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—
Victor E. Taylor
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We know what has happened to an activity like religion that has not been able to avail itself of "Kantian" immanent criticism in order to justify itself. At first glance the arts might seem to have been in a situation like religion's. Having been denied by the Enlightenment all the tasks they could take seriously, they looked as though they were going to be assimilated to entertainment pure and simple, and entertainment itself looked as though it were going to be assimilated like religion, to therapy.

--Clement Greenberg, "Modernist Painting"

Now let us climb still higher to the point where all conflict is again untied, where the universe manifests itself as totality, as unity in multiplicity.

--Friedrich Schleiermacher, *On Religion*

Let us begin again. To take some examples: why should "literature" still designate that which already breaks away from literature—away from what has always been conceived and signified under the name—or that which, not merely escaping literature, implacably destroys it? (Posed in these terms, the question would already be caught in the assurance of a certain fore-knowledge: can "what has always been conceived and signified under that name" be considered fundamentally homogeneous, univocal, or non-conflictual?) To take other examples: what historical and strategic function should henceforth be assigned to the quotation marks, whether visible or invisible, which transforms this into a "book," or which still make the deconstruction of philosophy into a "philosophical discourse"?

--Jacques Derrida, *Dissemination*

The systematic dismantling of the founding concepts of the Western philosophical tradition brought on by "theory" in the last quarter century has provided innumerable occasions for re-situating inquiry in relation to disciplinarity. "Theory," as Carl Raschke writes in "Theorizing Religion at the Turn of the Millennium: From the Sacred to the Semiotic," is "dangerous to the power elite in the field because it offers unsettling questions about what religious people actually think and do, and how these modalities of signifying praxis compete and challenge each other" (2). Theory's continued radical "challenge" remains compelling for scholars in the humanities, even though none of these "theoretical occasions" has yet to fully deconstruct prevailing institutional categories. In honor of this radical "challenge," the history of "theory" is organized around the failure to make good on its promise of deconstructing the structures, meta-narratives, societies of control that comprise the humanities. By preserving theory's promise to open a space for challenging and re-thinking the relationship between inquiry and disciplinarity, Raschke's essay moves us closer to the possibility of a "critical religious study" within the wider context of the "institution of religion." Theory allows "religion" and the "institution of religion" to stand in conflict, with religion understood as the mimetic *aftereffect* of a sacred cosmology (primal identity), represented in/as data

and in/as experience and the “institution of religion” as the undisclosed network of supplementary discourses necessary in ascertaining and perpetuating the myth and meaning of a metaphysics of presence as “religiology”—a positivist and faith-based synthesis of “scholarly” paradigms and institutional mechanisms. A “critical religious study” that is theoretical, as a slight adaptation the passage from Derrida suggests, designates a “breaking away” from religion, a move away from that which “has always been conceived and signified under the name” of religion. These disciplinary “escapes,” conflicts over methods and objects of study, have become all the more pronounced in our current age of postmodernism, in which the very nature of intellectual inquiry and disciplinarity has come under fundamental review, a de-framing of *disciplinary fundamentalism*. The humanities, more than the behavioral and social sciences, have registered the effects of these conceptual reversals *vis-à-vis* Derrida, Deleuze, Foucault, Lacan, and Lyotard, leaving the humanities in crisis intellectually, but intact structurally, departmentally. It is this incommensurable moment in which the intellectual field of inquiry is dramatically expanding and the institutional structures are forcibly constricting that forms the *mise en intrigue* for our discussion.

3. While the discipline of religion is our immediate concern, it is useful to note that this contest between an object of study and its discursive domain occurs across the humanities, perhaps being felt earliest, if not more acutely, in art history.¹ The issues of “purity,” “subjectivity,” “objectivity,” and “framing” within art history/theory have captured the attention of prominent figures in religious studies from Karl Barth (“wholly other”) to Paul Tillich (“artistic symbols”), with each pursuing the theo-philosophical links between art, culture, and religion. These inquiries into the links between art, culture, and religion take on a high degree of significance considering that in the end the promise is that one purportedly will discover the contours of religious studies itself. The art historian Clement Greenberg’s analysis placing religion in the category of assimilated activities follows directly from his history of modern painting in which the “purity” of the work of art becomes compromised by an extra-aesthetic demand, entertainment.² Painting, for Greenberg, is diminished as an art form when it is offered as mere decoration. The problem of painting that Greenberg discovers centers on maintaining the internal integrity (“autonomy”) of the art object. Restoring the art object’s integrity is addressed in two ways: (1) art must retreat into the purely aesthetic; (2) art must embody a “radical self-criticism.”³ For Greenberg, the future of painting, as well as the arts in general, is found in its adherence to its own rules. Reasoning by way of Kant’s proscriptions regarding philosophy (a return to logic), Greenberg discloses that which he considers to be the truth in painting; that is, painting must aspire to its rule of “ineluctable flatness” and, to be considered good, must not abrogate its own rule. This resulting minimalism offered by Greenberg, I’ll argue, currently extends to all the arts and disciplines categorically and is the state of affairs across the humanities that “theory” seeks to deconstruct.
4. In *Disfiguring: Art, Architecture, Religion*, Mark C. Taylor states that “the moment has arrived when it is not only possible but, in a certain sense, necessary to reconsider the complex interplay of art, architecture, and religion.”⁴ The history of western philosophy since Plato, Taylor notes,

¹Carl A. Raschke’s *Fire and Roses: Postmodernity of the Body*. Albany: SUNY Press, 1996 and Mark C. Taylor’s *Disfiguring: Art, Architecture, Religion*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1992 locate theory’s central role in the development of a postmodern aesthetic in art history and religious studies.

²Greenberg’s history of modern painting is elegantly examined in Michael Fried’s *Absorption and Theatricality: Painting and the Beholder in the Age of Diderot*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980.

³See Stephen Melville’s *Philosophy Beside Itself: On Deconstruction and Modernism*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986.

⁴Mark C. Taylor *Disfiguring: Art, Architecture, Religion*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1992.

always has been deeply suspicious of the arts. The tendency has been to view art as three steps removed from reality, with Plato's hierarchy of Forms and Things dictating the value of artistic endeavor. While Aristotle would later re-value art in his *Poetics*, the relationship between the art object and reality would persist, with art functioning as a third order representation of a greater reality. Jan Van Eyck's *Adoration of the Lamb* (1432), for instance, was celebrated for its religious presentation of the totality of God's kingdom; with less attention paid to it as a technological achievement in the history of painting. Two years later Van Eyck completed his *Marriage of Giovanni Arnolfini and Giovanna Cenami* (1434) in which the overt religious symbolism found in *Adoration* undergoes a partial secular transformation. The totality of space that previously was rendered hierarchically with God occupying the supreme position is captured in the convex mirror at the center of the painting. Around the mirror there are ten miniature scenes depicting Christ's Passion, death, and the salvation of humankind. Fidelity in marriage is represented by a dog and single burning candle symbolizes God's omniscient gaze. Van Eyck's paintings place art in the service of religion then seemingly shift towards a secular theology. Taylor's "moment" of reconsideration of the complex interplay of art, culture, and religion initially takes the form of a "theoesthetic vision" in which art reflects a "primal identity that is antecedent to all differentiation."⁵ It is this "primal identity" preexisting difference that Taylor disrupts and finally recasts as an "A/theoesthetics," " . . . nonnegative negative theology that nonetheless is not positive."⁶

5. The (postmodern) turn toward a critical religious study is shaped by a "primal difference" pre-existing identity. Postmodern theologians or postmodern a/theologians reject Plato's hierarchy of Forms and things as well as a Greenbergian retreat into "purity" insofar as both advance an ultimate reality ("primal identity") or "purity" underwriting artistic and theological activity. To return to Raschke's argument in "Theorizing Religion at the Turn of the Millennium: From the Sacred to the Semiotic," it is only through semiotics that the study of religion can remain "distanced" from faith and empiricism:

The study of religion is semiotic at its core, because it is not about "words" and "things" as philosophy and logic conveniently regard them. The study of religion is about the way in which the logical and grammatological constraints of the process of representation are removed, yet remain "significant" at the same time. As Genosko observes in his overview of the new cycle of scholarship in both semiotics and cultural studies, the pursuit of the humanities at large is a wandering in the "theater of representation." And "all representation is theological, a matter of filling gaps." When one begins to frame the "theory" of religion as a theory of semiosis, or how the mimetics of representation function in extremis, then one can do philosophy of religion, if not "philosophical theology", in a whole new manner—as religious theory. Religion itself is a latticework of sign-functions and signifying elements that transcend the grammatics of common sense. These signifying elements do not coalesce into some kind of metaphysical object, as Durkheim and others have always believed. The mysterious, yet theoretically inconsequential, construct of "the sacred" belies this means of misconstruing the subject regions to which we append the label of religion.

6. Modern art, *à la* Greenberg, demands an internal integrity of form, a theoretical dogmatism, while modern theology, *à la* Friedrich Schleiermacher, rest upon a correspondence between "subject"

⁵Ibid, 35.

⁶Ibid, 317.

and “object,” a realist theology. The two avenues of approach, while appearing different in many respects, lead toward an orthodoxy in which identity precedes difference. These orthodoxies extend into contemporary religious studies insofar as “faith-based” religious studies returns to pure experience and an “empirical-based” religious studies return to a pure exteriority. In other words, Religious studies as “faith” finds a “primal identity” that is purely “interior” and religious studies as an anthropology, sociology, philosophy, politics OF religion invests in a “science” that finds a “primal identity” that is purely “exterior.” As Raschke’s points out, however, religious studies is semiotic, a complex of grammatological operations linking and unlinking signs and signs, not differences in identity and not words and things. Religion as a logical and grammatological dispersement of signs, then, stands in conflict with itself. That is, just a literature is “catachrestic,”⁷ comprised of the imaginative text and all the critical discourses “surrounding” it, so too is religion; it does not stand apart from its institutionality—it stands against it. Derrida refers to this posing of a term against itself as a double science, not an empirical science (Naturwissenschaften), but a human science (Geisteswissenschaften) that begins with an inquiry into the fundamental analytics of discourse, conditions of possibility. This double science is an inquiry that is always theoretical (genealogical) insofar as it makes manifest a structure, an analytic or logic along with its double, its negative. Inquiry that addresses its own negativity, its condition of meaningfulness is said to be “critical,”⁸ referring to Kant’s development of a critical philosophy in the Eighteenth century. In this sense, seeing the possibility of a “critical religious study” through “theorizing religion” as a mere method of textual exegesis, revealing a social reality, or rendering of experience is limited, reproducing the error made in literary studies when theory was/is taken to mean criticism. The aim of “theorizing religion” is not the sterile retrieval of the external “data” of religious texts or the internal experience provoked by such texts as much it is for the radical re-ordering of the “category” or “institution” or “division” of religion within the humanities. “Theorizing religion” as a move toward a “critical religious study” describes the project of tracing a logic of supplementarity within the wider field of religious studies. Derridean supplementarity provides critical religious studies with an alternative to primal symbolism. If Van Eyck’s paintings, for instance, cease being allegorical texts with symbols pointing toward a higher reality, then what could one make of this new insistence on the sign which takes on meaning across a line of signification? Here, religious studies, like art history, demands a reconsideration. With the signifying activity displaced onto a line of signs that do not have an anchor in a reality, internal or external, but in the differential structure of language, inquiry takes on a new aim. The notion of a religious studies circumscribed by the dialectical pairing with anthropology, history, psychology, and sociology, with empiricism as the organizing theory, forces the question, what is called theorizing religion? Theorizing religion, as a critical term, calls into question the distribution of religion into these contingencies, examining the

⁷See Peggy Kamuf’s *The Division of Literature Or the University in Deconstruction*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1997.

⁸Critical theory encompasses a wide-range of interpretative and analytical approaches to the humanities and social sciences. Beginning with the Frankfurt School in post-war Germany and ending with current postmodernism(s), “critical theory” refers not only to a specific history of scholarly activity over the past fifty years, but also to a series of analytic shifts occurring across disciplines. In the late 1950s and early 1960s, major scholarly journals, academic, and independent presses in North America and Europe began publishing the writings of prominent German critical theorists, such as Theodor Adorno, Walter Benjamin, and Georg Lukacs. The generation that followed, primarily in France, with Jacques Lacan, Paul De Man, Jacques Derrida, Gilles Deleuze, Michel Foucault, and Jean-François Lyotard re-invented the intellectual problem(s) (aesthetics, epistemology, ethics, and metaphysics) of the Frankfurt School, making it less an extension of social science and more a function of linguistic study. As these new voices in literature, philosophy, and cultural theory emerged, intellectuals across the humanities and social sciences assumed the task of re-examining their methods and objects of scholarly inquiry in terms of their condition(s) of possibility.

relationship between the institution of religion and religion; that is, theorizing religion is an inquiry into the relationship between disciplinarity and inquiry itself. Such an inquiry demands a new concept of the institution as a division, the division of religion.⁹

7. The division of religion is religion set against itself, beside itself, a para-religious study.¹⁰ This is contrary to the standard organization of religion into "subject regions" replacing the theoretical with "faith" or "positivism," thus defining religious studies as merely an intuitive, observational and verificational form of analysis. In the wake of "theory" and the fundamental re-examination of the Western theo-philosophical tradition, scholarly work and disciplinary boundaries have undergone significant redefinition. While "theory" in general is viewed by many as a specialized field, primarily within culture and literary studies, it has made its way into all the disciplines of the humanities in the form of revised research methodologies, curricula and pedagogical perspectives. The introduction of religious theory in the late 1970s and early 1980s by such figures as Carl Raschke, Mark C. Taylor, Edith Wyschogrod, and Charles E. Winquist, coincides with a much wider re-appraisal of intellectual inquiry across the humanities and social sciences. For instance, the poststructuralist turn on Saussure's observation that signifiers and signified are arbitrarily linked that transformed the sacred into the semiotic also shifted the locus of all disciplinary inquiry from metaphysics to linguistics, remapping, as it were, the entire critical landscape. "When one begins to 'frame' the theory of religion as a theory of semiosis," Raschke writes, "or how the mimetics of representation function *in extremis*, then one can do philosophy of religion, if not 'philosophical theology', in a whole new manner—as *religious theory*" (6). This "whole new manner" refers specifically to a new *economy of the concept* in religious studies, with the study of religion becoming an inquiry into the distribution of signs [signifiers (markers) and signifieds (concepts)] within signifying networks. The focus of "religious theory," then, is not on the so-called data behind the symbol (as is the case of scientific anthropology or faith-based studies), but on the logic governing the *sign-network* and its operating systems.
8. Religious theory as a new manner of religious inquiry re-issues the challenge of theory in general; that is to say, religious theory rearticulates the relationship between inquiry and disciplinary, with the links between signs and signs as the concern of religious thinking. The new *economy of the concept*, directed by the operational logics of the *sign-network*, force a collapse of the allegorical pairing forming the "institution of religion." The result of this collapse is the division of religion, religion as the totality of "religious" discourses or religion standing against itself. In this sense, religious studies always has been an undisclosed synthesis of religion and the "institution of religion" just as "literature" always has been a undisclosed synthesis of the imaginative texts and all its criticism (reading technologies). The future of religious studies, as it is the future of all disciplines, is in its rejection of a faith-based or positivist allegory. Religious theory, with its emphasis on linguistics, discloses the formation of concepts, providing a semiosis of religion that moves toward a disfiguring of the "logic of equivalency." Inquiry and disciplinarity, then, become activities linking linguistics disfigurements in an ever-changing *sign-network*. Art history, literature, history, philosophy, religion, and all corollary disciplines are discursive modalities produced from and delimited by the economy of concepts. From this "division," theory's successful challenge to religious studies is to make, as Derrida suggests, the "deconstruction" of religion into a religious "discourse."

⁹See Peggy Kamuf's *The Division of Literature Or the University in Deconstruction*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1997.

¹⁰See Victor E. Taylor *Para/Inquiry: Postmodern Religion and Culture*. London: Routledge, 2000.

Notes:

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