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Review of Anthony Paul Smith and Daniel Whistler, eds., *After the Postsecular and the Postmodern: New Essays in Continental Philosophy of Religion* (New Castle upon Tyne, UK: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2009). 409 pages.

It is extremely rare for a volume of collected essays to penetrate through the mass of competing titles and gain traction as an authoritative and important work in its own right. For instance, in the field of Continental philosophy of religion, about which the present volume under review is concerned, I could identify five volumes at most over the past thirty years that truly captured the *zeitgeist* and/or shaped future discussions in the field. First, there was *Deconstruction and Theology* (1982), co-authored by Thomas J. J. Altizer, Max Myers, Carl Raschke, Robert Scharlemann, Mark C. Taylor, and Charles Winquist.¹ The importance of this volume is that it represents the first occasion wherein post-structuralist thought, and more specifically, Derridian deconstruction, was put into conversation with philosophical theology. The result was the claim articulated by Raschke in the volume's introduction, which was later picked up and made the mantra of so-called postmodern a/theology by Taylor, that "deconstruction is the death of God put into writing." This variant of postmodern religious thought, which drew explicitly on the lineage of the radical death-of-God theologies of the 1960s, continued and was expanded in later volumes, most notably *Theology at the End of the Century: A Dialog on the Postmodern* with Thomas J. J. Altizer, Mark C. Taylor, Charles E. Winquist and Robert P. Scharlemann (1990), edited by Robert P. Scharlemann,² and *Secular Theology: American Radical Theological Thought* (2001), edited by Clayton Crockett.³

The second listing of seminal volumes I would include was the nearly simultaneous publications of *Radical Orthodoxy: A New Theology* (1998) edited by John Milbank, Catherine Pickstock, and Graham Ward,⁴ and *Post-Secular*

¹ Thomas J. J. Altizer, Max Myers, Carl Raschke, Robert Scharlemann, Mark C. Taylor, and Charles Winquist, *Deconstruction and Theology* (New York: Crossroad, 1982).

² Thomas J. J. Altizer, Mark C. Taylor, Charles Winquist, and Robert Scharlemann, *Theology at the End of the Century: A Dialog on the Postmodern*, ed. Robert Scharlemann (Charlottesville: The University of Virginia Press, 1990).

³ Clayton Crockett, ed., *Secular Theology: American Radical Theological Thought* (New York: Routledge, 2001).

⁴ John Milbank, Catherine Pickstock, and Graham Ward, eds., *Radical Orthodoxy: A New Theology* (London: Routledge, 1998).

Philosophy: Between Philosophy and Theology (1998), edited by Phillip Blond.⁵ These books helped to announce and define the school of thought known as Radical Orthodoxy. Building on Milbank's prior work that brought to question the reign of secular reason in modern and postmodern thought, together they went a long way towards redefining postmodernism as a post-secularism, and in offering up a strong Christian-based alternative to the deconstructive a/theology that for over a decade had defined the debate between philosophy and theology and had long determined the postmodern encounter with religious thought.

The third is also a listing of two separate volumes that were published nearly simultaneously, which together indicate a genuine shift in the sorts of questions being pursued by Continental philosophers of religion: *Theology and the Political: The New Debate* (2005), edited by Creston Davis, John Milbank, and Slavoj Žizek,⁶ and *Political Theologies: Public Religions in a Post-Secular World* (2006), edited by Hent de Vries and Lawrence E. Sullivan.⁷ Both of these volumes are massive tomes whose point of departure was the September 11, 2001 attacks in New York City and Washington, D.C., and the American-led "War on Terror" that was the response. And both suggested that a new epoch of political theology was upon us, one which required a thorough-going rethinking of the proper relationship between religion and politics.

Anthony Paul Smith and Daniel Whistler's edited volume, *After the Postsecular and the Postmodern*, deserves to be added to this list of titles. It is a confident and learned work that successfully announces, names, and analyzes the present moment in Continental philosophy of religion. By the volume's title, it should be clear that the editors intend the collection of essays to be read as a taking leave from what came before, whether it was postmodern, deconstructive a/theology, or its rejoinder in the form of the school of radical orthodoxy. And in terms of the postmodern and the postsecular, it is telling, with one or two exceptions, that the contributing scholars assembled are unaffiliated with either the one or the other. This is as refreshing as it is high-minded. The result is a fresh and open intellectual exchange that stands entirely on its own merits, that never degenerates into polemics, and that, along the way, introduces the reader to many new, younger scholars in the field who are defined first and foremost by their appreciation of, and willingness to engage in, speculation.

As with any such volume, there are of course some uneven contributions. In this case, it is not so much because the contributions themselves are without merit, as it is a question of fit and coherence. To my mind, the volume works best when it is most speculative, and when its argumentation is most assertive. To single out a few of the chapters that fit this bill the best, I should commend Rocco Gangle, Daniel Colucciello Barber, and Michael O'Neill Burns. Each of

⁵ Phillip Blond, ed., *Post-Secular Philosophy: Between Philosophy and Theology* (London: Routledge, 1998).

⁶ Creston Davis, John Milbank, Slavoj Žizek, eds., *Theology and the Political: The New Debate* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005).

⁷ Hent de Vries and Lawrence E. Sullivan, eds., *Political Theologies: Public Religions in a Post-Secular World* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2006).

these contributors writes with originality, intelligence, and authority, introducing and analyzing new concepts (e.g., Gangle on the “chimera,” Barber on “immanence,” and Burns on “speculative realism”) that effectively articulate the stakes of an emerging philosophical sensibility. I might also add the Editors’ Introduction to this list. Drawing on Gilles Deleuze, the editors refer to God “*as a means of liberation and transformation*” (p. 5, italics in the original), and use this notion of God to distinguish their approach to Continental philosophy of religion from their postmodern and postsecular predecessors. As they argue, “Both the postmodern and the postsecular . . . are two sides of the same coin: a one-way injection of theology into philosophy until what is proper to philosophy becomes indiscernible.” The alternative they propose is “the liberation of philosophy of religion,” by which they mean “to free a practice of philosophy of religion from the constraints imposed on it by theological thinking” (p. 3). But to be clear, while critical of what they alternatively call the “theologization of philosophy” or “theological imperialism,” they are not anti-theological; instead, by their openness to experiments in thought as a result of their bent for speculation, it would be more accurate, or at least more technical, to call their approach the practice of “non-theology.” Put otherwise, they opt for the practice of radical heresy over orthodoxy, but this in itself does not make their philosophy of religion any less theological.

In addition to these chapters, there are others that stand out as surprising readings of overlooked historical figures. For instance, James Brown’s reading of the early eighteenth-century Irish deist John Toland in chapter seven is especially well executed. Also, there are many illuminating and important readings of contemporary figures. For instance, Adam Kotsko’s reading of Giorgio Agamben in chapter Ten, Alex Andrews’ analysis of Martin Hägglund in chapter thirteen, Anthony Paul Smith’s engagement with François Laruelle in chapter fourteen, and Clayton Crockett’s employment of Catherine Malabou in chapter fifteen. Each of these chapters could function as stand-alone introductions to these important contemporary figures, not to mention the various ways they are creatively employed to offer up new directions for rethinking Continental philosophy of religion. And finally, there are entirely original essays in critical theory, such as Alberto Toscano in chapter eleven, which are located at the nexus of philosophy, theology, and politics. With contributions such as Toscano’s, it is clear that this is just a quick peek behind the curtain of what promises to be rich and exciting new forms of analysis.

My criticisms are few. While I earlier indicated that there were uneven contributions, my more substantive concern regards not so much chapters that were included that should not have been as it does what is largely left out of the conversation. Specifically, the editors did an admirable job establishing the relation between the so-called post-secular with contemporary Islamic thought and politics. However, this field of inquiry, or this line of analysis, is never picked up on or elaborated throughout the remainder of the text. Likewise, there is no real engagement with Eastern religious and / or philosophical thought or to the issues of gender, race, and sexuality. I do not read this neglect as a fatal flaw.

After all, nowhere do the editors claim that these new essays in Continental philosophy of religion are exhaustive. However, I do think it brings us back to where I began this review. There is no doubt that over the past thirty years there have been a series of major and discernible shifts within the field of (what has only recently come to be known as) Continental philosophy religion. Heretofore, those shifts (or advances, if you will) have been defined by a small cadre of voices. The great benefit of this present volume under consideration is that it blows open that conversation and effectively announces something new and different from both the postmodern and the post-secular. Let us be careful that this new movement or sensibility, which at present is characterized by a boldness and creativity born of its speculative approach, does not simply repeat the patterns of the past.

What I like so much about this book is that it reads not so much like it is written by a group of gate-stormers as it is by a group ready and willing to remove the gates altogether. And by that, theirs is a philosophy of religion no longer held hostage.

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