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At present theological and religious studies have reached a crisis of severe magnitude. While religious faith and praxis continue strong worldwide and a swelling population of ordinary believers, particularly in Third World nations, defies decades-old expectations of triumphal secularity, religion as a theoretical issue becomes ever elusive and murky. At the same time theological conversation has paled into political and ideological wrangles posing as substantive theory, academic research in the area has shattered into a muddle of socio-cultural methodologies with no common thread except a vague interest in *res religiosa*, or "matters religious."

3. Although "religious studies" as a field has sought for several generations to ape the nineteenth century Germanic model of *Religionswissenschaft*, the outcome has been something disturbingly contrary. The nineteenth century concept of "religion" in the grand sense flowered from the assumption that wherever the venerable term occurred, a shared *situs* for speech could be located, and the "phenomenon" itself mapped and assessed. The "classical theories" of religion, elaborated by such intellectual giants as Weber, Levi-Bruhl, Durkheim, Otto, van der Leeuw, and Robertson-Smith, were launched from this very proposition. The latter day notion of "religious studies," deriving from the merger of liberal Protestant theology and the history of religions, carried this trend further under a rising regime of the empirical social sciences.
4. Yet in the past generation the search for what might be characterized as a "general consensus" concerning the meaning of such words as "God," "the sacred", the "divine", and even the "religious" itself has petered away. "Theological" inquiry, which at one time focused on the signification of the word "God" (Greek=*theos*), has been undercut by the strident contention that such an undertaking is inherently sectarian and incapable of comprehending the limitless diversity of religious experiences and faith stances. Inquiry into religion, as a whole, which a generation ago ignited endless discussion and the writing of monographs, has for the most part given up the ghost. Instead academic attention has been concentrated on enlarging the gamut and complexity of what are conventionally called "area studies", on developing perspectives on familiar religious or cultural themes without asking more gnawing questions of why these topics matter in the first place. It is as if Medieval historians were to deliberate constantly on arcane concerns about papal legitimacy, feudal sovereignty, guild practices, and mercantile economies without ever seeking to understand what the phrase "Middle Ages" connotes, or what "history" itself might signify. The theory of *theos* has been reduced to a surface grammar of banal classificatory rubrics.
5. Much blame for this dissipation of research has been hastily laid on "postmodernism." In both the public and half-informed scholastic mind postmodernism has come to denote a spirit of radical pluralism and the propagation of differences. Indeed, the refusal of identity and the celebration of *difference qua difference* has become the conjectured trait of what Jean Francois Lyotard once named "the postmodern condition." The philosophical movement associated with postmodernism, of course, is far more nuanced and paradoxical than this caricature suggests. The almost pathological *differentialism* of the contemporary religious and

theological enterprise has far more to do with the evolution of an ideology suitable to the bureaucratization and hyperspecialism of the late industrial megauniversity than it has with any internal dynamics of religious thought itself, or with the topography of an emerging global civilization.

6. The cultural and institutional sources of this changeover are complex and probably await a new “sociology of knowledge” that charts twenty and twenty-first century ideology as a function of the nascent knowledge economy. Postmodernism in many ways has simply served as a convenient descriptor for the intellectual trends of the last thirty or forty years, and whatever worth, or lack of worth, one may attribute to the movement reflects the attitudes one already had toward these events anyway. Nonetheless, postmodernism, whether one protests or not, is the full firmament for intellectual inquiry nowadays. It is not one alternative among many, any more than a dedication to inductive science was merely an option at the height in the nineteenth century.
7. The preponderance of the cultural debate on “pomo”, however, has ignored the philosophical, and by extension the theological, imperatives that has brought about the demolition of the modernistic template. The common image of postmodernism has been created by certain eccentricities of style and sloganeering adopted by its most prolific proponents. The most visible envoy of postmodernist *belles lettres*, of course, is Jacques Derrida. The literary and philosophical influence of Derrida has been enormous, and the tendency to identify postmodernism with Derridean oratory seems only natural. But Derrida has only carried forth a special program in late modern philosophy that has its genesis in the writings of Nietzsche. The project itself germinates in Husserlian phenomenology, finds a pragmatic outlet in “structural” and “post-structural” linguistics, and comes to fruition in the later Heidegger. This venture we may describe as the *deposition of the sign*.
8. To “depose” means to remove from a certain place or position, particularly a “high position.” It also connotes a “written testimony.” It was Derrida who discovered that writing alters the vectors in the act of signification. The grapheme, or “grammatological” reference, is severed from the pristine presence of the spoken utterance, or phoneme. In writing the unity of signifier and signified is broken. Writing opens up a terrain of difference that cannot be sublated by reflective thought. The text and the name have entirely different genealogies. However, it was not the theory of inscription, from which derives the view that textualization amounts to a “deconstruction” of the idealistic architecture of modern philosophy that brought to light the possibility of a new thinking about the sign apart from the moment of denotation.
9. The antecedents to deconstructionism can be discerned in both C.S. Peirce’s doctrine of “thirdness” as well as Husserl’s concept of intentionality. Peirce launched the “science” of semiotics by characterizing the sign as “a third mediating between the mind addressed and object represented.”¹ The sign interrupts the pure continuity of word and thing and raises the problem of the “other” to which an expression is directed. Because language is not representational in the strictest sense of the word, but social or intersubjective, the semiotic theory of the sign challenges the centuries-old principle that “what is” somehow always coordinates with whatever mirrors or “represents” it. Most modern accounts of signification are simply sophisticated variations on Plato’s doctrine of *mimesis*. Although he had no relationship with Peirce, Husserl in his own tortuous elaboration of the “phenomenological method”

¹Nathan Houser and Christian Kloesel, eds., *The Essential Peirce: Selected Philosophical Writings* (Bloomington IN: Indiana University Press, 1992), p. 281.

argued that what the former called the “trichotomic” nature of sign operations actually can be considered tetradic. Husserlian phenomenology showed how signification has a fourfold constituency ‘ the subjective or agential relationship to the object supplemented by the action and the scenario.

10. Thus in Husserl the “structure” of a constellation of meanings always varies with the aim and outcome of a semantic undertaking. This undertaking remains independent of any logical nexus between the sign and the signified. The realization that, when one is thinking or speaking, one is also in the presence of “other minds” with whom it becomes vital to communicate, has crystallized many of the philosophical perplexities pursued, often obscurely, by such figures as Sartre and Merleau-Ponty. Derrida would later stress that writing is the premier mode of communication and thus makes us aware that the sign has been jarred from its original socket of reference, that it has been deposed. The deposition of the sign is the root of what postmodernists have in mind when they engage in a critique of “correlative” doctrines of signification, or what Heidegger and Derrida have termed “onto-theology.”
11. The deposition of the sign in postmodernism has intricate consequences for both religious thought and religious studies. The impact on theological research has already been extensive.² But the effect on the study of religion as a whole has been negligible. The study of religion as a whole has remained beholden to both functionalist anthropology and a kind of descriptivist, or textualist, idealism most strongly evidence in the work of Mircea Eliade. The descriptivism of religious studies has a long “colonial” history, as critics such as Jonathan Z. Smith have argued. The descriptivist bias stems from the origin of “comparative religions” in the exotic narratives, ethnographies, and travelogues of missionaries and explorers, and has been reinforced in recent years by polemics of the “new historicists”, who extol cultural particularities over the universalizing statements of earlier, Eurocentric writers.
12. But the hegemony of the descriptivist hermeneutic in the study of religion, according to Smith, also masks a kind of cultural imperialism that secretly privileges the Graeco-Christian metaphysical outlook while purporting to delegitimize it. Cultural radicalism turns out to be simply the program of a new generation scrabbling for the unclaimed perquisites of the *ancien regime*. The contemporary study of religion as a mythic terrain invested with numinous qualities “welcomes the foreign if only to show, by some allegorizing or rationalizing procedure, that it is, in fact, the ‘same.’”³ A similar point applies to the profusion of present day articles and essays that touch on the “social” and “political” import of familiar, or bizarre types, of religious belief and practice. Inside the planetary curiosity shop that merchandises the religious life of the human race we find the persistent prejudices of the West’s intellectual elites. It is colonialism with a compassionate face. The ever fashionable narratives of exploitation and victimization are increasingly crafted neither to “raise consciousness” in the classic, Marxist manner, nor to propound a strategy of liberation. Too often the exemplary topics are either recondite or historically inconsequential.
13. The true aim is to flaunt the hermeneutical privileges of the particular religious scholar by demonstrating his or her eye for the other, and by displaying the vast archipelago of social powers and influences that render all religious matters as identical manifestations of one’s own critique. Jean Baudrillard has already made this same point in his acid commentary on the anthropological imagination in postwar Europe. The multicultural sentimentality is

²Explain.

³Jonathan Z. Smith, *To Take Place: Toward Theory in Ritual* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987), p. 101.

“rivalled only by the profound contempt it is designed to conceal. For ‘We respect the fact that you are different’ read: ‘You people who are underdeveloped would do well to hang on to this distinction because it is all you have left.’ ‘Nothing could be more contemptuous’ or more contemptible ‘than this attitude, which exemplifies the most radical form of incomprehension that exists’ it is a product of eternal stupidity’ of that stupidity which endures for ever in its essential arrogance, feeding on the differentness of other people.”⁴

14. If the deposition of the sign in the realm of theory constitutes an insurrection against the totalizing scepter of the metaphysical, it likewise becomes apparent that a criticism of the current metanarrative of the sacred is absolutely necessary. Such a criticism would expose the totalizing constraints of the “celebration” of difference and would unmask the real game that is played in such a casino of cultural constructs and counters. The scholarly academy fears such a move because it would call into court its hidden, sectarian, and *anti-theoretical* agendas.
15. The political hermeneutic of religion is perennially tempting, because it offers a semblance of the theoretical without doing the hard work of excavating the phenomenon that the study of religion poses as a question. The study of religion can only be approached as a foray into the phenomenon of religiosity, and such a foray is impossible without mobilizing the instrumentalities of theory. Such theory invariably entails a transaction within the matrix of signification we call *interpretation*. And every theory must be germane to its topic area. It must be more than merely reading one set of signs as something thoroughly alien. Thus a biology of politics is conceivable, but a politics of biology does not really attain to what the “life sciences” are all about. A politics of biology remains a type of politics and answers none of the pertinent questions about the “biological” per se. The same can be said for a political investigation of the religious. It has little in fact to do with the religious. It is not accidental that in all previous cultural epochs the academic study of religion is tantamount to what we call “theology,” or that it is intertwined with what we loosely comprehend as the “philosophical.”
16. This observation holds not only in the “Christian West,” but in the Islamic and “Oriental” worlds as well. Theological speculation may take somewhat different paths with a variety of emphases, but in every instance it is tantamount to a “scientific” attempt to make sense out of what the particular culture considers worthy of unqualified devotion. An Islamic jurist seeking a determination on an item of the *sharia*, for instance, is not by any stretch of the imagination endeavoring to make some kind of covert “social statement.” That perspective is radically secularist and belies not only his intent, but his “intentionality” in the phenomenological sense.
17. The critique requires a re-reading of the “postmodern theme” not simply as differentialism but as deposition. The differencing of deposition defies totalization, because it generates a hyper-directionality to discourse, an “impossible” alterity that all at once unsettles, like a lightning flash above the desert, the deceptive atmospherics of the same. A sense of how deposition of signification has begun to take shape can be found in Gavin Hyman’s *The Predicament of Postmodern Theology*. Hyman surveys the topography of the sprawling intellectual continent that in recent years we have come to denote as religious postmodernism, and pictures it as a kind of *aporia*, a gigantic Janus-statue that still faces backwards toward the project of

⁴Jean Baudrillard, *The Transparency of Evil: Essays on Extreme Phenomena*, trans. James Benedict (New York: New Left Books, 1993), p. 132.

modernity that began in approximately the fourteenth century and forward into the unfathomable tomorrow. Hyman identifies this *aporia* as the unsociability of two philosophical, or theological, technics: “radical orthodoxy” and “nihilist textualism.” Although Hyman overemphasizes the importance of these movements in the evolution of the postmodernist idiom, he is persuasive in his argument that the *aporia* has been generated by a seemingly irresolvable contrapuntal treatment in modern thought of the realist versus “anti-realist” argument. Are we confined, Hyman asks, to a choice between the *parousia* of the text, as we find in Derrida, or the apotheosis of the liturgical, as is common theme in the writings of John Milbank and Katherine Pickstock?

18. We are not, he says, inasmuch as the postmodernist critique as instantiated in these two kinds of approaches endeavors to solve the problem of representation, on which the modernist enterprise rests, by flattening the entire space of signification. Deconstructionism overcomes the modernist template of signification as a reflective process by denying there is any “vertical” ontology, by reading the movement of meaning and semiosis within the context of language as a process of self-dislocation and erasure. Radical orthodoxy in its own weird way does the obverse, which is philosophically quite *perverse*. It hypothesizes a kind of sacramental realism that somehow substitutes for the onto-metaphysical tradition of both late Scholasticism and modernist empiricism. It assumes that the erasure is performed within what Milbank understands as the uniquely Christian “metanarrative.” The choice between deconstructionism and radical orthodoxy is a Hobson’s choice, Hyman argues, because both strategies constitute a *refusal of the other*. Although alterity has become a *bon mot* in theological postmodernism, its essence remains unrecognized. Thus postmodernism is nought but the eschatological finish for all of modernist undertaking, because modern thought from Scotus through Hegel to Wittgenstein is identified by either the repression, or the sublation, of alterity. Without recognizing itself postmodernism depends on what Hyman calls an “unavoidable call of theology” which is at the same time a resource for “ethical resistance,” a resistance that hovers within the negative interstices of the lexical that contemporary religious thought vaunts and celebrates.⁵
19. The deposition, therefore, is not a confusion of predicative specifications, as positivists and rationalists of all stripes protest; nor is it simply a dislocation of syntax, as deconstructionists insist. The deposition amounts to a disjunction in the virtual dyad of presence and representation, at once warranting the trace that can be pronounced as the “other” (*das andere, l’autre*). Hyman contends that the warranting of the trace serves also to warrant theology. Theology after all, according to Hyman, is the discourse that enfolds the trace and alchemizes it from what is strange to what becomes intelligible as divinity. But this line of analysis, while provocative, is misleading. Hyman, who seems more sympathetic to radical orthodoxy than he wants to admit, lets the trace suffice as kind of incarnational episode within the curious sort of *para-ontology* that Milbank and Pickstock consistently write about. A grammar of traces, while rhetorically defensible, is philosophically inconceivable. The explanation is straightforward. The very notion of the “trace” requires a kind of double coding which theology in its traditional format is incapable of assimilating. The philosophical construct of the trace, which we appears in the early Derrida, suggests a duplicity of language while generating the very paradox that necessitates the transcendence of metaphysics, so far as postmodernism itself is concerned.

⁵Gavin Hyman, *The Predicament of Postmodern Theology* (Louisville KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001), p. 144.

20. Such a paradox arises from the logic of representation itself. To be is to be doubled, supplemented, encoded, inscribed. The doubling posits the perdition of what has been duplicated. The trace, for Derrida, is a sepulcher ' marbled on its face, but vacuous in its interiority. In the work of Emmanuel Levinas, who I have argued can lead us out of the Derridean labyrinth of recursive ciphers, the trace takes on a different kind of dimensionality.⁶ The trace performs as a kind of "fourthness," if we can enfold what Perice had in mind with what Husserl perhaps intimated with his concept of the sign's "intention." Otherness, for Levinas, is neither an absent "thereness" or a present absence, as it has been delineated in so much postmodernist writing. To be other is to be that space of engagement toward which one struggles for expression. The other that is signified is the *l'autre* with which one seeks to communicate.
21. But this other must remain *totaliter aliter*, insofar as it is a horizon that recedes as the transaction we call speech advances. The other of course is not merely a horizon, a distantiated and ephemeral presence. The other responds to every act of saying, thus traversing language and authorizing dialogue. It is the other as interlocutor, rather than as a vanishing point of representation, that makes possible the deposition of the sign. The sign is *assigned* within the structure of language to what can, or shall, signify. But the visibility of the other as other is what causes contention within this structure. The "wholly other", the trace that shows itself as God's "face," is comprehensible to the extent that speech goes forth in search of a who, rather than a "what", that can *talk back*.
22. It is in this setting where we can begin to talk of "faith" in a postmodern parlance. The fiduciary character of speaking to another is what unsettles all signification. It is also what concretizes the otherness of the other. Both theology and philosophy from the modern, let alone the postmodern, standpoint have been unable to take any kind of "theoretical" account of faith because of the way in which the intentionality of all religious conversation, whether one is talking to one's neighbor or to one's maker, savages any descriptivist bias.
23. The deposition of the sign is both a viral infection of contemporary semantics, what Baudrillard terms the "negative intensity" of the nameless surface grammars and simulacra that have proliferated at the closure of the modern conversation, and a blast that reveals an openness to a new grammar of address. This new grammar of address requires an understanding of the orthogonality of speech, as opposed to the linearity of discourse. If Nietzsche seeded the postmodernist revolution with his assault on the logic of identity, we must now go beyond the revolution itself by breaking the totalizing stranglehold of differentialism - not the metaphysics of identity in difference, but the new metalogic of *difference as identity*.
24. We must bring to an end theology and sociology. We must begin to speak.

Notes

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⁶See my article "A-dieu to Derrida," in Clayton Crockett (ed.), *Secular Theology: American Radical Theological Thought* (London: Routledge, 2001), pp. 37-50.

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