RELIGION, THEOLOGY AND THE HUMAN SCIENCES

Religion, Theology and the Human Sciences explores the religious consequences of the so-called 'End of History' and 'triumph of capitalism' as they have impinged upon key institutions of social reproduction in recent times. The book explores the imposition of managerial modernity upon successive sectors of society and shows why many people today feel themselves to be oppressed by systems of management that seem to leave them no option but to conform. This culture has spread through education, health and social services and has been welcomed by the churches. Richard Roberts seeks to challenge and outflank such seamless, oppressive modernity through reconfiguration of the religious and spiritual field.

This volume will be of use to a range of students in the humanities and social sciences (particularly theology and the sociology of religion) and should become standard reading for those concerned with the practical application of contemporary theology in a postmodern world.

RICHARD H. ROBERTS is Professor of Religious Studies at Lancaster University. He has not shrunk from controversy and is known among senior British academic figures for his pursuit of a consistently critical line against the managerialisation and bureaucratisation of both universities and churches. His publications include *Hope and its Hieroglyph: A Critical Decipherment of Ernst Bloch's 'Principle of Hope'* (1990), *A Theology on its Way?: Essays on Karl Barth* (1992), *The Recovery of Rhetoric: Persuasive Discourse and Disciplinarity in the Human Sciences* (co-edited with J. M. M. Good, 1993), *Religion and the Transformations of Capitalism: Comparative Approaches* (editor, 1995), *Nature Religion Today: Paganism in the Modern World* (co-edited with Joanne Pearson and Geoffrey Samuel, 1998) and *Time and Value* (co-edited with Scott Lash and Andrew Quick, 1998).

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For Audrey and Anthony,
with heartfelt thanks and love

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Preface

The essays brought together in this collection originate from the period 1989–99, a decade marked at its outset by the momentous events of 1989–90 when Marxist socialist societies collapsed and the Berlin Wall was breached, accompanied by the proclamation of the much-vaunted 'End of History', which then turned out to be a chaotic and unpredictable 'New World Order' characterised both by much disorder and by the banality of globalisation. Until the summer of 1989 I had been a lecturer in theology at the University of Durham, but I became M. B. Reckitt Research Fellow at Lancaster University in the autumn of that year and embarked upon the project Religion and the Resurgence of Capitalism, a move which rerooted me in the interdisciplinary ambience of religious studies. This new location also allowed me to begin to respond to social and cultural change in what I would regard, in the final analysis, as a form of contextual theology. In 1991, I moved again, this time to the Chair of Divinity at the University of St Andrews.

As it happened, and as is critically outlined in chapter 4 of this book, the beginning of the decade 1989–99 also marked the onset of the greatest revolution in the history of British university education. A whole life-world in which theological, religious, gender and intellectual identities co-inhered in a setting supported by a liberal, critical, individualistic ethos (that had been relatively generously funded during the Keynesian expansion of the Robbins era) was to end, and to be replaced by an industrialised model of mass-production higher education. Having set out to become an individual agent of the critical and reflexive transmission of theological and intellectual traditions, and with the personal goal of helping to create within students a similar relative autonomy, I began to find myself an isolated dissident at odds with a new social reality. This process of 'reform' began under the then Prime Minister, Mrs Margaret Thatcher, and later continued as 'modernisation', or more accurately 'managerialism', under the New Labour government of Mr Tony Blair.

These non-consensual changes encountered the acquiescence and the active (albeit reluctant) cooperation of the overwhelming majority of British academic staff. They accepted the reconstitution of their existence and identity along Neo-Fordist lines without serious questioning or resistance. Readers of this book will soon realise that I regard this as a fundamental *trahison des clercs* for reasons made abundantly clear in what follows.

During four years as Professor of Divinity at the University of St Andrews from 1991 to 1995 I encountered at first hand some of the most acute tensions in contemporary educational, cultural and political life in their distinctively Scottish context and found myself in a senior academic position at odds with the policies of 'reform' then enacted. I returned to Lancaster University in the late summer of 1995, just in time to witness once again the slow, inexorable process of managerial 'normalisation' taking place. The mass higher education regime envisaged in the Dearing Report was imposed upon a university that had until then preserved its own distinctive practice more successfully than most such organisations. From 1995 onwards I concentrated upon trying to probe the roots of global issues in relation to which, I believe, the religious and spiritual 'capital' of humankind still has a critical and creative role to play. Whilst the essays collected in this volume are driven by a growing awareness of systemic crisis on many levels, the contents are so organised as to provide a coherent pattern of concerns.

As a continuing student of the traditions I have taught for twenty-five years, I do not regard the sense of crisis that pervades this book as merely the product of the personal aberration of an individual. In it, I provide a focused account of key religious aspects of processes in the managerialisation of a de-traditionalised society existing under the conditions of advanced modernity. As such, this collection is certainly transitional, but I have done my utmost to develop a narrative in which critique is balanced with a sense of hope. There is, I believe, the possibility of developing a new paradigm for the committed study of religion(s) and spiritualities that recognises and facilitates their emancipatory potential in a post-traditional world. Whether, however, this paradigm can be adequately exemplified, never mind fully realised, within the present systems of human production in either universities or areas of mainstream religion where most operatives have ceded their cultural agency, relative autonomy and ethical responsibility remains an outstanding question. Effective commitment to truth-seeking in higher education requires the recognition that the form of knowledge production and the content of

knowledge cannot be divorced without damaging consequences, and that to enforce pre-determined human outcomes in the 'delivery' of the human and social sciences is to reduce real education to mere training. Given present conditions, I believe that the future survival of fundamental truth-seeking, the production of knowledge and genuinely 'owned' university teaching, together understood as part and parcel of the total way of life, may well only be assured through cultural migration, and the creation of new, subversive and marginal institutional embodiments.

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Second, I should like to register my gratitude to the Christendom Trust, which funded the M. B. Reckitt Research Fellowship that I held in the Department of Religious Studies at Lancaster University from 1989 to 1991. Many discussions with colleagues at Lancaster in the course of the project Religion and the Resurgence of Capitalism made this a very fruitful experience. Particular thanks are due to John Clayton, Sarah Coakley, Adrian Cunningham, Angela Cunningham, Paul Heelas, John Milbank and Paul Morris, who all contributed in different ways to academic conviviality of a high order. In recent years Deborah Sawyer has been a stalwart and supportive Head of Department.

During the period 1989–99 my friends and colleagues Julia Davies and Jonathan Gosling of the Lancaster University Management School granted me *entrée* to the fascinating and sometimes rather surprising world of management training, where I have been able to engage in both teaching and action research on two key programmes, the M.Phil. in Critical Management and the International Masters in Practising Management (IMPM). My warm thanks are due to them both.

Since the conference Nature Religion Today held at Ambleside in 1996, I have enjoyed a growing involvement with environmental activists

and have been drawn into an ever deeper questioning of both ancestral Western Latin theology and social constructionism of late modernity, and then impelled into the area denoted by the term 'human ecology'. In making this transition, my friend the ecologist and activist Alastair McIntosh has provided relentless creative provocation, as have other friends and colleagues in the Centre for Human Ecology, Edinburgh. We have discovered much common ground and found mutual encouragement in the realisation that the creative loci of critical thought are often enough being driven out of the institutional academy into the margins, the true 'borderlands' of our time.

My thanks are also due to Brendan Hill and Kathleen Sullivan, who, with members of the Findhorn Foundation and Deep Ecology UK, planned and facilitated the international conference For the Love of Nature?, which took place in May/June 1999. Participation in this event and then later in the conference Forgiveness, also held at Findhorn in October 1999, proved to be very important events for me. I continue, with Phyllida Anamaire and David Burbidge, work begun with Robert Greenway and John Seed: my heartfelt thanks are due to them all.

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