

Introduction

“**T**heology,” from the Greek *theos* (which means “god”) and *logos* (which means “word” or “reason”) is reasoning and talking about God. What, then, is *radical* theology? The word “radical” comes from the Latin for “root,” but radical theology, at least as the expression is ordinarily applied, hardly means going back to the roots of a community’s faith. Rather, it suggests a decisive deviation from a particular faith community’s traditional way of talking about God. Context is all-important here. For instance, while the assertion that God is three-in-one would be a radical theological assertion indeed in the context of Judaism or Islam, it counts as orthodoxy within Christianity.

Of course, some claims qualify as radical when uttered within the context of most any tradition that focuses upon belief in God. Take, for instance, what Harold Bloom deems the “beautiful remark” of the seventeenth-century philosopher Baruch Spinoza “that whoever loved God truly should not expect to be loved by God in return.”¹ Spinoza’s abstract deity is incapable of love and is thus radically different from the God of what I shall term traditional monotheism. I define traditional monotheism as (1) *belief in a God* who is a personal, loving, *transcendent being* who freely created the universe and who acts within it to *reveal himself to humanity* and to accomplish his purposes, a belief that is formed and guided, (2) by allegiance to *sacred and authoritative texts* and *traditions*. It is sometimes supposed that traditional monotheism, the

belief system of the vast majority of Christians, for example, portrays God as an old man with a beard who sits on a heavenly throne. Radical theology is any theology, then, that replaces this cartoon God with something more sophisticated. But this is ludicrous, for traditional Christians, even the most humble, know that God is not a physical being perched on a heavenly chair. Thus, just as traditional Christian belief is something more sophisticated than belief in a supernatural grandfather, so radical theology must do something more radical than to quash an idea of God that no one holds anyway.

In order to better understand what we shall be calling “radical theologies,” it is helpful to consider the larger historical situation in which such radical theologies come to birth. They are largely the product of the modern and postmodern periods in the West. In the so-called Middle Ages, Western society was unified around the allegiance of the majority of its inhabitants to the Christian church. This arrangement is often referred to as “Christendom.” With the Renaissance, and especially with the birth of modernity, however, the forces of secularization were unleashed and Christendom came apart. Secularization is the process through which religion loses more and more (though never all) of its social power. Its central place in Western society has been taken over principally by the economic component of society. Secularization was well underway in the seventeenth century, the century in which historians tend to see modernity really beginning.² Why is the seventeenth century a watershed? Many powerful currents come together then: the nation-state is underway; capitalism begins to unfold; science as we know it is invented by men such as Galileo and Newton; and the philosopher René Descartes imparts a new focus to philosophy, an interest in knowledge and how we can attain certainty. In this brave new world, thinkers are no longer shackled to the tenets of Christendom. They are given permission, as it were, to explore radical approaches to thinking about deity, a permission that various thinkers have put to powerful use from the seventeenth century to the present day.

We can easily find representative radical thinkers from the seventeenth century through the twentieth. For a seventeenth-cen-

tury example, let us return to the brilliant philosophy of Baruch Spinoza (1632–1677). Spinoza defines God as absolutely infinite substance. This means that, in one sense at least, God is everything that exists; indeed God is the totality of everything that *can* be, that is, everything that is possible. Thus, we find in Spinoza a version of pantheism, a term that derives from the Greek *pan*, which means “all,” and *theos*, “god,” according to which God is the All. God has an infinite number of attributes, but we know only two, namely, space and thought, because we participate in only those two. We ourselves are “modes” or modifications of God under the attributes of thought and space.

In Spinoza’s pantheism, human beings are not free, for everything that happens follows necessarily from the characteristics of God as infinite substance. We do, of course, ordinarily suppose that we are free, but that is simply a function of our ignorance of what causes our actions. Only God is free. Yet even God is not free in the ordinary sense: he is not free to do *x* or not to do *x*. Rather, he is free only in the sense that there is nothing external to him compelling him; his actions flow necessarily from his own nature.

What should we make of Spinoza’s concept of God? Should it really be called “God” at all, considering how different it is from traditional monotheism? After all, Spinoza himself speaks of “*Deus sive Natura*,” “God or Nature.” Perhaps, then, Spinoza’s absolutely infinite substance can appropriately be identified with Nature as the All, but does not really deserve the appellation God. Certainly Spinoza’s God is not transcendent in the ordinary sense. Is Spinoza really best classified as an atheist? Not at all, according to interpreters such as the eighteenth-century poet Novalis, who dubs Spinoza a “God-intoxicated man”!

An example of eighteenth-century radical theology is provided by those thinkers usually known as the Deists (from the Latin *deus*, “god”). In English works such as John Toland’s *Christianity not Mysteriorious: Or a treatise Shewing That there is nothing in the Gospel Contrary to Reason, Nor above it: And that no Christian Doctrine can be properly call’d a Mystery* of 1696 and Matthew Tindal’s *Christianity as Old as the Creation* of 1730 we are introduced to a “natural religion” or religion of reason. The God here unveiled is

the watchmaker God: this deity can be shown by reason to exist and to have set the world in motion, much as a watchmaker constructs a watch, but just like the watchmaker, this God leaves the subsequent operation of his creation to its own devices. He does not make special revelations of himself to humankind, nor does he providentially intervene in human affairs. He is a God true devotion to which does not require priests and ecclesiastics. Indeed, they are positively inimical to virtuous piety. According to Peter Gay, the Deist's "historical significance was considerable: they redrew the religious map of Europe."³ On the Continent, they influenced men such as Voltaire who could declare, in the spirit of the stripped-down religion of Deism: "Almost everything that goes beyond the worship of a Supreme Being, and the submission of one's heart to his eternal commands is superstition."⁴ In the United States, the Deists could reasonably claim among their number such luminaries as Benjamin Franklin and Thomas Jefferson.

What motivated the Deists, in addition to the general phenomenon of secularization already mentioned above? Their age was the Age of Reason, the period of Enlightenment, which emphasized the importance of relying on reason alone in determining what one ought and ought not to believe. Descartes had already emphasized the need for certainty. If one decides to hold only those religious beliefs that can be fully supported in the cold light of mere reason, as opposed to beliefs handed down by sacred scriptures and allegedly authoritative traditions, one might well come up with something like Deism and its stripped-down, non-interventionist, watchmaker God. What is more, because Enlightenment thinkers believed that reason, in the scientific form that they championed, was universal, reason naturally tended to undermine any set of beliefs that was parochial or limited to a particular people and tradition. At least within the larger tradition of European Christianity, the Enlightenment thinkers looked over their shoulders at the wars of religion that had ravaged Western Europe, and they believed that reason, as a universal instrument, could cut away all of the parochial concerns that separated the different Christian confessions.

When we look for an example of a potent radical theology of the nineteenth century, we need look no further than the thought of the greatest Western philosopher of that century, Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel (1770–1831). For Hegel too, like his Enlightenment predecessors, reason is key. But in his estimation, reason is not simply the tool that we ought to employ in deciding upon our beliefs, it is the very nature of reality itself: what is real is rational; it is ultimately idea or thought. What about physical nature, then? Nature is simply the externalization of thought. Both human consciousness and the external world that is the object of that consciousness are embraced in the Absolute, Hegel's philosophical term for God. The Absolute encompasses both subject and object thought and that which is thought about.

If the Absolute is God, and if all is thought, even the world of nature, then one might be tempted to say that nature consists of ideas in the mind of God. But Hegel's Absolute is not a Supreme Being who, simply on his own, thinks the world. Rather, the Absolute is a process, and it requires human beings for its reality. For it is through our thinking of the world that the Absolute thinks itself and comes to self-consciousness. In his major published works, Hegel sets out a vast and complex system of philosophy, and it is in this system that the Absolute has come to its most perfect self-knowledge. The Absolute does not exist in splendid fullness from the beginning of time. Rather, it is the result of the whole logical process traced out in the Hegelian system, a process that operates by thought recognizing contradictory notions and then overcoming them in a higher synthesis.

Now it is important to keep in mind that thinkers from Descartes to Hegel have had specific philosophical problems that they were pursuing and that led them to speak of God in the ways that they did. But this does not prevent their positions from counting as radical theologies. We are reminded by the great historian of philosophy Frederick Copleston, for example, that "though it is true that Hegel became a philosopher rather than a theologian, his philosophy was always theology in the sense that its subject-matter was, as he himself insisted, the same as the subject-matter of

theology, namely, the Absolute or, in religious language, God and the relation of the finite to the infinite.”⁵⁵

Another nineteenth-century example, one especially pertinent to Americans, is the Transcendentalist movement, with Ralph Waldo Emerson at its head. Emerson and company were influenced by Hegel, however indirectly. Emerson, in particular, held that God is an encompassing reality that any individual can intuit within himself or herself. Though he began as a Christian, Emerson came to believe that the Christian tradition was wholly misguided in spending so much time on the figure of Jesus Christ. After all, each of us can have God dwell within us in the very same way that Jesus did.

What of twentieth-century antecedents of contemporary radical theologies? The choice of examples here is an easy one: America in the 1960s witnessed an extraordinary interest in a movement that was explicitly dubbed “radical theology.” At the heart of this radical theology stood the proclamation of the “death of God.” Already in the nineteenth century, the German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche had announced that God is dead, and “*we have killed him—you and I.*”⁵⁶ Thus, Nietzsche in many ways stands as the patron saint of the death of God theology of the 1960s. For Nietzsche, God never existed in the first place, but we are finally approaching the cultural epoch in which it will be possible to affirm the nonexistence of God. He acknowledges that to “kill” God in this way has frightening consequences. What will be the ground of our certainty about the meaning of life? From whence shall we derive our moral codes? How can history have a definite goal if there is no divine providence? What is truth if there is no perfectly objective God’s eye view of the world? But ultimately Nietzsche wants to affirm the death of God. At least for those in whom the life force courses most strongly, it is possible to celebrate the death of God, for “If there were gods, how could I endure not to be a god?”⁵⁷ In other words, Nietzsche holds that belief in God quashes human autonomy. If I believe that I am beholden to a God, a God before whom I am a weak and miserable sinner, then I am a pathetic figure. The strong human being will not only get along without God and accept his fate in a god-

less world, but he will so affirm that fate as to accept Nietzsche's doctrine of the Eternal Recurrence, the idea that I should say "yes" to the notion of having to live every moment of my life over and over again in a never ending cycle.

The radical theologians of the 1960s were not all equally influenced by Nietzsche, but his name can hardly be left out of any account of a theological movement known as the "death of God theology." One death of God theologian who does draw heavily upon Nietzsche, and perhaps the most fascinating of all of the so-called radical theologians of the 1960s, is Thomas J. J. Altizer. Part of Altizer's significance lies in the fact that a number of themes in his work of the 1960s are relevant to a form of radical theology that is important today (the postmodern, "deconstructive" theology that we shall investigate in chapter three).

In order to understand Altizer's death of God theology, we must begin with the traditional Christian doctrine of the Incarnation. The word "incarnation" means literally "enfleshment" (note its relation to words such as "carnivore" and "carnage"). Christian teaching holds that God himself took on flesh in the person of Jesus of Nazareth. Jesus Christ is God in the flesh. In the book of Philippians in the New Testament, which was written in ancient Greek, the apostle Paul approaches the Incarnation with the notion of *kenosis*, or "self-emptying." Philippians 2:5–8 advises

Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus,
 who, though he was in the form
 of God
 did not regard equality with
 God
 as something to be exploited,
 but emptied himself,
 taking the form of a slave,
 being born in human likeness.
 And being found in human form,
 he humbled himself
 and became obedient to the
 point of death—
 even death on a cross.⁸

Christ, as the Word of God, has emptied himself in taking on flesh. But Altizer's radical theology seeks "a *totally* incarnate Word."⁹ Indeed, Altizer maintains that by becoming flesh in the Christ, God the Father has died! This is no mere metaphorical flourish for Altizer. Rather, "God becomes incarnate in the Word, and he becomes fully incarnate, thereby ceasing to exist or to be present in his primordial form."¹⁰ The death of God is "an event that has actually happened both in a cosmic and in a historical sense."¹¹

Altizer learns not only from Nietzsche, but also from Hegel, for whom dialectic is essential to thought. A dialectic is an unfolding process: a thesis is negated, but that negation is in turn negated so that we end up with a truth more encompassing than either the original thesis or the original negation. Traditional Christian religion negates our ability to say yes to a truly this-worldly existence—here we are back to Nietzsche—but the death of God in the Incarnation negates this negation. We are freed to affirm worldly existence, freed even to affirm the Eternal Recurrence.

By proclaiming the death of God, Altizer imagines a religionless, genuinely secular theology. Indeed, "So far from being the servant of the dogmatic and institutional authority of the Church, a truly dialectical theology will dissolve all such authority, and give itself to an attack upon every repressive law and power that claims a holy or a transcendent source."¹²

Some of the other radical theologians, while still advocating a secular theology, stayed a bit closer to traditional Christianity in that they focused upon the historical Jesus. In his book *The New Essence of Christianity*, William Hamilton confessed: "Most of us are learning to accept these things: the disappearance of God from the world, the coming of age of the world, as it has been called, the disappearance of religion as a lively factor in modern life, the fact that there are men who can live both without God and without despair."¹³ But Hamilton offers us "a theology of the secular based on the lordship of Jesus."¹⁴ What would it mean to follow Jesus into the world and to embrace a truly worldly, yet Christian existence? This is the question that Hamilton poses in his book. While *The New Essence of Christianity* hints that God may be simply unavailable and irrelevant to us in the present historical moment

but may still be alive, Hamilton grows more radical in his later work: "God is dead. We are not talking about the absence of the experience of God, but about the experience of the absence of God."¹⁵ But while God is dead, the Christian is still a Christian, committed as he is to following the figure of Jesus and his teaching. Perhaps, says Hamilton,

Jesus Christ is best understood as neither the object nor the ground of faith . . . but simply as a place to be, a standpoint. That place is, of course, alongside the neighbor, being for him. This may be the meaning of Jesus' true humanity and it may even be the meaning of his divinity, and thus of divinity itself.¹⁶

Hamilton never goes so far as Altizer, who argues that the death of God means "abandoning all those moral laws which the Christian Church has sanctioned."¹⁷

We find a sensibility similar to Hamilton's in Paul van Buren's *The Secular Meaning of the Gospel*. Van Buren, too, would have us look away from God and toward the figure of the historical Jesus. He bases his argument, however, upon the sort of careful analysis of language and its use that characterizes that twentieth-century school of philosophy known as "analytic philosophy." The meaning of a word is determined, say some of the analytic philosophers, by its actual use. "Today," asserts van Buren, "we cannot even understand the Nietzschean cry that 'God is dead!' for if it were so, how could we know? No, the problem now is that the *word* 'God' is dead."¹⁸ We must turn away from God and focus upon the man Jesus and his extraordinary freedom, for by following him, we shall ourselves become free.

Perhaps the most poignant death of God theology from the 1960s is that of the Jewish thinker Richard Rubenstein. For Rubenstein, the death of God has less to do with a general cultural phenomenon articulated by Nietzsche than with a single event that occurred in the midst of the twentieth century, namely, Hitler's murder of six million Jews. "Although Jewish history is replete with disaster, none has been so radical in its total import as the Holocaust," says Rubenstein. "Our images of God, man, and

the moral order have been permanently impaired.”¹⁹ The whole notion of history is radically undermined, insofar as Judaism has always understood history in terms of a God of history who guides human events. Rubenstein holds that, as a result of the Holocaust, Judaism must now abandon the God of history. It would be obscene to imagine a loving God of history willing the Holocaust or allowing it to occur. We should turn instead to the pagan devotion to nature, to that Mother Earth from which we all arose and to which we must return in death. This approach will allow us, says Rubenstein, to grasp our actual and proper place in the larger scheme of things.

Is there anything left of Judaism in Rubenstein’s death of God theology? There is indeed, for Rubenstein wants to hold onto the symbols, myths, and rituals of Jewish life. The synagogue and its rites remain vitally important, for human beings need rites of passage. Their psyches cannot do without powerful rituals allowing them to confront life’s most potent challenges and to celebrate its happiest accomplishments.

But surely the 1960s was not the last decade in which radical theologies flourished. Indeed, as we shall see in the pages that follow, a host of radical theologies continues to be articulated right on up to our own time. Part of the point of collecting a number of contemporary radical theologies under one set of covers is to bring home the fact that radical theology is a potent stream of thought that in many ways continues uninterrupted into the twenty-first century. It is worth noting that this continuing vigor of radical theology may seem counterintuitive to some readers, especially those schooled in the so-called postmodernist sensibilities that inform much thinking today. In the modern period, that held sway in Western industrial cultures from the seventeenth century into at least parts of the nineteenth, reason was set free from tradition, and reason was viewed as universal. This made it likely that reason-based radical theologies, beholden to any particular confession, would arise in many quarters in the West and would thrive. Furthermore, the movement of the economic sphere into the center of the social structure helped power secularization, which meant that traditional religions saw their pre-

modern dominance of society wane, another trigger for the production of radical theologies.

But in postmodernity, despite the continued dominance of the economic sphere, traditional religious beliefs seem to make a comeback. Reason, especially in its scientific form, is no longer viewed as the one infallible instrument for exploring reality. There are a multitude of ways of knowing; why shouldn't these include parochial traditions and religious confessions? Parochialism is no longer something necessarily to be avoided, but perhaps something to be celebrated. For another blow to the Enlightenment notion of reason is the postmodernist claim that reason itself is not really universal after all. There is no one form of reason, scientific or otherwise, that possesses a universal standpoint and that can therefore judge all traditions brought before it. Different historical epochs and different cultural and religious traditions are each different worlds, worlds that can apparently exist unto themselves. Each such world seems to possess its own *internal* criteria of what can count as valid ways of knowing and believing. It should not be surprising, then, that we see a revival of interest in religion in our own postmodern day and age and that some thinkers argue that even the most traditional religious perspectives are now safe from radical critique.

But, as it turns out, postmodernity does not spell the end of radical theology, or even interrupt the stream of radical theology that has its source in the modern period. For one thing, the postmodern revival of interest in religion, along with the sympathy for parochial religious visions, means that a plethora of very different pieties can exist in contemporary society, *including radical, nontraditional ones*. Thus, we encounter a whole host of New Age spiritualities and feminist spiritualities in the contemporary West, and not simply the worldwide phenomenon of resurgent and newly minted fundamentalisms.

Furthermore, there are two weaknesses of the postmodern attitude sketched above that need attention. First, the postmodern dictum may indeed be "let a thousand worldviews bloom," including movements such as Hindu, Muslim, and Christian fundamentalism. But there is something naive about this celebration. First of

all, it is not at all clear that contemporary inhabitants of the “first world” whose mind-set is determined by postmodernism can really embrace a fundamentalist perspective, or even a highly traditional one.²⁰ Fundamentalisms stand in contradiction to other elements of the postmodern mind-set, since fundamentalism by its very nature closes down the avenues that the mind is allowed to explore. Fundamentalist authoritarianism and postmodern freedom of thought and pluralism do not cohere. In addition, the present world situation hardly suggests that what we need is a celebration of religious (or national) parochialism. Such parochialisms are currently drenching the world in blood.

Second, at least where citizens of the first world are concerned, and in some cases for other inhabitants of the globe as well, the most strident postmodern critiques of scientific reason, and even of its universality, are overstated. We shall see in the chapters that follow that one can make a case that we all possess what Sallie McFague quite perceptively calls a “common creation story.” It is the story of our origin as told by science, and it is a story that all of us must pay attention to if we are to avert the kind of ecological disaster that will affect the *entire Earth* and all of its *people*.

Thus, if the emergence of a postmodern mind-set in some quarters called into question particular aspects of the modern worldview connected with the initial appearance of radical theologies, there is nonetheless no good evidence that the soil in which radical theologies grow has been washed away by postmodern tides. The opposite might well be the case. We now need, more than ever, radical spiritual worldviews that can free themselves from destructive religious, ethnic, and national loyalties and that can tap into the common scientific creation story. We shall encounter strong candidates for such worldviews in the chapters that follow.