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## INTRODUCTION: POSTMODERN THEOLOGY

Theology fell from grace in the modern world. Having been the “queen of the sciences” in the middle ages, it is now not generally counted among the intellectually respectable disciplines.<sup>1</sup> A leading biologist jokes that only theology may exceed exobiology (the study of extraterrestrial life) in being a “great subject without a subject matter.”<sup>2</sup> The reference on an editorial page to an argument as “theological” usually means that the proponent defends a faith-commitment in the face of overwhelming disconfirming evidence, employs meaningless distinctions, or both. The way to refer disparagingly to those who formulate rationales and strategies for nuclear weapons is to call them “nuclear theologians.”

In intellectual circles, theology is generally thought to consist of two types. One type is conservative-to-fundamentalist theology, which is based on appeals to supernatural revelation that will not withstand historical scrutiny and which makes assertions about the world that are disproved by science. The other type is modern liberal theology, which avoids contradicting modern historical and scientific knowledge by not asserting anything significant; it uses the word *God*—if indeed it uses it at all—in a Pickwickian way to put a religious gloss over secularism’s nihilistic picture of reality. Because conservative-to-fundamentalist theology is unscientific,

and modern liberal theology is vacuous, both can be ignored. Because these two types of theology have constituted the whole of the public image of theology, the conclusion has been that theology as such could be ignored.

The fate of theology in the modern period should be no surprise, for two reasons. The first is that God, transcendent values, and the human soul (with freedom), which are at the heart of any significant religious vision based upon the biblical tradition, are not allowed to play a role in the universe by the "modern scientific worldview," at least in its second form, which emerged in the eighteenth century and became dominant in the latter part of the nineteenth. (The distinction between the first and second forms of the modern worldview will be explained in chapter 2.) Within this context, theologians have seemed forced either to reject or ignore science and its worldview, thereby being antiscientific, or to accept them, thereby having a theology without God, transcendent values, and a self-determining soul. There *has* been a third form of theology, which challenged the modern worldview in the name not of an antiscientific authoritarianism but of a more fully rational understanding of reality. Its proponents, however, have not been very many or very visible, and its divergencies from modern liberal theology have been minor and/or timidly stated. That this third form of theology has been left out of the public image, which is necessarily drawn in broad strokes, is therefore understandable.

The second reason theology has been peripheral in the modern world is that it has been considered irrelevant. Modernity has had its theology-substitutes. A theology is an articulation and defense of a community of faith's path to salvation. In modern liberal society, salvation is to be achieved through material progress, which comes about through the marketplace and scientific technology. Economics and natural science, buttressed by the philosophy of science, comprise the two main branches of the modern substitute for theology. The science of economics explains how the market works, almost magically—as if it were guided by an invisible hand—to turn private greed into public good. Economics thereby embodies a distinctively modern form of the doctrine that divine providence works in mysterious ways. Far from being pure theory, economics provides a counterpart to practical theology, telling us how best to cooperate with grace (the marketplace). Liberal political theory, according to which the state allows the market considerable autonomy, and even subordinates itself to it, is a central feature of this practical doctrine.

Natural science, the other main branch of modernity's theology-substitute, provides the basic truth about the nature of the universe, replacing all previous theologies and their false doctrines of revelation. Modern philosophy of science provides the counterpart to what Roman Catholics have called "fundamental theology" and Protestants "apologetics." That is, it shows the scientific method to be the most reliable channel through which truth is revealed. In its most fundamentalist and representative forms, such as logical empiricism, the modern philos-

ophy of science has insisted that science is the one true way for discovering truth and the one true body of doctrine. The god of science is a jealous god, allowing no other gods before it: metaphysics and common sense, as well as theology, are denounced as "unscientific."

Theology, in short, has been peripheral both because the modern worldview prevents a theological vision from being simultaneously significant and rational, and because the distinctive form of the religious quest for salvation embodied in modern society created substitutes for theology. Having been rendered impossible and irrelevant, theology was bound to fall on hard times.

As suggested in the introduction to this series, however, a postmodern world appears to be dawning. Negatively, confidence is waning in the materialistic worldview and in salvation through material progress. Positively, a postmodern worldview is emerging, supported by many scientists and scientific developments, and great interest in postmodern forms of community and spiritual life is becoming manifest.

In this new context, the place and nature of theology can be expected to change. Because of the renewed interest in religious spirituality as the foundation for both individual and social life, theology can be expected to return to the center of public discussion in the postmodern world. Neither of the two forms of theology that were dominant during the modern period can play this public role. But, of course, they will not be dominant in the postmodern world. The emergence of a postmodern worldview, supporting and supported by a postmodern science, provides the context in which a postmodern theology can be accepted. This postmodern theology articulates a genuinely religious vision of the world, unlike modern liberal theology, without taking an antiscientific, antirational stance, unlike modern conservative-to-fundamentalist theology. This postmodern theology can build upon the third form of theology, mentioned above, which challenged the modern worldview in the name of a more rational, more empirical, description of reality. In the new context, however, it can be bolder without seeming to go beyond the pale (to the theologians themselves as well as their readers).

The essays in this book constitute an example of a postmodern theology and thereby a proposal for the direction theology should take in the postmodern period. Whereas all the volumes in this series are theological in a broad sense of the term, the essays in this volume are theological in the stricter sense, dealing with ideas of God, religion, creation, science and theology, the human soul, immortality, spiritual discipline, and ethics. In the remainder of this introduction, I indicate the distinctive features of this postmodern theology.

With regard to the question of God, postmodern theology involves a naturalistic theism, which is equally distinct from the supernaturalistic theism of premodern and early modern theology and the nontheistic naturalism of the late modern worldview. A naturalistic worldview has been

widely equated with a nontheistic view; even if the term *God* is used by naturalists, it would not refer to a personal being distinct from the world who exerts causal influence in it. The affirmation of such a divine reality has been assumed to involve supernaturalism. For example, it is almost universally said that science, because it deals only with natural causes, cannot deal with divine causation. Divine causation is assumed, by definition, to be supernatural causation. Against both of these modern assumptions, postmodern theology proposes a naturalism that is theistic, and a theism that is naturalistic. This naturalistic theism, or theistic naturalism, is developed in several of the chapters, especially 4, 5, and 8.

Epistemologically, postmodern theology is based on the affirmation of nonsensory perception. This nonsensory form of perception is said not only to occur—which is shocking enough to the modern mind—but also to be our *fundamental* mode of relating to our environment, from which sensory perception is derivative. This affirmation challenges one of the main pillars of modern thought, its sensationism, according to which sense-perception is our basic and only way of perceiving realities beyond ourselves. The primacy of nonsensory perception, or what Alfred North Whitehead called *prehension*, lies at the root of his contribution to postmodern theology. This postmodern primacy of prehension undergirds and develops the “radical empiricism” that is William James’s main contribution.

This radical, nonsensationist empiricism lies behind the naturalistic theism already mentioned, and the closely related affirmation of the direct (if vague) perception of norms or values, which restores ethics and aesthetics to the realm of cognitive discourse (in which assertions capable of being true or false are made). This radical empiricism equally lies behind other distinctive features of postmodern theology, mentioned below, through which it differs both from traditional supernaturalism and modern nihilism.

The importance of this epistemic point cannot be overstated. The dogma that our experience is *wholly* mediated through culturally conditioned filters, especially linguistic filters, so that there can be no prelinguistic experience of anything, let alone God or norms, pervades the social sciences and the humanities. Postmodern theology’s recognition (as it sees it) of nonsensory perception allows for *a dimension or element of perceptual experience that is not a product of culturally conditioned frameworks and is therefore common to us all*. Because this postmodern primacy of prehension is so fundamental, it is recurred to time and again throughout the volume. (The type of “postmodern theology” that is based on the *denial* of prelinguistic experience is discussed below.)

Equally distinctive is the postmodern treatment of nature. At the root of the modern worldview, along with the sensationist doctrine of perception, was the mechanistic idea of nature. This mechanistic idea of natural entities forced most modern minds to choose between dualism and materialism, both of which are extremely problematic. Dualism left the mo-

dern mind unable to explain its relation to its body; materialism led the modern mind to deny itself.

Modern thought, when it took its sensationist epistemology even more seriously than its mechanistic view of nature, *did* come up with alternatives to dualism and materialism, namely the phenomenisms of Hume and Kant and the idealisms of Berkeley and Hegel. But these views are equally problematic, in that they refuse to affirm the real existence of the natural world studied by natural science and presupposed in everyday life. They have accordingly had little effect outside philosophical and theological circles.

Postmodern theology is based on another alternative, *panexperientialism*, in which feeling and intrinsic value are attributed to all individuals comprising nature. Our ineradicable realism is thereby honored, in that dogs, cells, and molecules are said to be real in the same sense in which we are real, while both dualism and materialism are avoided. This panexperientialism is the ontological basis for naturalistic theism, which seems so strange to the modern mind, given this mind's assumption that experience is not natural. If modernity has had trouble thinking of the human soul as natural, all the more could it not think of a cosmic soul as a natural reality and its interaction with the world as part of the natural process. Postmodern theology, by contrast, with its assumption that experience is fully natural, finds it natural to speak of a divine, all-inclusive experience.

Along with experience, the other key term in the postmodern doctrine of nature is *creativity*. The two terms should be used together: all experience is creative experience. Creativity is, in fact, considered the ultimate reality, which is embodied by all individuals, from God to electrons. That it is embodied in a plurality of finite individuals is as essential as that it is embodied by the divine individual. This idea is the essential presupposition behind postmodern naturalistic theism, according to which God could not possibly be the sole possessor of creative power, and cannot interrupt or unilaterally control events in the world. On this basis, postmodern theology, while agreeing with modernity that the problem of evil undermines supernaturalistic theism, argues that theism itself, if naturalistically conceived, is fully compatible with the reality of genuine evil. Chapter 3 develops the idea of creativity and applies it to a wide range of religious issues, some of which are treated more fully in other chapters.

Postmodern theology's naturalistic theism, along with its distinctive doctrine of nature, provides the basis for a new understanding of the relation between science and theology. This issue is illustrated in chapter 5. Postmodern theology rejects the modern assumption that evolution and a theistic doctrine of creation are necessarily antagonistic to each other. Theology need not choose between rejecting evolution, perhaps in the name of a supernaturalistic "creation science," and capitulating to an atheistic, nihilistic (for example, neo-Darwinian) account of evolution, with talk of divine creative activity either dropped or relegated innocuously to another

“perspective” or “language game.” Postmodern theology proposes a way of speaking straightforwardly about theistic evolution.

Postmodern theology is also quite distinctive in combining a high doctrine of human nature with an ecological approach to nature, in which intrinsic value is attributed to all entities. Chapter 2 explains the way the postmodern worldview allows us to recover the sense of “The Importance of Being Human,” which has been lost in the modern period. It shows that an ecological viewpoint need not lead to equalitarianism, according to which all things, from humans to microbes, perhaps even electrons and rocks, are assumed to have equal intrinsic value. The key ideas here are degrees of intrinsic value, the directionality of evolution toward organisms with greater intrinsic value, and a divine perspective in which intrinsic as well as ecological value is cherished.

At the center of the postmodern reappraisal of the human being is a new way of speaking of the human mind or soul. Key ideas here are nature as a hierarchy of creative experience and the primacy of nonsensory perception. These ideas form the basis for chapter 6, which will surely be the most startling to modern readers, in that the possibility of life after death is affirmed within a naturalistic worldview. “Naturalism” for the modern mind has *meant* the rejection of any survival of bodily death. To believe in life after death, from the modern perspective, is to believe in the supernatural: the human mind is not the sort of thing that could live apart from its body naturally, that is, apart from a supernatural act.

Given postmodern assumptions, however, the possibility of life after death can be affirmed without abandoning a naturalistic standpoint. This standpoint is naturalistic not only ontologically, requiring no supernatural intervention, but also epistemically, requiring no leap (or supernatural gift) of faith. Postmodern theology here appeals to evidence, albeit a kind of evidence—parapsychological—much scorned by modern minds. Even most of those calling for an “empirical theology” do not have *this* type of empirical evidence in mind! The closedness of the modern mind to this kind of evidence points back to the very origin of the modern worldview. The mechanistic view of nature and the sensationist doctrine of perception were adopted by early modern minds in large part to declare that action at a distance and extrasensory perception could not happen naturally, thereby ruling out a naturalistic interpretation of the Christian miracles. Postmodern openness to evidence for extrasensory perception and psychokinesis reflects the very heart of its differences from both early modern supernaturalism and late modern naturalism.

One of the most important features of postmodern theology is its potential for overcoming that division between religious liberals and conservatives (including fundamentalists) which was inevitable in the modern period. Modernity presented religious thinkers with a forced choice: *either* let experience and reason be decisive for the content of one’s faith, in which case it will become increasingly vacuous, *or* maintain a robust faith

by basing it upon the authority of scripture and tradition, allowing experience and reason a merely subservient role. This forced choice was due to the peculiarly modern conceptions of experience and reason. Because *experience* in modern thought was basically sense-experience, modern empiricism was a superficial empiricism, which ruled out contact with any spiritual realities behind sensory appearances. *Reason* largely meant thinking that conformed to the modern worldview. A liberal approach, meaning one in which received beliefs are tested by experience and reason, thereby inevitably led to a thin theology, one that provided an inadequate basis for personal morality, public policy, and for answering the question of the meaning of life in the face of personal and global tragedy.

In this context, a reassertion of the authority of the scriptures (and perhaps tradition) appeared to be the only way to maintain "a faith worth having." A significant theology seemed to require a conservative method. Postmodern theology shows that this is no longer true. Within the context of the postmodern worldview, with its radical empiricism, a liberal method supports a significant theology with robust doctrines of God, providence, and even life after death. The main reason for adopting an authoritarian method is overcome. People no longer have to choose between having a meaningful faith and being fully empirical and reasonable.

Another important, if less unique, feature of postmodern theology is its movement toward overcoming the separation between theory and practice, a separation that exemplifies the modern penchant for dividing our thoughtful relations to reality into disciplines. Postmodern theology seeks to make explicit the ways in which theological truth is *liberating* truth. While practical issues are touched on in earlier chapters, especially 2 and 3, they become the focus of chapters 7 and 8. I suggest in chapter 7 that postmodern doctrines of God and the soul provide a new basis for spiritual discipline, which had been undermined by the atheistic materialism of modernity and even to some extent by the supernaturalism of medievalism and early modernity. Within postmodern naturalism, spiritual discipline is neither impossible, because the soul has significant power to shape itself, nor irrelevant, because the effectiveness of divine grace in the world is not unilaterally determined by God.

In chapter 8, the subject is liberation from demonic forces in the public realm, especially imperialism, nuclearism, and, more generally, militarism. The central idea here is that, given our religious desire to imitate the supreme power of the universe, naturalistic theism will tend to produce a different type of human beings than have supernaturalism and materialism, both of which portrayed the supreme power as coercive omnipotence. Whereas those modern doctrines tended to produce either crusaders or power-politic realists, naturalistic theism, with its doctrine of divine persuasion, will tend to produce pacific souls. The choice of *pacific*, as distinct from *pacifistic*, is deliberate. The latter term generally connotes the renunciation of violence as a matter of ethical principle. While there

is nothing in postmodern theology that opposes pacifism in this sense, and even much that can support it, the concern here is not with an ethical principle but with a type of soul. Pacific souls are those that *want* to live in peace with their fellow creatures, who will therefore naturally seek forms of social order that promote peaceable relations, and will naturally seek peaceful resolutions of the inevitable conflicts that remain. Some of them may also want to live by and advocate an absolutist pacifist ethic, but that is another matter, not broached here.

Although I have not directly addressed the issue in any of the essays in this volume, postmodern theology is supportive of feminist or postpatriarchal theology. The nondualism, the primacy of nonsensory perception, the presence of divinity and creativity throughout nature, the divine as soul of the world, the divine persuasion, the divine receptivity, and the reunion of theory and practice have all been endorsed by feminist theologians as central elements for a postpatriarchal theology.

What is called *postmodern theology* here is obviously very different from much that goes under this name. In the other major type of philosophy and theology to which the term postmodern is often applied—which is called eliminative or deconstructive postmodernism in the introduction to the series—all the points highlighted here are denied, namely God, non-sensory and prelinguistic perception, the perception of objective values, the self-determining human soul, and the universality of creativity and experience. By eliminating God, the self, and all objective value and meaning, this form of thought simply carries modern thought to its logical conclusion, and is therefore really ultramodern rather than postmodern. It could better be called *mostmodern theology*. In following out Nietzsche's insight that the death of God leads to nihilism, this ultramodernism brings out the nihilistic implications that were present in the modern worldview from the outset. The postmodern theology of this book stands in contrast to this nihilistic postmodernism as well as to the modernism whose nihilistic implications are drawn out by it. (The contrasts between these two forms of postmodern theology are treated at length in a companion volume, *Varieties of Postmodern Theology*.)

The fact that I am a Christian theologian raises another question: Is postmodern theology (as portrayed here) a specifically Christian theology, or is it a philosophical (or "natural") theology, which could provide a foundation equally well for Jewish, Christian, or Islamic theologians—and perhaps even Buddhist, Hindu, and Primal theologians? There is, I hope, some truth in both answers.

On the one hand, postmodern theology is a philosophical theology, which states its claim to be accepted as true—or at least as less untrue than other available positions—solely in terms of the criteria used in scientific and philosophical reasoning at its best, that is, self-consistency, adequacy to the relevant facts, and illuminating power. (In philosophy, in distinction from the special sciences, the *relevant* facts include, of course, *all* the



facts of experience.) Anyone who, on reading this book, concludes that postmodern theology is really *philosophy* is correct in this sense. It argues for its positions in terms of strictly philosophical criteria, making no appeal to special revelation to support its truth-claims. It indeed aspires to be recognized as a more adequate philosophy than any position that seeks to make sense of our experience without speaking of God.

Postmodern theology does, to be sure, appeal to religious experience. It makes this appeal because the reality of this type or dimension of experience is among the facts to which any position aiming for comprehensiveness must be adequate, and also because, by explicitly calling itself theology, it focuses on just those issues that are at the center of specifically religious concerns. But this appeal to religious experience involves no appeal to an extrinsic authority, whose truth-claims are to be accepted apart from their capacity for illuminating our common experience. Nor is this appeal, in principle at least, to one tradition of religious experience to the exclusion of others. Postmodern theology in principle provides a framework in terms of which each religious tradition could interpret its own more particular emphases, because this framework has drawn upon, say, Primal, Buddhist, and Christian experiences from the outset. (I stress *in principle* because, although this feature is already somewhat true of postmodern theology, it is much more an ideal for the future than a present achievement.)

Whereas there is a sense, then, in which postmodern theology (as developed here) is not specifically Christian, there are other senses in which it is. None of us has that all-inclusive, impartial perspective which is to be ascribed to the divine center of reality alone. We necessarily see reality from a particular perspective, which both selects and distorts while it reveals. This particular perspective will, to a great extent, be a function of the particular tradition in which we stand (which may be the product of several traditions, such as Hebrew, Greek, Christian, Egyptian, Roman, Anglo-Saxon, Christian-Protestant-Disciple, and modern-American, in my own case). This postmodern theology necessarily reflects a Western Christian perspective on the nature of reality. Not only were its two primary philosophers, Alfred North Whitehead and Charles Hartshorne, the products of Western Christian civilization, they were also sons of Anglican priests. They did study other philosophical-religious traditions, especially Buddhism, and sought to make their positions adequate to Buddhist as well as Christian insights, and several Buddhists have testified to their partial success in this regard. But there is no doubt that their philosophical visions, conceptualities, and valuations are more Christian than they are Buddhist.<sup>3</sup>

Accordingly, although postmodern theology is a philosophical (or natural) theology, it can more accurately be called a *Christian* philosophical (or natural) theology: even though it appeals only to the criteria that are appropriate to natural theology, which is a branch of philosophy, the questions it asks and the features of experience it consciously notices in

answering them are influenced from the outset by its birth in a Christian cradle.<sup>4</sup>

The postmodern theology in this volume is Christian in an even more specific sense. Central to my own perspective is the conviction that the divine character, purpose, and mode of agency have been decisively manifested through Jesus of Nazareth. Within a framework of naturalistic theism, this conviction does not involve any metaphysical claims about God's unique presence or action through Jesus that a Jew, a Moslem, or even a Hindu or Buddhist could not in principle accept (if it be a Buddhist who finds the nonsubstantial deity of postmodern theology not incompatible with Buddhist emptiness). For example, a naturalistic christology could not describe Jesus as the second person of the trinity in a human body or, less crudely, as in any manner involving a divine mode of presence or agency that differed metaphysically from that in all other people. Such an interruption of the normal God-world relation is precisely what naturalistic theism rules out. Nevertheless, because of my belief in the decisive manner in which the character, purpose, and mode of agency of the soul of the universe was expressed through that portion of the history of the universe we call Jesus, I refer to Jesus in a normative way that would not be natural to a theologian of another tradition. Likewise, because I assume the majority of those who will read these essays are Christian, at least more Christian than anything else, I sometimes use "more authentically Christian" as a criterion for commending the naturalistic form of theism over the supernaturalistic. (A Buddhist postmodern theologian could use "more authentically Buddhist" in a similar manner. He or she would, of course, to some extent emphasize different aspects of postmodern theology than have I.)

The mention of Whitehead and Hartshorne raises yet another question, given the fact that the form of theology based on their theology has long been called *process theology*. Is *postmodern theology*, as developed here, just a new name for process theology? That is to some extent true; most of what is here portrayed as characteristic of postmodern theology could equally well be used to illustrate process theology. Nevertheless, more is involved than simply a new name. While postmodern theology (as exemplified here) could equally well be called process theology, not all process thought could equally well be called postmodern. In the first place, one can be a process philosopher or theologian without giving explicit and thematic attention to the contrast between premodern, modern, and postmodern, and showing how process thought provides a solution to distinctively modern problems and recovers some premodern truths and values.

In the second place, a tendency has existed among many process thinkers to modernize Whitehead, that is, to reject, ignore, or at least not bring out the implications of just those features of his position that are distinctively postmodern. For example, a position called "Whitehead with-

out God'' has been proposed.<sup>6</sup> Whitehead's allowance for action at a distance is usually not mentioned, let alone emphasized. One proposal would, in fact, modify his position so as to disallow any direct influence of the noncontiguous past upon the present.<sup>7</sup> This interpretation would mean that, when the "many become one," only the immediately past many are directly involved, which is a considerable dilution of Whitehead's basic principle, which holds that, when the many become one, they are "increased by one." This modernized Whitehead provides no basis for the cumulative power on the present of past repetitions of a form, which Carl Jung's archetypes and Rupert Sheldrake's formative causation require.<sup>8</sup> Although few if any Whiteheadians have rejected the notion of nonsensory prehension, few have applied the doctrine to the question of "extrasensory perception" in the usual sense of that term. Nor have many Whiteheadians, including theologians as well as philosophers, built on Whitehead's recognition that his philosophy allows in principle for the continuation of the soul after bodily death, so that the question is to be decided by empirical evidence. (Some Whiteheadians have, in conversation, even denied the possibility of such continuation on the grounds that a "mental pole" always requires a "physical pole." Their equation here of the soul exclusively with "mentality" and the body exclusively with the "physical" is a wholly non-Whiteheadian use of those terms, which they in other contexts recognize.) Few process thinkers have applied the correlation between higher experience and greater creative power to the issues of spiritual discipline, psychokinesis, or survival. Finally, few process theologians have developed the doctrine of God with an eye to the question of pacifism, or what I call the development of pacific souls. My use of the term *postmodern* calls attention to the fact that the contrast between modern and postmodern theology is thematized, that the distinctively postmodern elements in Whitehead's metaphysics are accepted and emphasized, and that other postmodern possibilities are developed.