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Brian D. Ingraffia

Excerpt

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Introduction: postmodernism, ontotheology, and Christianity

It is necessary to say whom we consider our antithesis: it is the theologians and whatever has theologians' blood in its veins – and that includes our whole philosophy.

Nietzsche, *The Antichrist*

Christianity is bereft of the power it had during the Middle Ages to *shape history*. Its historical significance no longer lies in what it is able to fashion for itself, but in the fact that since the beginning of and throughout the modern age it has continued to be that *against which* the new freedom – whether expressly or not – must be distinguished.

Heidegger, *Nietzsche*

But it would not mean a single step outside of metaphysics if nothing more than a new motif of “return to finitude,” of “God’s death,” etc., were the result of this move. It is that conceptuality and that problematics that must be deconstructed. They belong to the onto-theology they fight against.

Derrida, *Of Grammatology*

THE MODERNIST GROUND OF POSTMODERN THEORY

In this study I seek to analyze critically the antipathy exhibited in postmodern theory toward theology. Whereas modernism tried to elevate man into God’s place, postmodern theory seeks to destroy or deconstruct the very place and attributes of God. Heidegger uncovers the originality of postmodern thought in his description of Nietzsche’s transvaluation: “With the downfall of the highest values also comes the elimination of the ‘above’ and the ‘high’ and the ‘beyond,’ the former *place* in which values could be posited” (*N* iv 49). Nietzsche calls this place the “shadow” of God which lingers after his death, and I argue in this study that postmodern

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[More information](#)

theory has been intent on completing Nietzsche's project of vanquishing God's shadow. Not only is God seen as a fiction or a projection of man, as in modernism, but the Christian God is rejected as a *bad* fiction. This is Nietzsche's claim to originality against the Enlightenment attacks on Christianity: "That we find no God – either in history or in nature or behind nature – is not what differentiates *us*, but that we experience what has been revered as God, not as 'godlike' but as miserable, as absurd, as harmful, not merely as an error but as a *crime against life*. We deny God as God" (AC 47).

This denial of God is reflected in postmodern theories of the nature of language and truth. Lyotard has defined postmodernism as the rejection of the metanarratives of modernism, "as incredulity toward metanarratives." Modernism is therefore defined as "science that legitimates itself with reference to a metadiscourse . . . making an explicit appeal to some grand narrative."¹ But what all these grand narratives of modernism have in common is the attempt to replace the grand narrative which had legitimated knowledge in the Western world for over a millennium: biblical narrative.

Auerbach describes how in the Christian era the Bible was the foundation for Western society's interpretation of human existence and history. He argues that the Bible makes claims within itself to be the grand metanarrative of both history and individual lives. The biblical text "seeks to overcome our reality: we are to fit our own reality into its world, feel ourselves to be elements in its structure of universal history."² And during the Christian era the Bible was read in just this way. "But when, through too great a change in environment and through the awakening of a critical consciousness, this becomes impossible, the biblical claim to absolute authority is jeopardized; the method of interpretation scorned and rejected, the biblical stories become ancient legends."³ Hans Frei, in *The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative*, describes in detail this loss of belief in the literal truth and authority of the biblical texts. He describes how the "breakdown of literal-realistic interpretation of biblical stories" caused a "reversal in the direction of interpretation that accompanied the distancing between the narratively depicted world and the 'real' world."⁴ Instead of the world and individual experience being interpreted on the basis of Scripture, the biblical texts are judged and criticized on the basis of the interpreter's own understanding of the world and human experience.

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Excerpt

[More information](#)*Introduction*

3

Recall how many major works from the modern, Western philosophical canon perform this reversal, this critique of biblical authority on the basis of modern rationalism and empiricism. Spinoza's *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus* and Hobbes' *Leviathan* both contain long sections which attack the orthodox reading of the Bible. The epistemology of both rationalism and empiricism, as in the writings of Locke and Hume, worked to undermine belief in divine revelation and miracles; consequently, both the authority and content of the biblical gospels were attacked. The German higher criticism, building upon the work of English deism, worked diligently to undermine the belief in the historical validity of the New Testament. Nietzsche may argue that "German philosophy is at bottom . . . an *insidious* theology" and castigate "our whole philosophy" for having "theologians' blood in its veins" (*AC* 8), but it would be more true to assert that this whole philosophy, including Nietzsche's own, has had theological *antibodies* in its veins, if we define "theology" as Christian theology. Nietzsche himself asserts that "Modern philosophy, being an epistemological skepticism, is, covertly or overtly, *anti-Christian*" (*BGE* 54). Heidegger echoes this analysis, writing that "since the beginning of and throughout the modern age it [Christianity] has continued to be that *against which* the new freedom – whether expressly or not – must be distinguished" (*N* iv 99). To adapt for a moment the vocabulary of Harold Bloom, Christianity has been the greatest and most enduring source of modern philosophy's anxiety of influence.

Two brief examples will help illustrate my point. Heidegger claims that modern philosophy has defined its freedom, "whether expressly or not," against Christianity. Both Descartes and Feuerbach seek to free modern philosophy from subordination to biblical authority, but Feuerbach seeks this freedom overtly while Descartes seeks this freedom covertly.

René Descartes, often considered the founder of modern philosophy, introduces his *Meditations on First Philosophy* with the following claim: "I have always thought that two questions – that of God and that of the soul – are chief among those that ought to be demonstrated by the aid of philosophy rather than theology."⁵ However these questions are answered, whether God's existence is asserted or denied, whether the soul is considered a real unity or a dispersed fiction, these words can stand as an epigraph to both modern philosophy and postmodern theory. In both periods,

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

4

Postmodern theory and biblical theology

philosophy stands as judge over the basic questions concerning God and man.

Descartes grounds all knowledge in the certainty of man's subjective existence. The existence of God is proven afterwards and is dependent on this first proof of the existence of the *Cogito*. Heidegger highlights Descartes' break with the "Christian medieval age."

In the context of man's liberation from the bonds of revelation and church doctrine, the question of first philosophy is "In what way does man, on his own terms and for himself, first arrive at a primary, unshakable truth, and what is that primary truth?" Descartes was the first to ask the question in a clear and decisive way. (*N* iv 89)

Only after demonstrating that man's ego is *res cogitans* does Descartes, in his fourth meditation, attempt to prove the existence of God. But this specious proof of God's existence serves only to ground the validity of the *Cogito's* reason, the very thing that proves God's existence. It is not the biblical God whose existence is proven, but rather the god of metaphysics, the god of ontotheology.

It is my contention that the god of ontotheology, no matter how descriptions of this god may differ, is always the product of human reason, is always the result of humanity's attempt to formulate an understanding of god rather than the result of God's revelation towards us. In Descartes' ontotheology, God is merely the metaphysical ground for the operation of the independent, autonomous ego.

Feuerbach openly asserts what Descartes only implies, that the "reason is not dependent on God, but God on the reason."⁶ As is well known, Feuerbach argues that man has falsely projected his own value upon God. "To enrich God, man must become poor; that God may be all, man must be nothing."⁷ Feuerbach calls for the reversal of this projection, for man to take back the values he has given to God. All statements about God are to be translated into statements about man. In this way, the divinity of man is asserted as man is called upon to take God's place.

Feuerbach's opposition to Christian theology, his view of God as an imaginary projection of man, was adopted by the three great masters of the hermeneutics of suspicion at the end of the nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth century.⁸ Nietzsche, Marx, and Freud each adapted and made specific Feuerbach's analysis of the essence of religion. But what must be emphasized is that the

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Excerpt

[More information](#)*Introduction*

5

God which Feuerbach demystified was the god of ontotheology. His language in *The Essence of Christianity* makes this clear:

God as God, that is, as a being not finite, not human, not materially conditioned, not phenomenal, is only an object of thought. He is the incorporeal, formless, incomprehensible – the abstract, negative being: he is known, *i.e.*, becomes an object, only by abstraction and negation (*via negationis*) . . . God, said the schoolmen, the Christian fathers, and long before them the heathen philosophers, – God is immaterial essence, intelligence, spirit, pure understanding.⁹

Although Feuerbach includes the Christian God in this description, it is only the Christian God that has been understood through Greek conceptuality. The God of the Bible may have been confused or even falsely equated with the God of Greek philosophy by many of the Church Fathers and medieval theologians, but only after the advent of modern philosophy does the god of ontotheology replace the God of the Bible.

Although Feuerbach makes no room for this distinction, it is not the God of biblical revelation who is unmasked as a projection of man, but only the god of ontotheology, the god which replaced the biblical God in Descartes.

Thus the understanding is the *ens realissimum*, the most real being of the old ontotheology. “Fundamentally,” says onto-theology, “we cannot conceive God otherwise than by attributing to him without limit all the real qualities which we find in ourselves.”¹⁰

Thus says ontotheology, but the Bible asserts that God must be revealed to us. Jürgen Moltmann agrees that “Feuerbach knows only the God of dogmatic philosophy and natural religion, for it is only this God in his abstract identity that can be reduced to man.”¹¹ Karl Barth makes the same argument in his effort to reverse the direction of ontotheology.

That there is no God may perhaps apply to the deity of philosophy, or to a deity that might be regarded as the common denominator of the gods of the different religions, or to a deity that demonstrates its existence by having a place in a world-view of human construction, or even perhaps to the “God” who is in one way or another poorly proclaimed and understood in some Christian tradition or theology. The atheistic negation applies to a “God” who, if he exists, must do so in the same way as the data of other human experience or the contents of other human reflection exist for people. The true and living God, however, is not a “datum” of ours.¹²

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Brian D. Ingraffia

Excerpt

[More information](#)

6

Postmodern theory and biblical theology

All of these gods listed by Barth which are overcome by the atheistic negation belong to ontotheology, since all these gods are projections of human thought and desire, but the modern iconoclasts of ontotheology uncritically extend their destruction of the gods of ontotheology to the biblical God. However, it must be remembered that ontotheology either opposes the God of the Bible as primitive or sublimates the biblical God into an ontotheological god.

Postmodern theory not only continues the modern opposition to Christian theology, but also goes on to criticize the secularization of Christian theology in modern ontotheology. However, postmodern theory relies on the ontotheology it deconstructs for its rejection of biblical Christianity. The rejection of Christianity in both modernism and postmodernism has been for the most part based upon a profound misunderstanding of biblical revelation. Christian faith has all too easily been conflated with ontotheology in modernism and then criticized for being ontotheology in postmodernism.

Theology continues to be that against which postmodernism defines its freedom: the freedom to create one's own values set against submission to an absolute truth, the autonomy of human beings set against obedience to a transcendent God, and the free play of interpretation set against belief in any final, authoritative meaning. Barthes, one of the founders of the post-structuralist movement, articulates the anti-theological thrust of postmodern thought:

writing ceaselessly posits meaning ceaselessly to evaporate it, carrying out a systematic exemption of meaning. In precisely this way literature (it would be better from now on to say *writing*), by refusing to assign a "secret," an ultimate meaning, to the text (and to the world as text), liberates what might be called an anti-theological activity . . . since to refuse to fix meaning is, in the end, to refuse God.¹³

The death of God, the refusal of God, means that the interpretation of our existence and our world, and even our interpretation of interpretation itself, must be radically changed. If God is that which fixes human meaning, as ontotheology claims, then the absence of a God means that human meaning is unfounded and plays upon an abyss.

Foucault follows Nietzsche and Barthes in seeking an understanding of writing which is released from the problematics of theology. Although Foucault, like Derrida, seeks to go beyond the motifs of man's finitude and God's death, both authors still regard the need to separate postmodern thought from theology as an imperative. As Foucault writes:

Cambridge University Press

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Excerpt

[More information](#)*Introduction*

7

In granting a primordial status to writing, do we not, in effect, simply reinscribe in transcendental terms the theological affirmation of its sacred origin or a critical belief in its creative nature? To say that writing, in terms of the particular history it made possible, is subjected to forgetfulness and repression, is this not to reintroduce in transcendental terms the religious principle of hidden meanings (which require interpretation) and the critical assumption of implicit significations, silent purposes, and obscure contents (which give rise to commentary)?¹⁴

Even though Foucault is seeking to criticize Derrida's deconstructive program for being subconsciously theological, the unspoken and uncritically foundational assumption in both Foucault and Derrida is that the theological is necessarily to be avoided. The theological is that which must not be approximated in any sense.¹⁵ God's shadow must be vanquished.

But what sort of theology are these writers trying to avoid? The uncritical use of the general term "theology" would seem to imply that all theology is meant. Why is all theology bad? Why have postmodern theorists defined theology as their enemy?

NIETZSCHE/HEIDEGGER/DERRIDA ON ONTOTHEOLOGY

All three of the figures focused upon in this study are united in their attack upon metaphysics as ontotheological, though each accounts for the birth and essence of the ontotheological character of Western metaphysics in a distinctive way.

Nietzsche locates the origin of metaphysics in the distinction between two worlds, a true and an apparent world. Following Feuerbach, Nietzsche believes that man has falsely projected his values upon God and upon a true, divine world. According to Nietzsche, this true world is invented by man because he is weak and powerless in this one; therefore, he invents a realm in which the fearful powers of this world are negated. God serves as the negation and indictment of our life and world; therefore, we must kill this God in order to become free to affirm the actual world. Through the death of God and the abolition of the true world, the metaphysical distinction between a true and an apparent world collapses, and along with it collapses all the metaphysical and anthropological dualisms which are dependent upon this distinction. Nietzsche desires to abolish theology's true world because it has served to denigrate the actual world.

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

Nietzsche focuses his attack upon the “Christian-moral interpretation of the world,” or what he derides as “monotonothemism” (*TI* 480). For Nietzsche this is the prime example of a worldview which relies upon the distinction between two worlds. It is Nietzsche’s primary example not because the Judaeo-Christian interpretation of the world was the first to negate this world in order to invent another world better suited to human needs, but because it was the first to negate this world in order to take revenge upon the world out of *ressentiment*. Christian theology is considered by Nietzsche to be the strongest opponent to his own affirmation of the actual, natural world because of the virulence of its attack on the natural world and because of the power of its continuing influence on the modern understanding of the world in secular thought systems. Nietzsche believed that he could abolish the distinction between a true and an apparent world only through an overcoming of the Christian-moral interpretation of the world.

While Nietzsche seeks to abolish the distinction between a true and an apparent world, Heidegger seeks to reinscribe a distinction, i.e., the ontological difference between Being and beings. Heidegger wants to destroy the theological character of metaphysics because it forgets this difference in defining Being as a being, as the efficient cause of beings. According to Heidegger, the divinity enters into metaphysics in order to account for the Being of beings.

When metaphysics thinks of beings as such as a whole, that is, with respect to the highest being which accounts for everything, then it is logic as theologic. (*ID* 71)

It is this theo-logic which causes the reliance upon the metaphor of height, the “most high,” upon transcendence as the source and guarantor of truth. Like Nietzsche, Heidegger seeks to destroy this theological character of metaphysics which defines God and his transcendence.

In the place of a theological transcendence which defines the position of God, the *ens increatum*, above man, the *ens creatum*, Heidegger formulates the ontological difference, based upon the relationship between human *Dasein* and Being, in which transcendence defines not the place of God above man, but rather designates man’s ability, in his essence as *Dasein*, to differentiate between Being and beings.

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-56840-1 - Postmodern Theory and Biblical Theology: Vanquishing God's Shadow

Brian D. Ingraffia

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Introduction*

9

Transcendence can be understood in a second sense . . . namely, as signifying what is unique to *human Dasein* – unique not as one among other possible, and occasionally actualized, types of behavior but as a *basic constitutive feature of Dasein*. (*ER* 35–37)

Although Heidegger argues vehemently that this is not merely a secularization of theological transcendence, Feuerbach's basic premise remains here in disguised form. It is clear that in Heidegger's redefinition, transcendence has been transferred from a theological to an anthropological term, from a term used to describe God's position above man to one used to describe a "basic constitutive feature" of human *Dasein*. Therefore the analysis of *Dasein*, the destruction of the metaphysical definition of man as *animal rationale*, as body and soul, plays a central role in Heidegger's destruction of ontotheology. "Thus an analytic of *Dasein* must remain our first requirement in the question of Being" (*BT* 37).

Derrida deconstructs ontotheology not through identifying metaphysics as the forgetting of the ontico-ontological difference or as the denigration of the natural world, but rather by defining metaphysics as the debasement of writing. Both Heidegger and Derrida are questioning the privileging of "presence" by ontotheology, but Heidegger looks first to the description of human being while Derrida begins with the description of writing in order to deconstruct the metaphysics of presence. By focusing not upon the metaphysical character of ontology, as Heidegger does in *Being and Time*, but upon the metaphysical character of linguistics, as Derrida does in *Of Grammatology*, Derrida's critique of transcendence in metaphysics takes the form of a deconstruction of philosophy's irrepressible desire for a "transcendental signified," which in exceeding or transcending the play of language serves as the source and guarantor of truth. Like Nietzsche, Derrida questions the belief in a transcendental realm, here a transcendental source of meaning, which seeks to impose a final, true interpretation of the world, or in Derrida's problematic, of the text. In many ways, Derrida's project can be read as an elucidation of Nietzsche's remark that "I am afraid we are not rid of God because we still have faith in grammar" (*TI* 483).

Just as Heidegger reads Nietzsche as the last metaphysician, despite Nietzsche's efforts to abolish metaphysics, so does Derrida place Heidegger within the ontotheological tradition he works to destroy:

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

The ontico-ontological difference and its ground (*Grund*) in the “transcendence of *Dasein*” . . . are not absolutely originary. Differance by itself would be more “originary,” but one would no longer be able to call it “origin” or “ground,” those notions belonging essentially to the history of onto-theology. (*OG* 23)

Not the interpretation of Being, but rather the interpretation of the sign is the source of metaphysics’ reliance on divinity, on a transcendent God. “The sign and divinity have the same place and time of birth. The age of the sign is essentially theological” (*OG* 14). Consequently, for Derrida it is not the Christian-moral interpretation of the world or the ontotheological conception of man, but rather the logocentric conception of the sign which must first be deconstructed:

It is thus the idea of the sign that must be deconstructed through a meditation upon writing which would merge, as it must, with the undoing of onto-theology. (*OG* 73)

Derrida therefore begins by deconstructing the metaphysical conception of the sign as signifier and signified in linguistics and as letter and spirit in theology.

To summarize: Nietzsche mocks the “monotono-theism” of Western thought through an attack upon the distinction between a true and apparent world, privileging the example of the Christian-moral interpretation of the world. Heidegger destroys the ontotheological character of metaphysics through a questioning of the ontico-ontological difference, privileging the example of *Dasein*. Derrida deconstructs ontotheology through an attack on the metaphysical conception of writing, privileging the example of the linguistic sign. All three thinkers attack the ontotheological character of Western metaphysics and consider Christian theology an exemplar of ontotheological discourse.

NIETZSCHE/HEIDEGGER/DERRIDA ON CHRISTIANITY

My final purpose in studying these three attacks on ontotheology is to understand better these thinkers’ attitude toward Christianity. These philosophers are, in a sense, twice removed from the Christian era. The reinterpretation of biblical theology as ontotheology in modernism has greatly influenced their understanding of Judaeo-Christianity. I seek to define how these thinkers’ dismantling of