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The Revenge of God: The Resurgence of Islam, Christianity and Judaism in the Modern World
Gilles Kepel
Polity Press, 1994

Shadow of Spirit: Postmodernism and Religion
Phillipa Berry and Andrew Wernick (Eds)
Routledge, 1992

Radicals and the Future of the Church
Don Cupitt
SCM Press, 1989

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The 'post modernization' of contemporary Western societies provides a problematical environment for the survival of the mainstream Christian tradition. Bryan Turner, in his *Religion and Social Theory* remarks that Christianity as a Grand Narrative is subject "on the level of intellectual exchange to a direct analytical challenge to biblical authority through the postmodern technique of deconstruction and the critique of textuality" (xx). In the wider socio-cultural climate "consumerist hedonism and postmodern relativism challenge Christianity at both the intellectual and experiential levels by providing alternative sources of value, lifestyle and perspective" (ibid.). In conclusion, Turner writes that the public realm can "function in late capitalism without an over-arching system of common legitimation grounded in religion despite the chaos of personal lifestyles which is enhanced by the consumer market" (241).

However, as the three books featured in this review essay indicate in their own ways, the trends running within contemporary culture are ambiguous and contradictory for the future possibilities of religious development and theological thought. While orthodox religious beliefs have continued to decline—particularly in Europe—there has been no corresponding growth in 'rational-coherent', non-religious belief systems. Indeed the main secular alternatives are themselves in crises—precipitating talk of any number of 'post' concepts or scenarios—post-Marxist, post-ideological, even 'post-rationalist'. Chomsky has spoken of the possibility of a regression to 'pre-enlightenment times' with an eclectic mixture of superstition and irrationalist views, New Age and Fundamentalist religiosity co-
The very scope of Kepel's work might lead to suspicions that he is trying to fit complex phenomena into too neat a symmetry. However, Kepel's four specific areas of study (Catholic movements in Europe, Islam in the Mediterranean basin and communities in Europe, the Gush Emunin in Israel and the forces for re-Christianization in the US) chronicles in fine detail the 'local' balance of sociopolitical events which acted as catalysts for growth in these movements. Equally, these differing contexts act to shape and limit their influence. Liberal democracy and secularism—concepts vitally related to the modernism held in such contempt—act as a 'democratic restraint' on the aspirations of Western groups, who prefer to influence State policy in a 'Christian direction', rather than the revolutionary strategy 'from below', frequently adopted by Islamic groups.

In conclusion, Kepel's superb book highlights that however aberrant and fanatical these movements can appear "...like the workers' movement of yesterday, today's religious movements have a singular capacity to...fanatical these movements can appear..." (Ibid.). The wealth of documentation on each field of study helps Kepel to succeed convincingly in his case for us to see the new Fundamentalism as a global phenomenon. Given the fact of a global culture and the hegemony of Western values within it, Kepel shows us that these movements share the same basic impulse in the face of the 'new Fundamentalists': they reject all the main concepts of the Enlightenment and secular modernism and the intent to 'reconquer' their respective societies for religious truth. Kepel writes that we must take seriously what these groups are saying and "...the alternative societies they are trying to build in response to the confusion they feel in a world from which their landmarks have disappeared...Taking them seriously does not make us into either their advocates or their fellow-travelers" (11).

In the Revenge of God, a remarkable study of the global resurgence of Fundamentalist Islam, Christianity and Judaism, Gilles Kepel sets out his purpose as to "lay down some markers as a guide for thinking round the phenomenon as a whole" (7). It is this approach that gives the book an especial relevance to those interested in the cultural history of the past 20 years and the 'crises of Modernism'. Kepel's working hypothesis is that the near simultaneous appearance of the new Fundamentalist movements within all three religious traditions is not due to chance but a global phenomenon, which from the 1970s in each of their own cultural/political contexts drew sustenance from a "world wide discrediting of Modernism that was the hallmark of the decade" (3).

Kepel speaks of the post-World War Two optimism ("...nothing seemed unattainable") in which "the improved standard of living resulting from the considerable advances in technology fostered an uncrical belief in progress, so much so that 'progressiveness' itself became a criterion of value" (9). The developing socioeconomic crises from the mid-1970's shook the confidence in what Kepel calls the 'Earthly-Utopias'—the State Socialism of Eastern Europe and consumer capitalism of the West. Traditional categories of secular thought and solutions could no longer deal with the 'deep malaise' exposed in society. For the new recruits to the Fundamentalist movements the Enlightenment tradition of separating religion from questions of political and social order was the main reason for cultural delay—societies had to be rebuilt on a religious foundation. Kepel notes the common thread which motivates these movements and their followers as they wish to move on from a 'modernism that failed'; in every case:

they complain about the fragmentation of society, its 'anomie', the absence of an overarching ideal worthy of their allegiance. They do not fight against a secular ethic which according to them does not exist but consider that in the final analysis the modernism produced by reason without God has not succeeded in creating values (4).

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a new harsh 'regime of truth'.

*Shadow of Spirit: Postmodernism and Religion*, edited by Philippa Berry and Andrew Wernick, explores with contributions from amongst others Mark C. Taylor, Gillian Rose, John Milbank and Don Cupitt, another aspect of postmodernist culture and its relationship with religion. Based on the Cambridge conference held in 1990, "Shadow of Spirit, Contemporary Western Thought and its Religious Subtexts," the book highlights the surprising and as Benny writes "unexpected emergence of religious motifs and themes in both deconstruction and postmodernism" (3). Divided into three parts, the 19 essays featured here are diverse, exploratory and complex, and defy easy summarization. Starting with the section 'Maps and Positions', which offers a series of introductory essays with maps of the 'terrain of this new discourse', the articles are then subdivided into discussions of ethics, morality and politics and on the other hand on questions of gender, subjectivity and textuality.

Berry herself sets the context in which this theoretical exploration of postmodern thought takes place,

It now seems plausible that the deconstructive style of thinking which has initiated a century ago in Nietzsche's thought has subtly and unobtrusively dissolved the clean-cut distinction between secular and religious thinking, which Kant and the Kantian tradition had carefully secured (4).

Berry remarks that the original conference which inspired the book implicitly asked the question ... could an apparently nihilistic tradition of thought—a thought ostensibly shaped by that darkness of angst of meaninglessness and abjection which surrounds the 'end' of the modern era—paradoxically have acquired a non-religious or spiritual dimension?

(4)

Taken as a whole, the book does not provide a conclusive answer (or aim to), but succeeds in provoking further questions on this 'reading' of postmodern thought.

It is, of course, an arbitrary exercise to highlight some of the most provocative themes arising from a book with such a varied collection of essays. However, for those acquainted with the main postmodern writings from a cultural history/sociological perspective, certain themes are particularly rewarding and provocative. Wernick's article, "Theological Themes in Baudrillard's America", is perhaps the most surprising from this perspective. While stressing "my point is not that Baudrillard's lapsed Catholicism is waiting to grab him from the wings", Wernick finds in Baudrillard's writings "in thoroughly magic yet thoroughly dis-enchanted form ... a recovery of the prophetic voice" (69) and the hope that "we can secure a redemptive escape" (65). Several essays refer to the "obscure relationship of Derridean deconstruction to various religious or mystical treatments of negation and absence" (3). In essence, the book is a tentative investigation into the limits and 'gaps' in postmodern thinking, the recurring themes of the 'sublime', 'sacred', 'divine' and 'infinite' and whether they lead themselves to a quasi-religious or mystical discourse. The sub-text here is whether such concepts (the problem of terminology) are sufficient even when 'stretched' to describe the new modes of thinking and existence.

*Shadow of Spirit* is not a programmatic book—authors disagree sharply on what a postmodern theology would look like. What its real significance may be is that, in Berry's words, it reflects an intellectual climate leading to an interrogation of the assumptions upon which secularism depended and the "contributions currently being made by many theologians to the changing orientation of postmodern thought appears to herald the end of theology's intellectual marginalization" (4). Foucault remarked "it is no longer possible to think in our day other than in the void left by Man's disappearance" (251). *Shadow of Spirit* explores the vacuum, the collapse of meaning at the heart of Western thought—and at least tentatively suggests that a new religious or theological discourse may emerge from this 'thinking in the gaps' in ethical, moral and political debate.

Don Cupitt, lecturer in the philosophy of religion at Cambridge and an Anglican priest, describes *Radicals and the Future of the Church* as his "fourth and last of a series of books about faith in the postmodern age" (5) and a book which "on a small scale addresses itself to the question of how far in the postmodern age a church is possible" (1). Cupitt has been described as the best known and the most controversial of the Church of England's academic theologians "and an 'atheist priest'". One of his earlier works, *The Sea of Faith*, also a successful and acclaimed television series in 1984, inspired later in the decade the 'Sea of Faith Network', now of over 500 members—including Methodists, Quakers, Catholics and Atheists. It rejects concepts of a supernatural God and is committed to exploring and promoting religious faith as a human creation. The network is influential amongst many active members of the clergy. One of those, the Rev. Anthony Freeman, became the first Anglican minister removed from a parish for his views for half a century after the publication of his book *God in Us—The Case for Christian Humanism*. Freeman denied the existence of a supernatural God 'out
there', instead seeing the concept of God as a projection of all human values, ideals and aspirations. Cupitt describes his own position as one of a 'state of exile' in the Church. "I am an emissary of the world to the Church rather than of the Church by smuggling into her the faith of the future" (121).

Cupitt's exploration of what a post-modern faith might be borrows eclectically from Derrida, Baudrillard, Nietzsche, Rorty and Buddhism. However, elsewhere he has been critical of the apathetic 'lie back and enjoy it' attitude to late capitalism he finds in Baudrillard as well as Deleuze and Guattari. He is scathing about fundamentalists, whose writings "reek of reaction, hysteria and despair. They have seen the writing on the wall from their God and it has driven them mad" (125). Equally, he sees liberal theology as too compromised with the modernism that is in crisis. Instead Cupitt writes "your God has to be, let's be blunt about it, your own personal and temporary improvisation. Our God is only able to be so close to us and to dwell in our hearts because we made Him" (14). Cupitt talks of a 'cultural holocaust' which has cleared away all the metaphysical supports for a supernatural 'realist' God and traditional religious beliefs. Equally the idea of the unrolling of the march of history for a single divine or socialist purpose has perished in the ruins of optimistic religious and Marxist Messianism. For Cupitt the vacuum which has appeared should be the beginning of a new awareness of a freedom to create our own new values. He writes "this endless undecidability that follows the loss of the old absolutes is not all bad news. It opens a new space and leads us to seek out a post-orthodox sort of Christian faith" (13).

Cupitt proposes a Church "structurally democratic, crudely minimalist and consistently libertarian", committed to social justice and reflecting a Western kind of liberation theology (173). Cupitt stresses that a Church and religious language is still needed as a community and vocabulary in which, like art, it symbolically illuminates life and embodies our communal myths and values through constantly creating and recreation. Cupitt's view of a postmodern faith is not one in which intellectual structures, or dogmatic faith, are built to fend off the 'void' in Western culture. Cupitt instead advocates actually running to it and embracing it for this void is not "an additional blank region beyond life but rather is the experienced character of our life itself... It is the poignant insubstantiality, fleetingness on contingency of everything" (142). For Cupitt, it is the beginning of freedom, an overcoming of alienation. Radicals and the Future of the Church represents another strand in the 'dialogue' between postmodernist thought and religion and represents the clearest and most challenging account of what a 'faith of the future' might look like.

disClosure: Making Boundaries

Cupitt writes:

the astounding event that has come upon us in recent times is the end of all ends. As in our modern physical cosmology so also in our philosophy, everything now scatters into infinite dispersal and endlessness. We are adrift in an illimitable flux. Truth is a lot of arguments that go on forever without end (12-13).

These three books looked at here do not suggest any simple reversal of secularization. But they do indicate that in the 'arguments about truth,' religion, albeit in new forms, will have a less marginalized contribution to make than a more confident, secular age would have predicted even 20 years ago.

Endnotes


3 See for example Eagleton's 1994 review of Bhabha's The Location of Culture.
