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Reply to Elizabeth A. Castelli

Graham Ward

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Reply to Elizabeth A. Castelli

IT IS ALWAYS REFRESHING to receive back from another person one's own ideas; refreshing because it is like returning to a familiar book read many years ago. The text is never quite the same; even one's own text. I think Castelli is right to emphasize the topographies of religion and the my own standpoint within a European cultural situation—a situation which through figures like Lull, Cusa, and Ficino shaped our modern understanding of religion; a situation which through the cultural emphases of the nineteenth century fashioned the academic study of religion. But the point of Castelli's response that I like to respond to is her concern for what she detects as a "future-nostalgia" operating in my ideas about the future of religion. My first reaction was denial. Not on the basis of believing I am right and she is wrong. Rather, my denial arose from being enmeshed in a certain cultural politics concerning Radical Orthodoxy—such that my comments on the future of religion were being read through a lens provided by a circumscribed understanding of whatever Radical Orthodoxy has come to mean. More briefly my comments were being read in light of John Milbank's and Catherine Pickstock's work; since in this circumscribed reading of Radical Orthodoxy, their work defines this theological "sensibility." And, whether the criticism is true or not, their work has been called "nostalgic." So if their work is deemed nostalgic therefore, so must mine. So my denial of a "future-nostalgia" was part of a plea for Radical Orthodoxy (even if by that phrase only the book series is being alluded to) to be understood more inclusively. Allow Dan Bell's book *Liberation Theology After the End of History* or D. Stephen Long's book *Divine Economy* to be expositions of Radical Orthodoxy, and the criticism of "nostalgia" (in its modern negative sense) cannot stand. With respect to my own appeal to late antiquity, it is a point of fact that Augustine wrote one of the first systematic treatises on religion and that what was signified by that word at that time was not what was signified by the use of the same word (even in Latin) by Calvin or Grotius.

As I said denial was my first reaction. But my subsequent reaction was one of acceptance—albeit without the negative connotations of "future-nostalgia." For how are the possibilities of a future trajectory (of "religion" in this case) constructed if not by sifting through and re-evaluating

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past and present phenomena? Of course, since at least the work of Gadamer and de Certeau on historiography and the writing of history, we can appreciate the past is never simply the past. It is the past as conceived through the cultural emphases of the present. In reaction to the abstractions, dualities, and grand narratives of modernity, postmodernity has fostered an academic concern with practices, performances, embodiment, and material cultures. No doubt these emphases, which have also refashioned investigations in religious studies, become visible in my reading of Augustine's treatise on religion, and I construct the future trajectories of religion in terms of a "return." But this is not a "return home"—the original Greek meaning of "nostalgia." As I see it there is at the moment a struggle between genuine and self-denying practices of piety and banal self-serving religious simulacra. I take someone like Augustine or Aquinas or de Lubac or Rahner as providing benchmark reflections, for Christianity, of genuine and self-denying practices of piety. The "future" of religion I construct is not a fantasy (understood negatively as a wistful fabrication), rather it is an imagining—and an explicitly political one insofar as it is an imagining that pitches itself against the banal commodification and commercializations of pop transcendence. To be satisfied with, to be uncritical of, the kitsch and superficial, particularly with respect to the sacred, to that which expresses life's ultimate values, is simply decadent.

Graham Ward
University of Manchester