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INTRODUCTION: VARIETIES OF POSTMODERN THEOLOGY

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This book deals with eight types of postmodern theology—or, one could equally say, four basic types, with each type having two versions. To call all of them types of *postmodern* theology is to imply that they all have something in common. To speak of *varieties* is to indicate that significant differences exist among them. Indeed, the phrase *postmodern theology* is suddenly being used for a very diverse set of programs. The differences among them are probably more obvious than their similarities.

The varieties of postmodern theology do have some features in common. A not insignificant fact is that they all use the term *postmodern*. The various theologians thereby register their conviction that that noble and flawed enterprise called *modern theology* has run its course. Exactly how “modern theology” should be characterized is a question that elicits different answers. But even here there are commonalities. Modern theology, it can be agreed, sought to articulate the essence of the biblical faith in a context in which the general cultural consciousness was assumed to be shaped by the modern worldview, and in which a rational, objective ap-

proach to reality, through the natural and social sciences, was assumed to support the modern worldview. The varieties of modern theology represented different strategies for “doing theology” within that context, which at first glance seemed to make theology impossible.

The major divide is between early and late modern theologies. Early modern theology, represented most clearly by the deists of the eighteenth century, sought to accommodate theology to the modern worldview by reducing theology’s content, often by “demythologizing” it. It was hoped by many that this procedure would produce a universal theology representing the essence of all the religions. This universal theology would provide a religious but nonsectarian basis for public policy. The attempt to work out this strategy led many to the conclusion, however, that it so diluted the content of biblical faith that it left the religious community with an inadequate basis for identity and the individual with an inadequate basis for facing the perils of modern existence. Early modern theology’s twin goals of universality and integrity seemed incompatible. This perception led to late modern theology’s decision to retain religious identity and integrity through a return to particularity. Late modern theology gave up its claim to universality and thereby its claim to provide a basis for public policy in an increasingly pluralistic society.

From that characteristic of late modern theology followed two others, both of which were aspects of its nonpublic nature. On the one hand, late modern theology appealed to criteria of validation other than the public criteria used in science and science-based philosophy, that is, self-consistency and adequacy to generally accessible facts. Whether late modern theologians spoke of truth as subjectivity, contrasted the perspective (or “language game”) of objective science with that of religion, or appealed to a revelation to a particular community which allowed them to speak “from faith to faith,” they conceded the arena of public discourse to the modern worldview. In so doing, these theologians excused themselves from the need to meet the demands of public verification. On the other hand, late modern theology sought to articulate biblical faith in a context in which people’s faith, religion, or piety was generally assumed to be a private matter, without relevance to public policy. These two nonpublic features of late modern theology were related: insofar as the implications of a community’s religious faith remained private, the criteria for evaluating its assertions could also be private.

Given this characterization, it is obvious that not all theologies during the modern period were equally modern. For example, many philosophical theologies prior to the rise of the term *postmodern* were postmodern with regard to using only public criteria of validation. They could do this without evacuating biblical faith of its content because they challenged some of the basic presuppositions of the modern worldview. And “social gospel” theologies sought to be relevant to public policy. Reinhold Niebuhr, who both worked largely within a Whiteheadian-Hartshornean

philosophical framework and retained most of the emphases of the social gospel, was about half modern and half postmodern.

In speaking of *postmodern* theology, then, the various theologies using this self-designation share both a common view of the nature of modern theology and a common conviction that its era is over.

Beyond these formal agreements, great variety is to be found among the postmodern theologies. The four basic types discussed in this volume can be called (1) constructive (or revisionary), (2) deconstructive (or eliminative), (3) liberationist, and (4) restorationist (or conservative). Constructive or revisionary postmodern theology is the specifically theological dimension of the constructive postmodern thought to which this series is devoted and which is discussed in the introduction to the series, above. One version of this type is represented in the essays by William Beardslee and me. Those of its general features that are especially stressed by me are discussed in the introduction to my companion volume, *God and Religion in the Postmodern World*. A second version of constructive or revisionary postmodern theology is exemplified by Joe Holland. Whereas Beardslee and I are Protestants and stand in the tradition of Whiteheadian process theology, Holland is a Roman Catholic whose perspective is shaped more by Thomas Berry's ecologized Teilhardianism, Matthew Fox's creation-centered spirituality, and the transformed Heideggerianism of Gibson Winter's *Liberating Creation*.

This type of postmodern theology rejects all the characteristics of late modern theology mentioned above. While it recognizes that Western culture is still overwhelmingly shaped by the modern worldview, it believes that this situation is rapidly changing. The change is coming about in part, it holds, because the objective (rational-empirical) approach to reality no longer supports the modern worldview, but is pointing instead toward a postmodern worldview. And it believes that theology must in our time become public in both senses: it must make its case in terms of the criteria of self-consistency and adequacy to generally accessible facts of experience, and it must be directly relevant to matters of public policy.

Deconstructive or eliminative postmodern thought is also discussed in the general introduction to the series. The term *deconstruction* properly belongs, of course, to the French-based movement in which Jacques Derrida is the most prominent figure, and behind which stands Heidegger's deconstruction of Western metaphysics. This type of postmodern thought as represented by Jean-François Lyotard is discussed in Beardslee's first essay and, as represented by Mark C. Taylor, in my first essay. The term *eliminative* comes from a position that emerged in English-language philosophy sometimes called *eliminative materialism*, of which Richard Rorty has been a central advocate. This version of postmodern philosophy is also discussed in the critiques of Cornel West's theology. The positions of Taylor and West represent two very different ways to relate theology to this type of postmodern philosophy.

This type of postmodern philosophy believes that an objective approach to the facts of experience proves, paradoxically, that an objective approach is not possible, and that this realization undermines the modern worldview along with every other worldview. It believes that we are moving into a postmodern age in which this relativistic outlook will increasingly undermine the modern worldview.

The two forms of theology based on this type of postmodern philosophy have quite different ways of going public in relation to it. Taylor takes the deconstructive postmodern outlook as definitive of the context for theology, which must thereby become "a/theology." No private revelation or alternative perspective can circumvent the negative conclusions of the deconstructive analysis. Although positive motives generally lie behind this postmodern a/theology, its direct relevance to public policy is primarily negative: it is content for the most part simply to undermine the social structures that have been based on modern assumptions. The theology of Cornel West, by contrast, provides positive support for movements for human liberation. It has done this, however, by apparently retaining one of the features of late modern (and premodern) theology mentioned above: an appeal to a particular (the Christian) community's faith which is not evaluated in terms of the criteria of self-consistency and adequacy to generally available facts of experience. Unlike constructive postmodern theologians, West does not point to a postmodern worldview; unlike Taylor, he does not limit the theologian's affirmations to those consistent with deconstructive analysis. West's position involves an interesting combination of liberationist faith and eliminative postmodern philosophy.

Other examples of deconstructive postmodern theology are extant. They include Carl A. Raschke, *The Alchemy of the Word: Language and the End of Theology* (Missoula, Mont: Scholars Press, 1979), Jeffrey Stout, *The Flight from Authority: Religion, Morality, and the Quest for Autonomy* (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 1981, which is invaluable for its elucidation of the history of foundationalism and the reaction thereto, and Charles Winquist, *Epiphanies of Darkness: Deconstruction in Theology* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1986). Each has its distinctive emphases. But the main presuppositions and contentions of this movement are, I believe, discussed in the treatments of Lyotard, Taylor, and West herein.

The third type of postmodern theology is liberationist. While Cornel West provides one version of liberationist postmodern theology, Harvey Cox provides a second. Unlike the other types of postmodern theologians, Cox does not raise the issue of whether an objective analysis of the facts of experience undermines the modern worldview. But he does argue that theologians should not be constrained by the cultural mind-set that has been shaped by this worldview. The primary concern of a postmodern theology, in Cox's view, is to be liberationist, and for this purpose it can build most effectively upon the premodern piety of the religious communities. While Cox's theology is clearly postmodern in seeking to overcome the privatiza-

tion of faith, it retains late modern theology's rejection of the need for theology to be self-consistent and adequate to the various facts of experience. On this point, it should be added, my characterization of modern theology and Cox's diverge: he believes that this concern with adequacy and especially consistency has been an obsession in modern theology which a properly postmodern theology will overcome. He thereby regards a feature of early modern theology as characteristic of modern theology as a whole. Liberationist postmodern theology, I should add, is also discussed in Joe Holland's first essay.

The fourth type of postmodern theology can be called restorationist or conservative. This form of postmodern theology has thus far appeared mostly in Roman Catholic theologians, although the Lutheran Richard John Neuhaus manifests some affinity with it in *The Catholic Moment: The Paradox of the Church in the Postmodern World* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1987). We have only one essay on conservative postmodern theology, this being Joe Holland's essay on the cultural theology of Pope John Paul II. To maintain symmetry with our treatment of other types of postmodern theology, in which we present two versions of each type, I here summarize briefly another version of this type, that provided by George William Rutler in *Beyond Modernity: Reflections of a Post-Modern Catholic* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1987). I indicate how this version of restorationist postmodern theology compares with the constructive postmodern theology embodied in this volume.

Rutler's restorationist postmodernism contains much that resonates with the opinions of constructive postmodern theologians. Much of this agreement involves the features of modernity that are rejected. Rutler rejects modernism's relativism, subjectivism, reductionism, scientism, and sensate empiricism (22–24, 30, 35, 98, 193), together with its assumption that it is the final standard of all truth and value (11, 27). He wants to overcome modernity's utilitarianism, consumerism, individualism, loneliness, alienation, dependence on independence, and loss of memory (25, 63, 35–37, 46, 57, 77, 97–98). Rutler rejects both the totalitarianism in socialist countries and the sensuality and moral indifference in capitalist countries to which these features of modernism and modernity lead (28). Some commonality is also found with regard to the kind of postmodern world envisioned. Much of this commonality is constituted by the obvious opposites of the rejected features of modernity just mentioned. Besides these features, Rutler looks forward to a new union of religion and politics, and of theology and science, and thereby to a transformation of the pluriversity back into a university (13, 29–31, 85).

The differences from the postmodern theology represented in this book and series, however, are at least as significant as the commonalities. Rutler's so-called *postmodernism* differs little from earlier forms of Roman Catholic *antimodernism*. Indeed, his heroes include Cardinal Newman as well as Cardinal Ratzinger (33, 197, 199, 200). Rutler does deny that he is simply advocating archaism or revivalism (34); but, besides saying that "anything

valuable of post-modern life will be that which was valuable in pre-modern life” (29), he seems to recommend a simple return to medieval theology, especially that of Thomas Aquinas. No creative synthesis of medieval with modern insights seems to be in view. There is no sign, for example, that anthropocentric and androcentric assumptions are to be modified through the impact of the ecological and feminist movements: Rutler speaks of “Christian humanism;” and uses “man” for human beings (37 and *passim*). Nor is Christian faith to be enlarged by insights from other religious traditions. Rutler’s postmodern Christianity will not even be one that unites Protestants and Catholics: all his remarks about Protestantism are critical, and he even repeats the characterization of Luther as the “elemental barbarian” (36, 41, 97). Pluralism will be overcome, not celebrated, in Rutler’s postmodern world. The new unity of religion and politics is to be a reunion of Christianity and politics—more particularly, *Catholicism* and politics. Rutler’s vision, in fact, is the restoration of the unity of the Catholic worldview and world order that was destroyed through Protestantism and the Enlightenment (65–66, 96, 98). Overcoming modernism will mean a return to revealed, immutable doctrines (33, 34, 193) and the recognition of papal infallibility (43, 51, 194, 202). Rutler’s solution to our problems is perhaps best summed up in the following statement: “modern man fell apart as he lost the moral and spiritual unity of his culture. Only loyalty to the chair of Peter, the seat of unity, can secure freedom of life and humaneness of humanity. . . . [F]reedom requires conformity to the structure of Christ’s Body as it is made visible in the hierarchical constitution of the Church” (220, 222). This type of postmodern theology, at least in this version, therefore does not share the conviction that a public theology must employ public criteria of validity.

In his account of the theology of John Paul II, Joe Holland shows it to be a significantly different version of restorationist or conservative postmodern theology, one that may be open to supplementation by the constructive postmodernism embodied in this series.

While four types of postmodern theology—constructive, deconstructive, liberationist, and restorationist—are discussed herein, they are by no means presented neutrally. As indicated, this book is part of a series in which constructive postmodern thought is advocated, and all the essays are written from this perspective. Beardslee, Holland, and I claim that the valid points made by the other types of postmodern theology can be expressed, and can be expressed better because in a more balanced way, within a constructive or revisionary postmodern theology. It is possible that the proponents of the other types of postmodern theology will immediately and unanimously agree. Barring that improbable possibility, however, I hope this book will contribute to vigorous public debate about the nature and purpose of theology in our time. Even some defenders of modern theology may want to join in.

I take special pride in being able to use this series to present to a new audience the writings of two of the most profound postmodern thinkers,

William Beardslee and Joe Holland, whose writings have previously earned them great respect but within quite limited circles. (Readers of the second volume of this series, *Spirituality and Society: Postmodern Visions*, will have encountered Holland before.) Beardslee has long been a respected figure within biblical studies and process theology, and has been the recognized leader in relating these two fields of interest. Holland's ideas have thus far been known primarily within Roman Catholic circles devoted to revitalizing the laity. The essays by the two of them in this volume reveal something of the inclusive scope as well as the subtlety of their thought. Because of Beardslee's gifts as a historian and exegete, his essays, with their attention to the authors' intentions within their historical contexts, provide a nice balance to my more abstract, philosophical treatments. Another form of balance and richness is provided by Holland, who approaches the contrast between premodern, modern, and postmodern with a sociologist's sensitivities. It would be too little to say that I have been "greatly informed" by the writings of Beardslee and Holland; their writings have had something of the force of revelation for me. I trust that this will be true for others.

The dedication of the volume to John Cobb is appropriate not only because without him it would not exist, but also because he first used the term *postmodern* (in a 1964 essay) for the type of philosophical theology reflected herein.