at certain dead ends. That said, however, I am persuaded that our time occupies a distinctive relationship to certain structural elements that we associate with modernity. Central to my current work is what I have called (borrowing terminology from the later work of the philosopher Martin Heidegger) a fourfold made up of man, his raced and sexed others, his divine other, his animal other.² Modernity configured them in a certain order: man at the center surrounded by his "others," a network of mirrors that reflect man back to himself thus securing his boundaries. It is that configuration—perhaps even that fourfold—that is disintegrating in our time. And we are struggling to bear (in the sense of carry and bring to birth) whatever will take its place.

I am particularly interested in the roles played by religion and by sexual and racial differences in the constitution and sustenance of this fourfold, in its passing away, and in whatever will come to replace it. I see signs of this fourfold in the place assigned to religion by modernity. The alignment of truth with modern science and history undercut the claim to truth asserted by traditional religious (read Christian) authorities. Though not without resistance from religion (including its advocates in academia), modern culture separated the secular from the sacred and faith from reason. (In the United States, especially, religion has been consigned primarily to the arena of private belief rather than public practice. As such, it requires protection achieved in part by separating "church" from "state.") Religion came to be considered an aspect of human subjectivity, a turn of events engendered at least in part by modern

¹ This list would include but certainly not be limited to philosophers like Jacques Derrida, Alain Badiou, Giorgio Agamben, Michel Foucault, and Luce Irigaray as well as cultural theorists such as Julia Kristeva and Slavoj Žižek. See, for example, Derrida (2001), Badiou (2003), Agamben (2004), Foucault (1999), and Žižek (2001; 2003). For essays by Irigaray and Kristeva as well as other so-called "French feminists," see Joy *et al.* (2001).

² I first proposed the fourfold in Armour 2005a. A fuller treatment of it is in Armour 2005b.

philosophy, especially that of Immanuel Kant. That view of religion has proven centrifugal to theology after Kant. That is, whether a given theologian endorses or rejects that view of religion, theological discourse has revolved around that consignment.

Modernity also produced new taxonomies of “nature” and “culture,” including new taxonomies of “man” and his “others.” The emergence of the scientific study of religion is arguably among those taxonomies and intersects with other modern taxonomies of racial, sexual, and ethnic differences. It may go without saying, but should not, that these taxonomies have had profound material effects in the circulation of capital (financial, psychic, fleshly) via individual and social identities—including religious identities—constructed by force, by discipline, by the circulation of capital itself.

The academic study of religion in its current form is, then, the product of modernity. It is also, I shall argue in what follows, a site where symptoms of the erosion of modernity have become legible. The current state of the line dividing “theology” (with its various subfields and methodologies) from “religious studies” (with its various subfields and methodologies) is a primary example. While the latter speaks descriptively about various forms of religiosity, the former speaks normatively from within specific religious traditions—or so the standard map of approaches to the study of religion would have us believe. Yet, this dividing line proves to be less than stable under closer examination, especially when it comes to Christian theology. Indeed, it may be more akin to a geological fault than a secure boundary.

Living on a fault line is not without its anxieties. The task of finding a conceptual vocabulary for religion that can cross cultures and contexts without falling prey to reductionism has proven an elusive task. A version of separation anxiety appears here insofar as responsibility for this lapse is laid in the lap of religious studies’ failure to fully rid itself of the residue left by its theological origins. The ambivalent place that the study of religion continues to occupy in the academy only exacerbates that anxiety. Some of our college and university colleagues see the presence of the academic study of religion in their midst as a dusty relic of academia’s faith-based (read tarnished) heritage. Departments of religious studies largely replaced departments of theology or Christianity and the like several decades ago, but some suspect that the change is only skin deep. We scholars of religion sometimes attempt to assuage their anxiety by highlighting our credentials in our cognate disciplines in the social sciences and the humanities. We differ only in the subject matter that we study, we say. Claiming too close a kinship, however, can prove dangerous. We get nervous when a scholar who lacks the imprimatur of a higher degree

in religious studies publishes a book on the subject. Anxiety becomes outrage when universities threaten to dissolve religious studies departments and farm out their faculty to their respective cognate disciplines. Training in specific disciplines and methods is necessary to correctly approach religion, we insist, leaving aside for the moment our interne-cine debates over the difficulty of pinning down that elusive subject.

The tremors that attend the fault line that separates religious studies and Christian theology are, I suggest, symptomatic of the “end” of “man.”³ The end of man is both more and less than the purported death of the subject. In using this phrase, I want to draw on both the Aristotelian sense of “end” (telos) as essence and goal as well as the connotation in English of “end” as limit. I use “man” in scare quotes to call to mind the fourfold, that is, to indicate that his boundaries are drawn in part along racial, gendered, ethnic, and religious lines. Rather than stilling the tremors, I will pursue the changes to theology’s terrain, in particular, that they engender. Those shifts call into question the line that the journalist who queried Fish drew between “religion” and “high theory,” as well as “religion” and “the triumvirate of sex, race and class.” The fault line itself is, in part, a legacy of the place assigned to religion by modernity and its taxonomies of knowledge. In *In Search of Dreamtime*, Tomoko Masuzawa revisits the troubled but intriguing question of origin in the history of theorizing religion (1993). She identifies a doubled subject at the heart of this quintessentially modern project: taking the measure of religion is the work of the modern western epistemological subject, “Man the Knower.” The object of “his” knowledge, *homo religiosus*, is western man’s pre-Enlightenment other and his double. The scholar of religion gets to fulfill his desire for origins, a quest forbidden him by contemporary religious studies, through the other whose religion centers around origins.

Though its specific contours may be different, I want to suggest that theology, too, is implicated in a similar discursive doublet composed of “Man the Knower” and *homo religiosus*. This is so, I suspect, because both are products of a legacy that theology and religious studies share in common, a Christian-inflected strand of the modern philosophical tradition that runs from Kant through Schleiermacher, Hegel, and Heidegger, to Tillich, Otto, and Eliade (and thus to their critics as well). Both theology and religious studies are, to say the least, ambivalent about this common legacy. As noted above, religious studies remains haunted by its theological

³ My use of the terminology of “end” and of trembling echoes that of Derrida’s essay, “The Ends of Man” (1982). For more on this concept and its relationship to issues of gender and race, see the fifth and sixth chapters of Armour (1999).

origins, but theology is no less haunted by its own past. Both fields have had to acknowledge their cooptation by, if not outright cooperation with, colonialism, racisms, ethnocentrism, sexism, heterosexism, and so forth in recent decades. It turns out that the doubled subject at the heart of the modern project—and thus modern forms of the study of religion—is hardly neutral with regard to such categories as sex, race, or religion, further evidence of the fourfold's effects.

If certain scholars of religion project their nostalgia for origins onto *homo religiosus*, certain critiques of academic theology suggest that academic theologians ignore him.⁴ A perpetual lament about whiteprotestant theology, in particular, bemoans the distance between “the academy” and “the church,” between academic theology and the lived theologies of Christian and Christian-inflected institutions and the organizations and the people who inhabit them.⁵ Those of us in the academy would rightly claim that a certain distance is unavoidable, given the various guilds (including those of our cognate disciplines) to which theologians hold themselves accountable. We would also, I trust, want to insist that theology as an academic discipline should be free of constraint or oversight from church authorities.

“The church,” too, bears its share of responsibility for its distance from academic theology. If my experience in lay education is any guide, the mainline whiteprotestant churches, at least, do at best a haphazard job of providing serious theological education for their congregations. I was invited recently to teach a series of adult Sunday school classes on great theologians at a local Presbyterian church in Memphis. For most of the 100 or so who attended one or more of these sessions, the names of Karl Barth, Rudolph Bultmann, and Paul Tillich (not to mention Sallie McFague, Gustavo Gutierrez, and James Cone) were utterly unfamiliar, as were the ideas associated with those names. Given the eager response to serious theological conversation that I found among this group, I suspect that whatever stands in the way of serious theological lay education, it is not lack of interest on the part of laity.

⁴ It may seem strange for a feminist theologian to make such a claim, given feminist theology's traditional grounding in “women's experience.” However, that strategy has proven problematic, as many of us came to realize in the 1980s and 1990s. See Davaney (1987) and also the first and last chapters of Armour (1999).

⁵ I use “whiteprotestant” to bring to light the usually invisible racial mark associated with “protestant” theology. For example, given that an explicit connection to black church traditions grounds much of black and womanist theology, I suspect that critiques of distance (if they exist) are likely to be reactions to critiques made of those traditions by such theologians. Catholicism is arguably beset by a similar distance, but Paul Lakeland, for one, has attempted an important corrective. See Lakeland (2003). The term “whiteprotestant” is modeled after my use of “whitefeminist” in Armour (1999).

I am not arguing that laypeople need theologians to tell them what to think or believe. That would be to simply replicate a paternalistic version of theology's double subject. I am also not suggesting that theology relinquishes its normative—or better, critical—voice. Whiteprotestant-lived theology would, I think, benefit from deeper engagement with critical theological reflection. But academic theology, too, would benefit from deeper acquaintance with theology “on the ground,” as it were. Theologians need to walk through the looking glass, as it were, that divides Man the Knower from (and binds him to) *homo religiosus*.

Academic theologians will shortchange their access to creative currents in lived theology if, in doing so, we attend only to traditional forms of “the church.” We need to seek out the large variety of Christian organizations (new forms of church, new forms of Christian social activism, etc.) that constitute the contemporary religious landscape. Theology's traditional basis in reading and writing texts may lead us to misperceive lived Christian theology, however, as simply a matter of ideas rather than practices. Phenomena of interest to whiteprotestant theologians arguably should include the renewed interest in “spirituality” manifest in labyrinth walking and chant-based Taizé services, for example. The pursuit of spirituality has prompted many Christians to cultivate practices outside the Christian tradition (yoga, Buddhist meditation, etc.) What lacunae motivate these developments in institutional form and collective and individual practice? What resources sustain them? What theological insights might these practices cultivate? What blind spots might afflict them?

Christianity is a global religion whose population is increasingly centered in the so-called “two thirds world.” This shift is having an impact on “first world” Christianity, as well, as the recent controversy within the Anglican communion over the consecration of Rev. Eugene Robinson as bishop indicates. On the surface this event seems to pit “liberal enlightened” (read “First World”) Christians against “conservative traditionalist” (read “Third World”) Christians. Yet, I would urge caution in imposing those frameworks inherited from modernity too quickly upon global Christianity. Doing so reproduces once again theology's double subject, a move that should give us pause. Another walk through the looking glass is in order here lest we obscure the responsibility colonizing Christianity holds for the effects of the particular theologies that it exported to the colonized world. Moreover, if we remain on our side of the looking glass, creative theologies arising from these particular religious landscapes may escape our notice.

I am not arguing that theology should reclaim its former place as queen of the sciences—or at least of *Religionswissenschaften*. The method-

ological differences between the fields are significant and must not be underestimated. The traditional methods of textual interpretation in which theologians are trained are limited in their ability to illumine lived theology. Scholars trained in religious studies will, no doubt, look askance at theologians who attempt to adapt descriptive methods for ultimately prescriptive purposes. Stepping onto this fault line is risky business, to be sure, but some among us are doing it. Not coincidentally, I suspect, many of those taking this risk speak from positions assigned to “man’s” mirrors.⁶

Of particular value to both fields, however, is scholarship—whether in theology or religious studies—that pursues the making and unmaking of the ties that bind our fields to modern man and his doubles. Such work is often though not always informed by the work of philosophers and theorists associated with postmodernity.⁷ Reading this body of scholarship demonstrates the variety of configurations that subjectivity and religion can take. Familiarity with such work should help theologians develop a richer, multidimensional lens through which to do their constructive and critical work. Man the Knower and his double *homo religiosus* may or may not be dying, but, insofar as our discourses depend upon this structure, it behooves theologians to explore its contours and contexts and to begin to imagine life in the wake of its (timely or untimely) demise.

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⁶ For a monograph, see, for example, Stewart (2005). The volume by Donaldson and Kwok (2002) includes essays by scholars in various subfields of religious studies. A volume that I am co-editing with Susan M. St. Ville (Armour and St. Ville forthcoming) likewise includes essays from scholars in various subfields of religious studies and those technically outside the field who also write on religion. Feminist theologian Mary McClintock Fulkerson has been studying for a number of years the lived theology of an interracial congregation (now defunct, unfortunately) in Durham, NC, using ethnographic methods more commonly associated with religious studies (see Fulkerson forthcoming). In a slightly different vein, theologian Wendy Farley (2005) turns to roots music and her years of Tibetan Buddhist practice as resources for theological reflection. Only those texts from “the tradition” and its margins (the writings of medieval Beguines, for example) that have worked themselves into her embodied memory over the years inform this project.

⁷ In addition to Masuzawa, I include Jordan (1997), Keller (2002), Anidjar (2003), Yu (2001), and Asad (1993; 2003). If her essays are any indication, Mahmood’s recent book (2004) promises to be a similarly important resource.

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