
AAR

ARTICLE

Theology in Modernity's Wake

Ellen T. Armour

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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RESPONSES AND REJOINDERS

DEAR ELLEN ARMOUR,

Thank for your essay on “Theology in modernity’s wake.” I found your words point hopefully and helpfully to ways that we can mediate some of the inherited tensions between theological and religious studies. I appreciate both how you linked these tensions to the dilemmas of modernism *and* how you asked us not to overstate those dilemmas—in other words, to recognize that we have to face up to how we remain modern in many ways. By way of response to you, I would like to outline and then extend five claims embedded in your approach to “religious studies, theological studies, and the tensions of modernity.” My first question is to ask whether you recognize aspects of your own approach in this outline. My second question is to ask to what extent you would tolerate these extensions. OK? Here are the five:

1. The world’s “turn to religion” is a response to the decline of modernity. There is powerful evidence for your claim, which makes it all the more troubling that the academy tends to take insufficient account of its implications: among them, the strong possibility that what some decry as “the world’s turn to fundamentalism” is also a strong indictment of the inadequacies of modern secularism. What alternatives are there to either radical secularism or radical fundamentalism? AAR scholars should be well equipped to answering this public question.
2. What has declined is the modern model of “‘man’ as surrounded by and self-reflected in his four others –his racial, sexual, divine, and animal others.” In this model – which we might also label “humanism”—religion came to be considered an aspect of human subjectivity.

You offer what I find to be a brilliant portrait of modern humanism as a model of four doubles. Your portrait suggests that if academics take

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responsibility for their part in modernity, then they ought no longer to assimilate the world (or their subjects of inquiry) to the terms of the cogito (of “Man the Measure”). Against a radical postmodernism, however, I take you also to suggest that this need not lead academia to skepticism, for there are measures available other than either the cogito or its simple negation. Might we say that there are, for example, three-valued logics for philosophy, quantum and string theories for natural science, and, for religion, a host of noncogito-based reasonings (relational, social, textual, scriptural, liturgical, ritual, and so on)?

3. Academic divisions between “theology” and “religious studies” are symptoms of this modern model. With the decline of modernity, we should therefore re-inspect these divisions, which also means re-inspecting the modern model of “Man the Measure” and, thus, of “Man the Measure of Religion.” This means re-inspecting the strictly humanistic presumptions of both religious studies and modern theology.

Within Jewish philosophy and theology, this re-inspection is illustrated in the line of thinking initiated by Hermann Cohen, the great Kant scholar who added, however, that only prophecy introduced that attention to the other (and Other) that grounds ethical, as opposed to merely conceptual, thinking. The line continued through his students Martin Buber and Franz Rosenzweig and his student Emmanuel Levinas. Levinas offers the most well-known model for turning to the other/Other to interrupt humanistic solipsism. I find his model powerful, except that I would like to see more embodied (less spiritualistic) versions of it that begin more with the fact of societal life than with the self and its other. Do these sources relate at all to your project?

4. Academic humanism also tends to insulate academic inquiry from lived practices: both as sources of information and sources of criteria for receiving and judging the outcomes of inquiry. This means that, as practiced in modernity, both religious studies and theology have been under-informed by empirical studies of everyday religious practice and under-attentive to the way this academic inquiry does and ought to impact religious life in everyday society. In other words, our academic studies have not caught up to the religious turn in post-modern society.

Would you agree that some recent postmodernist writings—including the recent postmodern “turn to religion”—may continue rather than interrupt this “effete” tendency in humanism? I am thinking of the hyper-intellectualism among some students of Derrida, which I read as not quite in sync with the older, pragmatic critique of humanism that was exemplified in Charles Peirce’s work. For Peirce-Dewey, the academic job is to put intellect to the work of helping repair broken and oppressive institutions and practices. Of course, this work may require highly abstract

thinking, including mathematics. But would you agree that one job of theologians and religion philosophers may be to keep such thinking in relation to its ultimately reparative ends (making sure the “ultimate” is in the near future!)?

5. On the other side, we should also re-inspect tendencies in the modern Church to claim independence from academic criticism. If the modern divide works both ways, so should the post-modern alternatives. On the one side, academic inquiry should be a source of the kind of inquiry that attends to and responds to the institutions of everyday social life. On the other side, these institutions ought to call for and attend to the results of this kind of inquiry.

Shall we say that, in general, modern religious studies *and* theology has tended to divide what goes on in religious “houses” (traditions of church, synagogue, mosque, and such) from what goes on in academic theory? And, rather than recommend blurring the distinction between these two, shall we say you recommend our raising up a third activity—practices that bring problems and sufferings in the houses to the attention of the theorists and that bring the literature and hypotheses of the theorists to the attention of the houses? If so, would you recommend that the AAR itself might turn more to the work of housing such mediating practices, beginning with dialogue among AAR scholars and those who work in and for those religious houses?

Thank you for your encouraging words!

Peter Ochs
University of Virginia

Reply to Ochs

DEAR PETER OCHS,

First, my thanks for the generous reading of, expansions on, and probing questions to my essay. I will respond seriatim.

I largely concur with your diagnosis, though would add that the specific aspects of modernity that the various so-called “fundamentalisms” reject vary. Hindu and Muslim fundamentalisms, for example, are reactions to the history of modern Christian-inflected colonialism. Naming these movements “fundamentalisms” is arguably entangled in that history. These movements may point to lacunae within modern secular culture(s), but before we could identify resources (religious or not) for addressing those lacunae, we would first need to rethink the division between “the secular” and “the religious” that secularism presupposes (see Talal Asad, among others).

I would accept the term “humanism” as a label for the fourfold and endorse as well attending to “non-cogito-based reasonings” as aspects of religiosity. Two caveats: academic analyses of such forms of knowing are largely cogito-based work. Noncognitive aspects of religion are just as vulnerable to distortions (cognitive and noncognitive) as religious ideas. Moreover, we cannot pick up and put down at will this particular yardstick, “Man the Measure.” We scholars are made in “man’s” image to one degree or another. We can, however, undo him by putting to work his formidable resources through various kinds of *askeses*—including cognitive *askeses*. Comparative theologians Wendy Farley and John Thatamanil arguably do so via the *askeses* of meditative and textual study under religious adepts. Saba Mahmood and Mary Keller, via the *askeses* of ethnography and feminist theory, reconceptualize religious subjectivities.

Levinas’s is a powerful and provocative vision, but I share your wariness. Because he leaves uninterrogated and unthematized the various social and psychosomatic regimes implicated in the ethical (in its broadest sense) and its refusal, I have found Foucault, Derrida, and psychoanalytic theorists more helpful.

Will attending to “the empirical” address the impoverishment arising from the gap between the academy and the “religious houses” (thank you for introducing me to this term)? I would prefer “attending to the embodied” (social/institutional structures and their subjects). The line

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distinguishing the theoretical from the empirical is indistinct; critiques of religious studies like Masuzawa's and J.Z. Smith's demonstrate that scholarly approaches to "the empirical" are deeply imbued with theory. Theory is also embedded in "empirical" religious practices.

Without doubt, some Derridean acolytes have hyper-intellectualized deconstruction. Our accountability as "theologians and religion-philosophers" to the concrete reality of religious traditions and communities *may* provide a check on that particular temptation, particularly to the degree that we turn to high theory to address specific forms of suffering, pain, or injustice (a reparative *and* creative task).

At least within theology, I think the division you describe is accurate. I am indeed advocating a "third activity" that would foster a kind of mutual accountability—or at least engagement—between religious houses and the academy, though not through a one-size-fits-all approach. With or without official encouragement, the AAR is already "housing such mediating practices" in certain program units. The Queer Theory and Religion Consultation invited a Metropolitan Community Church minister and political activist to respond to their inaugural session, for example. Other forms of experimentation under the AAR's aegis but perhaps outside the structure of the annual meeting would be welcome.

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