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The Deaths of God in Hegel and Nietzsche and the Crisis of Values in Secular Modernity and Post-secular Postmodernity[1]

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Abstract

Although declarations of the death of God seem to be provocations announcing the end of the era of theology, this announcement is actually central to the Christian revelation in its most classic forms, as well as to its reworkings in contemporary religious thought. Indeed provocative new possibilities for thinking theologically open up precisely in the wake of the death of God.

Already Hegel envisaged a revolutionary new realization of divinity emerging in and with the secular world through its establishment of a total order of immanence. However, in postmodern times this comprehensive order aspired to by modern secularism implodes or cracks open towards the wholly Other. A hitherto repressed demand for the absolute difference of the religious, or for "transcendence," returns with a vengeance. This difference is what could not be stated in terms of the Hegelian System, for reasons that post-structuralist writers particularly have insisted on: all *representations* of God are indeed dead. Yet this does not mean that they cannot still be powerful, but only that they cannot assign God any stable identity.

Nietzsche's sense of foreboding concerning the death of God is coupled with his intimations of the demise of representation and "grammar" as epistemologically bankrupt, but also with his vision of a positive potential for creating value in the wake of this collapse of all linguistically articulated culture. He points the way towards the emergence of a post-secular religious thinking of what exceeds thought and representation.

Keywords

theology and literature, postmodern, secularism, Hegel, Nietzsche, death of God

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I. Two Contrasting Paradigms of Divine Death

The modern and by now postmodern predicament of religion has often been equated essentially with the realization that God is dead. Whether it is declared outright or merely suspected or reacted against, the idea of the death of God inaugurates a new era for the philosophy of religion and more generally for all aspects of culture. Every domain of values finds itself affected in the deepest way by the proposition that there is no transcendent theological grounding for the world in which we live. A new prospect arises that this world must somehow ground values immanently within itself. Such a world cut loose from transcendent moorings is the predicament announced as so profoundly disturbing by Nietzsche's madman in *Die fröhliche Wissenschaft*, section 125, but it can also be experienced as the actual realization of divinity in humanity, as it was by Hegel. The death of God thereby becomes the prelude to a new age of unprecedented human self-realization. In effect, it heralds the kingdom of heaven on earth, as Ludwig Feuerbach was quick to perceive. Finally free from alienation of its essence into unworldly and otherworldly abstractions, humanity can recognize itself as its own master and realize its nature and destiny fully, unhampered by any superior instance such as a divinity standing over it. There is therefore something of a mood of triumph present in certain utopic versions of modernism as the era of the death of God. In postmodern times this triumphalism appears most often only in an ironic key and is lacking in the pathos and high seriousness of Hegel's characteristically Enlightenment optimism. Still, this irony itself becomes one more signifier of the profound upheaval for values provoked by the presumed death of God.[2]

There is a very obvious way in which the much-touted death of God necessarily brings in its train a fundamental crisis of values, especially moral values. The consequences for the common man are envisioned, for example, in Dostoyevsky's novel, *Crime and Punishment* (1866). Raskolnikov, the protagonist, is haunted by the thought that, "If there is no God, then everything is permitted." This reasoning, together with his own personal motives of greed and desperation, drive him to the murder of his landlady. The book thus stages the drama of the collapse of moral values pursuant

[2] Blanchot explores how modern and contemporary humanistic and atheistic culture in the wake of the death of God is fraught with ambiguities that devolve from its inextricably theological premises.

upon the collapse of theistic belief that had been philosophized by Immanuel Kant, Hegel's immediate predecessor, as an indispensable underpinning to morality. Kant thought that the existence of God was a necessary practical postulate for the possibility of moral action, even if theoretical proof of God's existence is impossible. Dostoyevsky, realizing how very fragile was the theistic belief that Kant assumed as a necessary concomitant to belief in morality, begins to explore in some of its terrifying consequences the world in which such belief no longer obtains.

When we turn to the statements concerning the death of God in the philosophers, it turns out to be a good deal more complicated than Raskolnikov's plainly poisonous thought. God's death does not mean that he simply is not at all—and much less that he never was—anything more than an illusion. Nietzsche finds God to be still all too real and present, even after his death, in the form of his decaying corpse: "the divine decomposition" (*die göttlichen Verwesung*). The madman even goes to church himself to sing an eternal requiem to God (*Requiem aeternam deo*) after discovering that he has come too early for his message to be received by human ears.

We think of Nietzsche as the aggressive iconoclast out to smash idols with his merciless philosophizing by means of the hammer. But Nietzsche actually meant for this instrument to be used as something like a tuning fork. And Nietzsche's madman is very far from gloating over the death of God and from hurling this message gleefully into the teeth of despised believers. On the contrary, he is himself shattered, driven to distraction and a state of panic by the death of God. He is mocked for his sincerity by the more cynical bystanders to whom he announces this news. They seem to take this as no news at all, whether we are to imagine them as churchgoers or not. And this callousness confirms what the madman has presumably seen—that sincere belief in God is no longer possible. What sets him apart is that he has seen, as the bystanders have not, the disastrous consequences that this entails: "Are we not straying as through an infinite nothing? Does not the empty space breathe on us? Has it not become colder? Is not night and ever more night coming?"[3] The implications for a world wrenched loose from its moorings in theological transcendence are unfathomable: "Where is the earth going now? Where are we going? Away from all suns? Are we not continually falling?" This event ushers in a whole new

[3] Nietzsche, Book 3, sec. 125. My translation.

era of history, and the thought of it is hardly to be borne: it is enough to make one mad.

Hegel projects a much more optimistic interpretation of the death of God. This death is actually the way in which God realizes himself concretely in his infinity and identity with and as humanity. Death is sublated into the infinity of the divine life by God's taking death upon himself. Death is negated and overcome thereby; it is in Luther's phrase, which Hegel echoes, "the death of death." "God... maintains himself in this process [of death], and the latter is only the death of death. God rises again to life, and thus things are reversed" (*Lectures* 65). God's death as abstract and unknowable is "the death of the *abstraction of the divine being* which is not posited as Self." It is at the same time his resurrection in worldly form as self-conscious humanity: "This death is, therefore, its resurrection as Spirit" (qtd. in Carlson 34–5).[4]

Divine death is seen by Hegel as a certain way and means, unprecedented and magnificent, of God's self-realization in the world. The central message of Christian revelation is the Incarnation of God as fully human in a particular man, Jesus of Nazareth, and his fully living out of the human condition culminates in death by Crucifixion. This is taken by Hegel to announce the death of God as an abstract, merely metaphysical being by his complete immersion in history and human life, even to the point of death. Only in the temporal world can God truly live, and this entails submitting to death as well. As a dying God, he can also be resurrected. He is resurrected in the Spirit that lives in the community of believers, the congregation of the church. From the basis of this incarnation in the world, the Spirit radiates out more widely into the world, converting and redeeming it. Among those who have pursued Hegel's thinking into the postmodern age, Thomas Altizer emphasizes the "total presence" realized by the death of God that issues in an unlimited sacralizing of the profane, secular world in all its crass and insignificant banality as portrayed, for example, by James Joyce in *Ulysses* and in *Finnegans Wake*. Thomas Carlson, on the other hand, stresses that the resurrected life envisioned by Hegel entails an overcoming of finitude. But in either case, there is an emancipation of this world from any overshadowing other world that would deprive it of intrinsic value and bleed it of its own inherent meaning. The immanent human and historical world is freed to realize itself as infinitely meaningful in itself and without reference to any other reality.

[4] See also Eberhard Jüngel's important discussion of the death of God.

Nietzsche too, beyond the moment of foreboding registered by his madman, envisaged the new age as an era of a possible emancipation and of the opening of an unlimited new field for human creation and invention of values. Such was to be the task of the Overhuman (*Übermensch*) undertaking a transvaluation of all values. Still, at a deeper level, the two versions of the death of God take us in two different, even opposed directions. I wish to maintain that of these two versions of the death of God, Hegel's is deeply secularized, while Nietzsche's is not. Nietzsche is provoked by what destroys the order of the world rather than realizes and fulfills the human and historical project. He focuses on and is obsessed by the Dionysian force of difference and disruption that rends any world order asunder. Hegel, by contrast, envisages a total order of knowledge realized in the perfect articulation of "the concept." And history is the working out of the identity of this concept with the reality of the world. Thus the impact of the death of God on values varies with one's attitude towards the secular world, particularly with whether one sees this world as fundamentally opposed to or as potentially identifiable with God. In what follows, I will trace these two divergent attitudes towards the collapse of a divine foundation for values—represented here schematically by "Hegel" and "Nietzsche"—through their metamorphoses in the modern and especially the postmodern eras.

II. Secularism's Implosion: Graham Ward

Modernity, when viewed from a theological perspective, coincides by and large with the movement of secularization—literally the actualization of the world as simply world—rather than as a sign for something else. In a medieval perspective, still represented, for example, in Calderon de la Barca's *Auto da fé*, the world often appeared as a theatre for supernatural dramas of fate and destiny. The paramount shift entailed by secularism with respect to a religious outlook is that values are seen as immanent to the world rather than as founded on some order transcending it. In fact, the word "secular" comes from the Latin, *saeculum*, meaning "age" or "world." "The world" is, of course, a wide-open notion capable of receiving almost any kind of content, but the idea of its being a realm standing on its own, self-sufficient, even self-enclosed or sealed off, so as to be governed only by its own intrinsic principles, is what makes it a world in the specific sense intended by talk of the *secular* world. "World," in this sense, simply *is* this immanence to or of itself.

Paradoxically, however, such a world, conceived of as self-founding and self-grounding, is actually conceived in the image of God, traditionally thought of as *ipsum esse subsistans*, according to the Scholastic formula. And this imitation builds some ironies into the self-assertion of secularism as a rebellion against subjection to theological paradigms. For the secular world appears to be constituted by the projection onto the world of a certain theological paradigm of "aseity," literally "being unto itself," that is, self-generated and self-generating being. To this extent, secularism, as the declaration of the self-subsistent autonomy of the world, consists in the transfer of a certain logical and metaphysical structure of self-groundedness from God to the world.

Nevertheless, apart from this theological derivation of its concept, such a world understands itself as eminently godless. The irony here is that in order to be godless the world must itself in effect become God, the unconditioned—the be-all and end-all that is in and for itself. The secular world is to be understood as a totally integrated and internally self-regulating system—hence as without God, as not dependent on anything or anyone outside of or beyond itself. Such a world could never be conceived of so long as unpredictable influences from heaven or meddling demonic forces from the opposite direction could invade the world of human action and experience. The extent to which such beliefs have become implausible today is the measure of our secular mentality.

Such a self-enclosed world, moreover, is the correlate of an autonomous humanity that has finally assumed responsibility for itself. This realization of humanity's freedom and its establishment in its *own* world was understood by prophets of modernity such as Marx, Nietzsche, and Freud as, among other things, an emancipation from religion. Nevertheless, the ways in which this emancipation remains always deeply indebted to religion and beholden to the theological vision it endeavors to surpass are emphasized by so-called secular theologians and, among them, by Gabriel Vahanian, for whom "nothing is more religious than the secular, and more secular than the religious."[5] Vahanian persuasively argues that secularism in modern western civilization is the realization of the religious vision particularly of Christianity. Christianity's central teaching of the Incarnation is, after all, a becoming worldly of divinity.

[5] Vahanian, "Theology" 14. I work especially from Vahanian, *Dieu anonyme ou la peur des mots*. A good digest in English of key ideas is Vahanian, "Theology and the Secular" 10–25.

Pursuing the thought of the incarnation of God as a human being to its logical implication of a divine death, Gianni Vattimo traces the new possibilities that open for (non)religious expression in the wake of the death of God. The development of non-metaphysical sense or meaning that is not grounded on a permanent order and invulnerable authority actually proves to be the validation of Christian theology on its own terms of *kenosis*, or the self-emptying of God.[6] Other thinkers such as Marcel Gauchet and Jean-Luc Nancy have reached similar conclusions concerning the continuity between Christianity and secularism from widely divergent viewpoints and on altogether different grounds. Secularism is seen to have advanced to such a point peculiarly in the West thanks largely to the influence of Christianity, which is especially compatible with modern urban society and its pronounced individualism. This Christian outlook sharply distinguishes between the created order and the Creator, recognizing a "theological difference" more fundamental than any ontological difference, and thus separating a secular order open for autonomous human action from the transcendent realm of divinity. It only remained for the latter to be exposed as a superfluous hypothesis in order for the human world to be abandoned fully unto itself.

The ambiguous role and standing of religion in the emergence of the secular is indeed inscribed macroscopically into the history of modernity. The beginning of the modern period can be traced to the sixteenth-century Protestant Reformation, with its supposed affirmation of the individual as standing directly in relation to God, a God sanctioning prosperity in this life in all its worldliness. But it can equally well be traced to the eighteenth-century Enlightenment with its virulent anticlericalism and its attack on all sorts of religious myth. In either of these forms, or again in that of the seventeenth-century scientific revolution, or of the industrial revolution of the nineteenth century, some conception of the secular world-order is foundational for the project of modernity. And such a conception has been carried to further levels and extremes of realization in the postmodern world, with its global systems connecting everything into ever greater networks of simultaneity and homogeneity: such systems bring about the immanence of everything to everything else. The immediate availability of all information by electronic means creates an artificial consciousness that is totally present to itself. This structure of total presence and even self-presence can hardly fail to conjure up theological matrices. Paradoxically,

[6] See, for example, Vattimo.

the world realizes itself as secular by imitating and assimilating the unconditioned self-relatedness that was classically conceived as the nature of divinity.

Clearly, this apparent *imitatio Dei* is actually a strategy for rendering God obsolete by means of purely secular substitutes for his unlimited creative and destructive power. However, this project also runs up against its limits, and another kind of conditioning of the secular world, its being confronted by something other than itself, begins to appear. This confrontation with a radical otherness, which is provoked by the failure of the modernist project of achieving perfection on a foundation all its own, opens upon a different dimension of religiosity that is far removed from traditional images of divinity. It encounters a numinous dimension in the failure of all images. When the process of secularization runs up against its own limits in eventually absolutizing finite structures within the world, it generates an awareness of something beyond itself and thus leads back to "the religious." Just as religion, at the stage of reflection reached in Christianity, opened up the possibility of a secular universe radically distinct from an absolutely transcendent God (as the history of Protestantism particularly demonstrates), so, inversely, secular Enlightenment in its own dialectic eventually negates itself and opens towards its other—hence the "post-secular."

Thus the process of rendering the world autonomous in its sheer immanence has generated its own powerful resistances and disruptions as well. It is entirely possible to read postmodernity as the absolute eradication of religion from culture which has entered fully into absolute immanence without any reference to a beyond or any belief in what is not absolutely present in the material manifestation of the now. All relation to otherness is interrupted. Yet this apocalypse of immanence at the same time calls forth religious descriptions and can be understood most deeply of all in theological categories. Graham Ward, in extensive writing and editing, and following the groundbreaking work of John Milbank, has called attention to these theological stakes of postmodernity. Under the heading of "the implosion of secularism," he describes processes through which the secular world order has come apart from within. He writes of an "implosion of signifiers" that has "facilitated a new return to the theological and a new emphasis on reenchantment" (xvi).[7]

[7] For Milbank, see especially *Theology and Social Theory*.

Not that anything outside the secular order has challenged it by forcing it to open back out towards an outside, in this way causing it to explode. Rather, as Ward explains, the implosion of a system "comes about through internal processes, forces, or principles which no longer regulate the immanent order but overshoot it." I would add that taking immanent structures as absolutes—as is necessary if the secular world is going to be in and for itself—inevitably leads to collapse or implosion. Ward elaborates further on how the principles of postmodernism, which redefine reality as socially produced and particularly as image, end by undermining their own basis:

> The forces of secular production forged an understanding of the world whose very constructedness came increasingly to haunt and obsess it, so that the relations produced, instead of continuing to work on behalf of the system, come increasingly to shackle and finally dismantle it. Secularity gets locked into the virtual realities it has produced... The system has exhausted its own self-conceived, self-promoted symbols. The symbolic itself collapses (as Baudrillard plaintively observes) because it is not standing in for or symbolic of anything. (xx)

Ward describes first the implosion that results from banishing an external ground of values, which disturbs the hierarchical order of value inherent within any system:

> And so the hierarchy of values implodes, with no appeal possible to an authority outside the system itself—no principle, no shared ontology, no grounding epistemology, no transcendental mediation. And so we move beyond the death of God which modernity announced, to a final forgetting of the transcendental altogether, to a state of godlessness so profound that nothing can be conceived behind the exchange of sign and the creation of symbolic structures. (xix)

This is the predicament at which the postmodern world arrives through carrying secularization out to its extreme consequences.

Nevertheless, the completeness of the collapse of any transcendent grounding and the resulting totality of immanence in the postmodern world is all too prone, ironically, to take a theological turn. The very thoroughness of these developments, which meet no resistance, creates an infinity and omnipotence of the immanent that knows no bounds, has nothing that can transcend or condition it. Thus this world without transcendence in the end manages, paradoxically, to embody a kind of transcendence of all limits, and so to reproduce the essential traits of the theological: the sphere of total immanence, such as is affirmed in certain modern and postmodern systems, is now practically infinite and unconditioned. This tendency is evident in the worldwide web, the global economy, and the absolute and unlimited commodification of all values—religious, political, and aesthetic. These systems seem to know no bounds and to be, in effect, theological, omnipotent, unconditioned by anything outside themselves. Of course, this again leads to the presentiment of what they after all do not and cannot encompass, and then we pass from imitation of traditional images of divinity to imageless contemplation, to rediscovery of the original religious experience of facing the Other.

Ward maintains that "this implosion of the secular produces a vacuum without values, a *horror Vacui*." He also points out that "fascination with it can transform it, too, into a commodity fetish" (xx). This produces a perverse postmodernity that is not even aware of how its own structuring principles have become sources of deformation and distortion. Consumerism is the quintessence of fetishistic desire that frustrates its own satisfaction: "The pleasure of not getting what you want drives consumerism. Consumerism becomes an endless experience of fetishism—as Marx was inchoately aware." This can even be linked with a death drive, "a longing and a *frisson* for oblivion." "Contemporary culture both wishes to embrace the nihilism of the abyss and screen it through substitutionary images." In theological terms, this fetishistic taking of pleasure in the absence of fulfillment of desire, in a substitutive image, leads to "an enjoyment of the absence of God by the commercialization of God's presence" (xxi). The enjoyment of one's wealth and power in a sealed universe of techno-omnipotence seems to be an even more perverse possibility characteristic of the postmodern age. Even world disasters are served up by the media every day for the delectation of mass television audiences. The viewer's immunity gives a certain sense of omnipotence vis-à-vis life and death and disaster as merely represented and thereby virtualized and distanced on the television screen.

Alongside this fetishistic perversion of divinity, however, Ward and other contemporary religious thinkers like Mark C. Taylor perceive another postmodern possibility. This consists in a theological or a/theological perspective that opens within the postmodern predicament as an immanent critique. Without positing God in any definite terms from outside, the inherent incompleteness and insufficiency of the world, its inability to

regulate itself on its own immanent principles, can be read as a sign pointing in another direction, towards transcendence or, more dramatically, towards a wound that cannot be healed. The lack and negativity that are built into the world keep it open to a religious dimension that, although seemingly marginalized in the advanced stages of secular culture, turns out actually to be constitutive for the whole postmodern outlook. Postmodernity, by discovering the undecidable, the infinite or open-ended planted everywhere in its midst, in effect turns into a turn back to religion.[8] This is not a religion of stable dogmas but one of belief in what can never be defined. Such belief is all that ties society together and loosely brings anything back round to itself, and this *religio* performs then in the role that was formerly filled by the unifying, cementing paradigms of religion. This religion offers nothing positive; it is a negative theology. It is critique of all pretended accounts and their closures that opens culture to what it cannot comprehend, in effect to an unknowable God.

Herein a radical critical and theological possibility emerges in Ward's view:

> It is this very process of turning objects into idols, fetishism itself—which is more than just a matter of analyzing economic processes—that theological discourse challenges. This *is* the theological difference, the theological critique. This theological difference has the potential for transforming culture in the second mode of cultural transformation I alluded to; that is, radically. That is why postmodern theology is not simply a product of the new reenchantment of the world, but an important mode of critical analysis in such a world. (xxiv)

Ward is suggesting that theology can look beyond the world as a complete system and critique this totalized immanence in terms of what it does not encompass.

This type of postmodern outlook evinces the critical capability of postmodernism that harbors resources for resisting the trends of globalization and consumerism, and it is crucially theological. As Ward writes, "Its critical edge is important for the way it can sharpen theology's own analytical tools, enabling theology not only to read the signs of the times but to

[8] See de Vries, *Philosophy and the Turn to Religion*. De Vries has pursued the religious aspects of postmodern techno-tele-media culture especially in *Religion and Media*.

radicalize the postmodern critique by providing it with an exteriority, a position outside the secular value-system. That exteriority is founded upon the God who is revealed within, while being distinctively beyond, the world-system" (xxii). The very perfection of the unifying system of things that modern humanity has achieved in the age of globalism provokes a thinking of the limits of the system and clarifies the distinction between it and what lies beyond it. In this way, like a phoenix from the ashes, the religious question rises again urgently from the very consummation of the secular world in a total abandon to rampant consumerism.

Since Hegel's time and especially since the age of positivism in the nineteenth century, our sense of the strangeness of our own worldly reality has grown much more acute. With the evidence of spirit's self-destructiveness, in effect a refutation of the Enlightenment ideal, coming across continuously over the media, we are made to face the contradictions of spirit manifest along its path of progressive growth towards knowledge of itself as more radical and less humanistic than Hegel imagined. Hence theology today can propose itself as a reflection on the world become strange.[9] The so-called Radical Orthodoxy presents a postmodern theology that also styles itself "post-secular" (Blond).[10] Theology presents a "revelation" that again can challenge the secular view of the world delivered by science, which has itself become much less certain in the day in which chaos theory makes the lawfulness of nature questionable. With regard to the social, Milbank attempts to demonstrate "the questionability of the assumptions upon which secular social theory rests" by showing that "'scientific' social theories are themselves theologies or anti-theologies in disguise" (*Theology* 3).

With the implosion of the secular system, then, the space of the theological, the dimension of the transcendent in the sense of an other world or a transcendent divinity, is no longer excluded; the secular world no longer seems so completely sealed off from such an instance. An aura of otherness comes back to haunt the world even in its destitution of all relation to any other world of faith and correlative divinity. Of course, this ghostly presence does not exactly undo the death of God. A God that haunts the world is a God that has died. However, the result is not God's disappearance so much as his transmogrification. In a remarkable prophecy of our postmodern predicament, the announcement by Nietzsche's

[9] Milbank, *The Word Made Strange* expresses this common denominator of postmodern theology in a wholly different tenor.

[10] See also Milbank, Pickstock, and Ward, eds., *Radical Orthodoxy*.

madman of the death of God in fact was concerned especially with the after-effects of the divine decomposition (sec. 125).

The death of God may have undermined some of the traditional, sacramental modes of God's presence in the world, but it seems also to have given rise to other, new ones in their place. Less reassuring and comforting, Godhead may be present even in a state of decomposition. The message of the Cross indeed instructs us to find God precisely in dying. Thomas Altizer has followed this line of thought unflinchingly to find the true Christian revelation precisely in the death of God. The removal of values based on transcending the world towards some presumable metaphysical order actually emancipates the value intrinsic to the world itself for the first time. Consistent with Hegel, Altizer interprets this value Christically, that is, as fundamentally love revealed in perishing, in accepting one's own mortality in a spirit of granting life to others in one's place and blessing them. Altizer opts for a radical Christianity which transposes this religion's value system from a metaphysical to an existential register. However, it is not so clear to all (any more than it was to Raskolnikov) that the altruistic values embraced by Christianity can survive the supernatural support system that has been undermined by the advent of the secular universe.

III. Postmodern Aesthetics versus Religious Eruption: Mark C. Taylor

A distinction similar to Ward's between the negative and the positive possibilities engendered by postmodernism is made by Mark C. Taylor. Taylor delivers perhaps his most compact reading of postmodernism as acting out the death of God in his essay "Postmodern Times." Here, as elsewhere, he distinguishes clearly between two different postmodernisms. He focuses on elements of radical difference that would lead in the critical directions indicated by Ward rather than towards the homogenization and erasure of difference so typical of modernity and now postmodernity, with its mass markets and mass communications. Post-structuralism, as a thinking of the sign as difference (Saussure) and ultimately as emptiness, since it has no fixed content but remains infinitely open to difference, preserves the trace of the religious. Postmodernism that continues rather on the secularizing path of modernism towards total domination of the planet embraces the *image* as plenitude itself, albeit virtual: the lack of reference in this case makes the image, as an aesthetic manifestation, absolute. In the other, the first case, that of post-secular postmodernism, the world and its phenomena are not absolutized and divinized but are rather emptied and remain marked as deserted of divinity.

Taylor points out the continuities between the second version of postmodernism (in essential ways like what Graham Ward calls "postmodernity" as opposed to "postmodernism") and the modernism that it has supposedly superseded. The critique of this modernism of self-reflexivity aiming at total union with self in the absolute immanence of what Hegel called "absolute knowledge" was formulated already by Kierkegaard in reaction to Hegel's system. For Kierkegaard, Hegel remained at the aesthetic stage of total fusion of subject and object in ecstatic, pantheistic union, never recognizing the irreducible alterity encountered in the religious stage of existence. Taylor distinguishes between immediate versus reflective aestheticism as worked out by Schleiermacher and Hegel respectively, but both come to the same thing, namely, the elimination of difference in an affirmation of unlimited unity with oneself in the All. This constitutes an aesthetic modernism and subsequently postmodernism that Taylor sets apart from what he calls rather religious postmodernism. According to Taylor, Frederic Jameson's analysis of postmodernism, stressing how temporal continuities break down as the present is absolutized and commodities are fetishized, does no more than repeat Kierkegaard's critique of modernism as aestheticism.

Taylor does not claim that Hegel's system directly influenced the founding painters and architects of the modernist movement in aesthetics—figures like Mondrian, Kandinsky, and Le Corbusier. He identifies rather the theosophical writing of Madam Blavatsky and the anthroposophical ideas of Rudolph Steiner as "the two primary conduits through which these speculative ideas entered the mainstream of aesthetic modernism" ("Postmodern Times" 179). They shared an eschatological vision aimed at establishing the Kingdom of God on earth, here and now, through a spiritual renewal of humanity. The further propaginations of this vision have expressed themselves more recently in various manifestations of New Age culture.[11] All this is made possible by the death of God as abstract and apart from the world that was announced first by Hegel (and perhaps even before him by Pascal).

But as was mentioned already, in "Postmodern Times" Taylor also identifies an anti-modernist, anti-aesthetic postmodernism, a "poststructural

[11] See Taylor, "Terminal Faith" 37.

postmodernism" (unlike the modernist postmodernism), where differences are not collapsed in a total fusion in the present but are respected as ultimate and irreducible. Derrida is a leading representative of this strain of postmodern thought. Here an "other time" emerges that can never become fully present but rather always also withdraws. This is the time that is theorized by Blanchot as "terrifyingly ancient" and by Levinas as an "unrepresentable before." They are the descendants of Kierkegaard's resistance to the Hegelian system, as the foundation of aesthetic modernism, in the name of "absolute heterogeneity," the "infinitely and qualitatively different" ("Postmodern Times" 187). Taylor's preferred term for this is "Altarity." This locution signifies unthought difference, non-opposition, non-dialectical difference. It is an absolute difference that checks all projects of realization in the present of one's essence or origin. Here the death of God remains permanently a condition of loss rather than an opportunity for total fulfillment of human desire, such as the other postmodernism seems to promise—and even to proclaim as achieved—by means of eliminating every obstacle to and difference from pure presence. The realized presence of this more superficial postmodernism of the image as absolute represents a total forgetting of difference in the more radical sense.

Georges Bataille in particular is chosen by Taylor to illustrate the seminal thinking of religion as radical difference that issues in religious postmodernism. As theorized compellingly by Bataille, the phenomena of sacrifice and the gift introduce something radically heterogeneous into the normally homogeneous economies of social exchange. They are disruptive of the system of differentiation that keeps individuals distinct and separate. They introduce something incalculably different that cannot be reckoned in economic terms of production and exchange but exceed it by virtue of their destructiveness or gratuitousness. This different difference—or transcendence—disturbs all humanly established orders and rational economies. Eroticism and violence also threaten the boundaries between separate individuals, violating others' bodily integrity. They are closely related to the religious understood as a desire for unity or fusion, but also involve dismantling and dismembering unitary, integral wholeness.

The orientation towards God as an absolute transcendence, or recognizing divinity as absolute difference with respect to humanity, is motivated by the desire to escape the condition of difference and alienation from one another in which we live as isolated individuals in competition and very often conflict with one another. But this marks the point where desire for absolute difference can flip over into longing for unlimited unity. The mystical desire for fusion with a transcendent divinity assumes some more overtly sinister guises when it expresses itself in the political arena, for example, as the national-socialist program of uniting one folk on the unifying ground of its power understood in terms of a primitive force and entailing sacrifice of the inferior races in its midst.[12]

There are, furthermore, some artistic expressions of this desire for unity that likewise use the religious impulse for very worldly ends of establishing an order on earth rather than for transcending, presumably, earthly ambitions and lust. The aesthetic consequences of this collapsing of difference into unity are played out, according to Taylor, in the pop art of Andy Warhol and ultimately in the totally virtual culture of Las Vegas. These are further consequences of something that started with Marcel Duchamp's *Fountain*, the industrially produced urinal displayed by Duchamp as a work of art. This work, like his copy of the Mona Lisa with a goatee, desacralizes art. But do such works thereby sacralize the common, the utilitarian, the tasteless, or ugly?

Taking the common throw-away objects of everyday life at their crassest and most ordinary and elevating them to art objects, in the style also of pop artists such as Roy Lichtenstein, Jasper Johns, and Robert Rauschenberg, makes a powerful statement against any essentially different sphere of reality to which art can gain access. Such aesthetic idealism is supposedly unmasked as so much elitism, and art is restored to the absolute immanence of the daily life of common consumers. Again, difference in the sense of transcendence is completely effaced, as the primitive force of a transcendent power is appropriated into a sphere of immanence. Total immanence becomes the radical transformation of transcendence. The power traditionally ascribed to transcendence is released within immanence. The politics of fascism and the art of modernity would not be possible without the transcendence that they efface (Taylor, *About Religion*).

Most striking here is the way difference is eliminated, even in the pursuit of the uncommon, the different, the primitive. Transcendence is inevitably appropriated by systems of immanence that borrow its energy to operate all the more relentlessly in exerting their power over everything and making it conform to their standards and parameters. The absolute difference that is denied everywhere in the secular world and its systems remains the object of longing and the secret source of power for the very ideologies that most fervently deny it. Is there something different from

[12] See Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy, *Le mythe Nazi*, on the aesthetics of fascism.

the functional utilitarian universe created by industrial society? Of those who feel a need for something else, many seek in the direction of art, others in the direction of religion. Either quest is an effort to escape determination by a political and economic system that levels and erases any fundamental difference from its own constitution of reality. Political programs from socialism to liberalism try to give some transcendent ground and meaning for the economies that they foster, and at the same time these programs by their very functioning on immanentist principles make impossible any such grounding.

The search is for some source of value outside the system that furnishes always only commensurable values that have worth only relative to other values contained within the system, but not in absolute terms. This type of value is a currency like money. It is not intrinsically valuable. This type of value determines the situation in which we find ourselves after the death of God. Value accrues always only in terms of the system and its already established values. There is no exchange with any radically other kind of value or with something absolutely or naturally valuable. Money itself takes on an aura of divinity under these circumstances; it becomes the absolute and only value. Every other sort of value can be cashed out in monetary terms. There is nothing of intrinsic worth or value outside the system as a whole. Without radical, irreducible difference (without God) all value is relative and liable both to rampant, unchecked, indeed infinite inflation, and to complete collapse or bankruptcy as well.[13]

Understood in religious terms, this is the situation of humanity after the death of God. Such a culture is inevitably driven into myriad forms of idolatry, setting absolute value on something that it has, after all, itself created. There are many mechanisms of disguising such a vicious circle, for keeping it from becoming fully conscious and outwardly exposed, in order that it be enabled to function for legitimating values that otherwise would enter into crisis. There are artifices and technologies—for example, patriotism, love of country as a transcendent calling—designed to furnish some semblance of the exchange with the radically other, in effect, the encounter with divinity, that human beings seem to deeply need in order to be human. In this light, our arts and politics appear as ersatz religions; our entertainments and perversions are likewise efforts to escape ourselves and the emptiness of an immanence in which all values are only our own

[13] See especially Taylor, *Confidence Games*.

values—and to that extent no values at all in any higher, truer sense than that of our own arbitrary conventions or caprices. Nietzsche, the prophet of the death of God, wished to remake human beings into "over-humans" who would be creators of values for themselves. But there is an obvious structural reason why every value we create for ourselves sooner or later implodes. It cannot give us enduringly stable grounding if we establish it only ourselves.

Modernity comprises numerous varied attempts to found a new order of value on a secular and purely human basis. Art has often been taken as a source of new and creative value. This "displacement of religion onto art" is traced in bold outline by Taylor through the modern period. He starts in Jena, the modest German city where Schiller reinterpreted Kant's aesthetic theory in social terms as a prescription for recreating humanity as a work of art. A little later, Nietzsche interpreted Greek tragedy as religious sacrifice and thereby gave a classical precedent for the aestheticization of religion that was a driving force of modernist art such as that of Le Corbusier, Kandinsky, or Mondrian. These founders of modernism sought extreme purity of form and absolute structure, realizing the aesthetics of idealism. Pure spirit was concretely worked out and built up on a rational foundation. Russian Futurists and the *Bauhaus* group attempted to create by means of art or architecture a new and truly human world.[14] They employed the sparest means, reducing everything to bare, functional essentials in the approach to the purely ideal. This approach was sarcastically spurned by Robert Venturi in *Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture* (1966), proclaiming against Mies van der Rohe's axiom that "Less is more" his own principle for postmodern architecture that "Less is a bore." The transformation of the world into a work of art is in crucial ways consummated in contemporary consumer and media culture.

Virtually all the creative movements of modern art are attempts to establish a new basis for values. The problem is that without the religious difference beyond the sphere of the apotheosis of all human making, value remains always precarious. If it can be reabsorbed back into a purely immanent process of producing values, it is not truly value, but only more fact. All difference is only more of the same. And this is what happens once the enabling fictions of each new ideal or ideology are themselves exposed as but ingenious artifacts, and are subsequently abandoned. Taylor finds the

[14] Taylor's most thorough treatment of much of this material is found in *Disfiguring*.

epitome of this immanentization or aestheticization of the world—its being leveled to a mere aesthetic surface—to be Las Vegas, "in effect, the realization of the Kingdom of God on earth" (*Confidence Games* 5). However, paradoxically and ironically, this means that it is the realization of a secularity immune to genuine religious difference.

Robert Venturi called attention to Las Vegas as embodying the quintessence of postmodernism in *Learning from Vegas: The Forgotten Symbolism of Architectural Form* (1972). Likewise Baudrillard described its excesses and contradictions in *L'Amérique* (1986). Las Vegas appears as the apotheosis of pure appearance: nothing there is even supposed to be more than a simulation. Las Vegas's so-called "New York, New York," a facsimile of Manhattan in the Nevada desert, is prototypical in this regard. Las Vegas enacts the death of God as a loss of any transcendent foundation for reality and of any stable basis of reference for the sign (the transcendental signified). Las Vegas epitomizes the undermining of reality by artifice and the loss of the very distinction between appearance and reality in the unholy, undivine creations of virtual reality. A shimmer of light replaces matter, vaporizing it into an ether that is artificially produced in such a way as to hide its basis in nature by making the whole city into a universe of pure artifice. It creates an illusion that is no longer distinguishable from reality. Reality in the sense of a material basis for this creation is reduced to a desert scarcely bearing a trace of God because now God is pumped into the air as everywhere present in the electricity of the eternally illuminated night.

There is no meaning: the experience of Las Vegas is a pure flash of sensation. This is precisely the significance of sex as purveyed by the Howard Hughes myth associated with the city. It is also in a manner the meaning of gambling. Take a chance, take life as pure chance: in Vegas, this is possible. Without any logic but contingency, what one gets and even what one becomes is offered arbitrarily out of a slot machine. Such a destiny is rendered possible by the obliteration of any real basis for who we are in our natural resources and personal qualities. It is a gift granted by the death of God. God is continually sacrificed in Las Vegas and in the contemporary American and global culture for which it stands. The substitute for any real source is a world of total artifice that generates everything out of itself, erasing any and all roots in the circumambient desert or in anything transcending its own radiance.

Taking his cue from the Luxor Hotel as one of Las Vegas's Disneyworld-like "themeparks," Taylor focuses especially on the image of the pyramid as

an entombment for the body that is missing or denied by this postmodern culture of electronic energy and virtuality. The disincarnation that characterizes this bodilessness is a killing or forgetting of death, as well as of God. There is virtually no trace of time or mortality in the postmodern city. The form of the pyramid itself, by being converted to use as a luxury hotel, occults its original significance and function as a tomb. "Instead of hiding the body that would solve every mystery, the pyramid becomes an empty tomb that marks the disappearance of the body. In the absence of a body, everything remains cryptic" ("Betting on Vegas" 239).[15]

> The consumption of the body leaves the tomb empty and the labyrinth inescapable. The pointless pyramid is the altar of sacrifice where the potlatch of meaning is staged. This offering is the sacrifice of God, which, in a certain sense, leaves everything pointless. The death of God is, in effect, the death of the transcendental signified, which marks the closure of the classical regime of representation left to float freely, signs figure other signs in an errant play that is as endless as it is pointless. The point of this pointlessness is nothing—absolutely nothing. Vegas is *about* nothing—always *about* nothing. ("Betting on Vegas" 241)

It is not that there is a repressed secret here. No censures, no cover-up plot. Everything is revealed on the surface in Vegas, and that is what is so uncannily mysterious about it. There is no mystery—nothing behind or beyond what you see. It is the total apocalypse of the death of God and of any dimension of experience that is not immediately accessible.

The very name "Luxor" no longer needs to evoke the numinous name of the city in Egypt and its ancient valley of royal tombs; it is repossessed and charged with a wholly different significance of boundless luxury where everything is to be enjoyed immediately and without restrictions. There is no other reality; now everything that appears is appearance. As Taylor suggests, "Since everything appears to be image, nothing appears but appearance" (*Disfiguring* 188). As suggested by the name of the Mirage Hotel—a hotel featuring all the amenities of a paradisiacal oasis in the desert—one is living in illusion here, but that is no longer distinct from reality: simulation becomes the ground one stands on and the air one breathes.

[15] Taylor reworks these arguments in other writings ranging from *Disfiguring* to *About Religion*.

How does this come about? On Taylor's telling, through loss of belief in the ultimacy of the body and death. We are seduced by Vegas to opt for a shinier hyper-reality that dissolves continuities of time and tempts us to live in an absolute present. This temporality is created similarly by the internet, where everything in principle is available instantly at will, but as ready-made, pre-packaged, and programmed. It can be produced immediately by a mere click. Without commitment, choice becomes arbitrary, pure chance: we are prompted by what happens to flash across our screen. Our whole lives are then nothing but a gamble. There is only the arbitrary gift of the present, no reasonable ways of working to develop and produce value through time and its organic processes.

IV. Post-Secularism: The Secular Opening from Within to the Religious

We have seen that there are two different directions that the realization of the death of God has taken in postmodern culture. One of them is fully in continuity with the modernist aspirations to completeness and to reintegrating the primitive into a total, utopic system of human self-realization as divine. There is no reality that stands outside the human sphere or that does not yield to being made over again by human means in a world that has become a human artwork. As one result, this drive to completeness in the immanence of human creativity has led to a total evacuation of any reality external to the human. Referentiality abides within the circuits of a constructed system rather than being able to refer to any genuine, unassimilable Outside. Art, for example, turns out to be only about itself. There is an effacement of all difference that is not artificially produced: differences are *made* within the terms of the system and are never unmediated givens. The most devastating consequences of this unlimited extension of human making and manipulation are not only for art. Even the supposedly natural and real world shows up only as artifice and simulation.

Our reality is so thoroughly mediatized in postmodern society that simulacra have always already preceded any purportedly direct experience, as Baudrillard argues in "La précession des simulacres." Playing upon a Derridean dictum, Taylor similarly stresses that "in the postmodern culture of the simulacrum, *there is nothing outside the image*" ("Postmodern Times" 182). Every supposed reality is apprehended as a variation of a repertoire of images. But this makes the image real then, turning it into a substitute

reality that is again the realized eschatology of modernist visionaries. In this imaginary world desire is immediately gratified; there is no interval between object and image, image and reality. Postmodern reality *is* a reality of images, and it denies that there is any other reality that is more basic or authentic or real.

> When the real becomes an image, the image becomes real. In the absence of any exteriority, difference and otherness disappear in a play of the same. Alterity is colonized by the symbolic order, which can bear nothing other than itself. If understood in this way, the postmodern play of the signifier reinscribes Hegel's conceptual idealism in the register of the imaginary. Just as Hegel argues that Kant's thing-in-itself is actually a concept, so, too, postmodernists maintain that the real is an image that reveals nothing other than itself. Every image, in other words, is a mirror image. The self-reflexivity of the Hegelian concept is refigured in the self-reflexivity of the postmodern image. ("Postmodern Times" 182)

Taylor's key insight is that this total realization of reality in the present of postmodern hyper-reality is in fact the realization of the death of God as Other. This is the Hegelian death of God as abstract and remote from this world and at the same time his fully worldly realization in the neon city that never sleeps but remains always fully present to itself in the light of its own illumination, without day or night or any need of nature or apparently of any kind of outside. This God is now resurrected and incarnate in the network where all is connected and available in the simultaneity of a timeless present in cyberspace. As Hegel conceived, God empties himself into history and his eternal presence becomes apocalyptically realized here and now. By erasing the difference between reality and image or simulation, postmodern culture is able to simulate infinite divine presence. Since with the death of God, as its consequences play out in the postmodern city, there is no *real* divine presence, and in fact no presence or reality that is not produced by simulation, this simulation is as good as reality itself. Furthermore, its not being delimited by anything real outside itself makes it in effect omnipotent and divine. The present play of signs has become absolutely real, indeed absolute reality. God is resurrected in and as the total immanence of humanity and history and culture. This is just what the death-of-God thelogian Thomas Altizer has consistently maintained

and thought out in many creative and intriguing ways.[16] However, such a utopia of total self-reference and immanence is also destined to implode, as we saw earlier.

Following a post-secular and, I would suggest, Nietzschean rather than Hegelian scenario for the death of God, Graham Ward has collaborated with others like John Milbank in developing a postmodern theology that powerfully diagnoses the predicament of secular culture. His diagnosis initially is perfectly compatible with that of Taylor: "The death of God has brought about the prospect of the reification and commodification (theologically termed idolatry), not only of all objects, but of all values (moral, aesthetic, and spiritual). We have produced a culture of fetishes or virtual objects. For now everything is not only measurable and priced, it has an image" (in Ward, xiv.)

Ward goes on to describe this change in terms of a turn from "the Promethean will to power" by rational domination of the real to "a Dionysian diffusion, in which desire is governed by the endless production and dissemination of floating signifiers" (xiv–xv). But Ward and Milbank especially see theological revelation as having an ability to critique contemporary culture as if from outside its horizon. From beyond the analysis of the postmodern predicament after the death of God, they advocate a return to theological revelation. They stress especially the critical capabilities of theology—its capacity to critique secular culture in its totalitarian pretensions. Taylor seems much more reluctant to affirm in the name of theology any such horizon transcending secular culture.[17]

The difference between an aesthetic absorption in and a theologically critical stance towards secular culture can be seen reflected in different styles of postmodern art. Pop art reproduces consumer culture and by that fact makes it into art, obliterating even the distinction between the merely useful and the aesthetic object. Conceptual art, too, erases the difference between signs and what they stand for, but in a completely different way. Works, for example, by Daniel Buren or Michael Asher, attempt to treat artworks not as aesthetic works but as signs reflecting critically and even subversively on the institutional frameworks and situations in which art is manufactured and marketed and manipulated.[18] Every reality, moreover, is

[16] One of Altizer's most suggestive works is *Total Presence*.

[17] In "Betraying Altizer," which designates Altizer as "the last theologian," Taylor seems to suggest that we ought to make an end of theology as traditionally understood.

[18] See Foster.

always already encoded, and to that extent is itself already a sign, one that has simply made us forget its status as sign. This again produces a system of total immanence and of indifference of everything from anything that is not just a sign. But rather than making all life, including the most ordinary articles, into art, aestheticizing life as pop art does, conceptual art takes the artwork not as an aesthetic object but as a statement about life in society, or as a social sign. Conceptual art can in this respect be seen as the postmodern countercurrent to pop art. In both cases the difference between art and life is erased, but the one leads to an aesthetic perspective on life and the other to a critical perspective on art.

The latter position leads us to ask critically, How, then, can value be established in a convincing and effective way? If it is to hold sway, value must be "revealed"; it has to come from somewhere outside the world of immanent references, from a sphere of mystery or otherness, rather than being reducible to human calculation and manipulations. What about the rational systems of values that modernity has ardently sought to establish? Why should they not be adequate and represent what human beings in their maturity are called upon to construct together in concert? History seems to have demonstrated the implosion of any purely secular system. That is what postmodernity, a certain postmodernity—that represented by the religiously attuned outlooks of Ward and Taylor—has concluded. Radical difference is revealed by the ruptures in the apparently seamless systems of the human cultural world. The necessity of revelation in a more traditional sense as well has been reaffirmed from a postmodern perspective especially by those speaking in the name of the Radial Orthodoxy.

Nietzsche deeply knew the incommensurable power of theological revelation. Dionysian disruptions are in fact interruptions of inner-worldly continuity and logic that become loci of revelation of something absolutely different and incomprehensible. Nietzsche deeply knows this dimension of difference, where the religious can be discerned. Such religious disclosure is not necessarily opposed, moreover, to revelation in a more theistic sense. The madman's announcement leaves open the possibility that the death of God is all an act of God redounding ultimately to his enhanced power and glory, for we who have killed God must, after all, in some sense, be God ourselves. How else could we have drunk up the sea (Wie vermochten wir das Meer auszutrinken)? We must ourselves be infinite. Who else gave us the sponge to wipe away the entire horizon? Just below the surface of the madman's delirious questions is the suggestion that to have killed God we must ourselves be God, who in that case has

staged his own death and also survived it. God may even be said to have been resurrected as his own murderers—*in us*.

A God that can die and even direct or stage-manage his own death has truly demonstrated that nothing can stand outside him. Death is taken up into the divine being or becoming. To the extent that humans perform it they are a divine mystery to themselves. The Hegelian and Nietzschean paradigms of the death of God seem no longer to be held apart as irreconcilable without repeal. In both cases, the human and divine collapse together. However, the question remains: Are we left located in the system and wrapped up in the worldwide web, or are we in a chaos of unknowability that begins from the ungraspable immediacy of our own selves? This would be something like the "non-lieu" or no place of a "pure distance," in which what is near and far are inverted, such as occurs in the negative theological moments of Foucault's interpretation of Nietzsche (144). This difference between the totally known and the unknown now becomes the axis along which the two paradigms represent polar opposites. Hegel's paradigm is the total revelation of man as God in absolute knowing. Nietzsche envisages rather man's never ending self-transcendence into the indeterminate and unknowable.

The fundamental paradox that the history of religion and its displacements consistently demonstrates is that the need for unity that we constantly seek to satisfy requires a relinquishing of any immediate unity. The attempts to fulfill it in the immanence of the aesthetic and political spheres, sometimes by collapsing the difference between the two, inevitably end by obliterating ethical and religious value altogether. The fundamental need for a religious vision concerns the keeping open of space of difference. Any specification of it proves inadequate and self-defeating, yet erasing this respect for the wholly other results in systems of oppression of one type or another. To safeguard this type of different, incommensurable, non-commercializable value, we cannot but live in faith.

My point is not that we need stable, foundational values. I do not think "we" ever had these, certainly not in any mode that was not fundamentally ambiguous. The point is rather that only openness towards the absolute difference of the religious dimension prevents us from idolizing pernicious, factitious values and using them to oppress others as well as ourselves. This openness itself is the only value we can hold on to, and even this has no content that can be held fast and preserved. It can only be continually enacted over and over again in the release of whatever fixed terms and formulated values we are tempted to hold on to, rather than releasing them

and letting them be given in their own way and from outside and beyond our control. This is a challenge to us to adjust and adapt to what life and history place in our way, as opposed to always going forth conquering and to conquer in the attempt to make the always different offering of any new time conform to our own preconceived terms. To be open to endless exchange, and to unlimited change—this is what religion has meant deeply, even though it has frequently generated its opposite in deeply conservative and fixed systems. These systems must be seen as valuable only insofar as they are instrumental to fostering unlimited receptivity of the wholly other and incalculable. Such a religious sensibility should be regarded as the generative matrix of values: it entails the release of all values as fixed and final—or even just as stably defined.

There is a new kind of religious (un)grounding of value possible and emergent for us today in the postmodern world. It is a value that is conjectural and projected, not grounded and demonstrable. It is based on relation to the indefinable. It requires a negative capability, a capability of placing all our determinate beliefs into abeyance. But this can be one of the most inventive ages of value that the world has ever seen. Creative possibilities for unprecedented justice arise in the face of what remains absolutely different and even inconceivable to all—what can thereby level and confound humanly concocted hierarchical distinctions. To avoid the trap of immanently human creativity that totalizes itself and the whole world made in its own image, this inventivity must acknowledge and be responsible to radical indeterminacy: it must thereby let itself be an enabling of inventivity that is not its own, one that comes from elsewhere, from an Other. This means infinite openness to others, to other people who express other perspectives and interpretations of this revelation from the Other that none of us can in any exclusive way encompass or possess.

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