

CARL RASCHKE
University of Denver

RADICAL ISLAM AND THE SPECTER OF THE DESERT –
OTHERWISE, THE CALL OF THEORY

SINCE THAT FATEFUL DAY IN SEPTEMBER 2001, a vast and tenebrous specter has suddenly spread out over the horizon of Western thinking in general, and the theory of religion in particular. It is, of course, the specter of radical Islam, or “Islamism” as it is commonly called.

There is an odd, but increasingly discrete dark thread that connects the destruction of New York’s twin towers, the nightmarish rondo of suicide bombings and military counterstrike that identify the Israel and Palestinian conflict, the launching of the Iraq war its intense political aftershocks, the Madrid bombings and the European response, not to mention inconceivable events that will inevitably occur pursuant to the writing of this “manifesto.” To date an equally vast “hermeneutics” designed to construe summarily this specter has built up steam among the Western intelligentsia, more often than not as a routine rhetorical occasion for championing the sundry ideological causes of the last half century. A Manichean politics has emerged, one wrongly termed “the culture wars.” The nativist and jingoist sentimentality of an America that has never been truly “nationalistic” in the European sense, largely because its drivenness derives from Enlightenment rationalism and libertarianism rather than from the ethno-mysticism of the “Old World”, solidifies aggressively and abruptly after “911”, only to dissolve over a few short seasons into a recrudescing “war of religion” between globalists and particularists, or diplomaticists and militarists. This Manichean politics mirrors the indigenous duality of the Western mind not just “in itself” but also “for itself,” as a good Hegelian might say. The duality defines all our responses. It is a duality which, furthermore, happens to be predicated on the West’s own “schizoanalysis” of the religious problem, a problem which even the most advanced “postmodern” mind is incapable of compassing.

We are all familiar with the mounting academic interest in “fundamentalism” as a conceptual issue, which might be compared to the old-style European colonialist’s curiosity about body-piercing, or female circumcision. Vattimo’s and

Derrida's Analogizing the "return of the religious – an expression introduced somewhat ironically by Derrida and Vattimo in their Capri colloquy – " to Freud's recovery of the instinctual is a case in point. Is religion really "returning," or has the dismantling of the monolith of post-Comtean sociology in cultural theory pried open a serious space where the obvious can at last be named and successfully theorized? Deconstruction is not theory, and it should never purport to be theory. But it can begin to make fissures through which can manifest a signifying of what is otherwise too treacherous to speak. The return of the religious is ultimately the exodus of signification from a positivist, or historicist, Egypt. But like the archetypal exodus it is both a fulfillment and a frustration of an earlier promise. The fulfillment lies in siting of the exodus itself, an escape from eternal bondage which is at once ironically the deference of the "promise." The deference is the "sight" of the desert with all its emptiness, horror, and cruelty and the struggle for faith that defines the story of the ensuing, and countless, generations.

Radical Islam is this specter one must cite/site/sight. We are reminded of Derrida's own meditations on the three "sites" or "aporetical places" – island, promised land, and desert - roughly corresponding to Platonic utopian idealism, Judeo-Germanic historicism, and the specter of aftermodernism which may be understood more profoundly with respect to Nietzsche's "specter" that stands at the door. It is at this last site where the specter looms larger than ever imagined. Derrida denominates this specter as Islam's "surge" (*déferlement*). Derrida cautions: "Never treat as an accident the force of the name in what happens, occurs or is said in the name of religion, here in the name of Islam. For, directly or not, the theologico-political, like all the concepts plastered over these questions, beginning with that of democracy or of secularization, even of the right to literature, is not merely European, but Graeco-Christian, Graeco-Roman. Here we are confronted by the overwhelming questions of the name and of everything 'done in the name of': questions of the name or noun 'religion', of the names of God, of whether the proper name belongs to the system of language or not, hence, of its untranslatability but also of its iterability (which is to say of that which makes it a site of repeatability, of idealization."¹

Radical Islam does not allow for the conceptual "differentiation" in the Graeco-Roman, or even the "Jew-Greek" sense, of the religious from a multitude of philosophical discourses. Even the twentieth century totalitarianisms with their death camps, their gulags of repression, and pyramids of sanguinary sacrifice still allowed for the persistence of some circumscribed cultural – and by implication a faintly "spiritual" – sphere of influence. As Lyotard argues, we still

¹ Jacques Derrida, *Acts of Religion*, edited by Gil Anidjar (London: Routledge, 2002), 46.

have in Auschwitz a strange sort of “differend.” But in Islamism even the differend vanishes. We are no longer dealing with something “religious” in the normative sense of the word. We fantasize an alterity. The Islamist, we are told, is merely our “Orientalist” shadow that needs to somehow be reintegrated with our overdrawn techno-imperial persona. We must heed Said’s warning against “any attempt to force cultures and peoples into separate and distinct breeds or essences”² - for example, Huntington’s clashing civilizations or the idiomatic struggle between “the West and the rest”. Even Said, a Palestinian, does not conceptualize Islamism, which is neither a question of the West’s “demonization” of the collective other or the devouring of some irenic Islam by a “chaosmotic” terror monster (in Deleuzian terms), a latter day Tiamat on whom we have somehow declared “war.” In Islamism we are confronting the violence of the “sacred” in a way we have never encountered either the violent, or the sacred, before. What do we make of Vattimo’s argument that we have now all read enough Nietzsche and Heidegger to become apostles of a “weak Christianity” in which we experience “the rebirth of the sacred in its many forms?”³ What is the difference between the phenomenology of religion and some some easygoing, post-metaphysical “animism,” the kind against which the Qu’ran calls for unending “struggle” (*jihad*).

A weak Christianity versus a globalized jihadism? An etherized and “pluralistic” hermeneutics versus the totalistic rendering of the *shahadah* – “there is no God but God.” We cannot circumscribe the *shahadah* as intoned by the Islamists as any kind of “religious” phenomenon. It is question of neither metaphysical congeniality nor the energetics of the mobile signifier. Radical Islam sets its face against both modernism and postmodernism, against the taken-for-granted sovereignty of the Cartesian subject and the infinite differentialism of the Deleuzian “concept, against the “West” even to the endless extent that the term can somehow be deconstructed. We are incapable of assessing this challenge on strictly religious, or philosophical grounds.

Even a decent sort of Derridian *différance/différance/déférence* proves insipid in this context. “The enemy of my enemy is my friend.” In the “liberal” West, at least since the late fifteenth century, the “enemy” has been the discourse of the Same with the “enemy’s enemy” the differend. Alterity is glimpsed first in the bourgeois, then the peasant, then the Jew, then the proletariat, then the “second sex,” then the wretched of the earth, then the “unconscious,” then the ungendered, then all who are somehow silent and forgotten, then identity in and of itself. Hegel understood that alterity must be infinitely generated by the

² Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Random House, 1979), 347.

³ Gianni Vattimo, *After Christianity*, trans. Luca D’Isanto (New York: Columbia University Press, 2001).

dialectic of the one and the many that begins with Plato's principle of the division and composition of all terminologies. But what if the differend, or not-same, is suddenly and epochally confronted by this differentialism as a strange, "apocalyptic" movement of nihilation – not "nihilism" in the dumb, "conservative" Christian reading of the term – but active "nullification" of every form and icon envisioned on sea and on land, of every Hegelian "diremption" in the nameless name "there is only"?

We are not raising a "political" question here, even though the raising of such a question in our posh, hyperpoliticized Manichean *maison* must inevitably be viewed as one? Nor are we posing the usual problem of religious diversity and "tolerance." The notion of tolerance has its origins in the conviction that there is a proper, if not somehow mutable, "geometry" to the sacred that has its origin in the epoch of *Aufklärung*. It presumes the limitability in a purely Greek manner of *to theos*, the "divine", not what Derrida dubs the "singularity" that arises when there is no distinction any more between "desert" and *khora*, between infinitely expanded and infinitely collapsed, when there is no longer "religion." Our *Aufklärung*, Derrida's strange light, privileges the subjectivity of "religious freedom" over infinite force. Yet even Derrida in "taking a stand for Algeria" discloses that he is far more comfortable discoursing on the island than in the desert. "Our idea of democracy implies a separation between the state and the religious powers, that is, a radical religious neutrality and a faultless tolerance which we would not only set the sense of belonging to religions, cults, and thus also cultures and languages. Away from the reach of any terror – whether stemming from the state or not – but also protects the practices of faith and, in this instance, the freedom of discussion and interpretation with each religion."⁴

Today we are witnessing something more profound, more titanic, and far more "perilous" than the religious scholar's planetary *circus maximus* in which the swords and maces of ever more desperate "fundamentalisms" clatter against each other, or dwarves, dancing bears, and exotic exhibitions constantly tempt our craze for novelty. It is certainly not "the return of religion." It is no coincidence that these metastasized monotheisms have both their scene and origin in the land of the nomad who left Ur for the "no man's land" that became a "holy land" in accordance with the strangest of summons. The nomadism of the postmodern mind is not without its incipient drama, as when Abraham wandered into Sodom. The academic rage against "theology" is in its very bowels the clamor about "monotheism." But what is monotheism, particularly the kind that has spawned sixteen-year-old suicide bombers and descendants of Holocaust survivors who would easily annihilate the "others" who trace their

⁴ Derrida, 306.

holy lineage to Ishmael rather than to Isaac? We are reminded of Badiou's criticism of Deleuze that his radical differentialism is really nothing more than an immanent neo-Platonism. Have we crossed the Rubicon finally, or transgressed the ultimate threshold of the "theory" of the religious when our differentialism finally encounters the violence of what we might in a kind of Bataillean ecstasy seek to name the *tout autrement*? As has been tirelessly pointed out, there is no dichotomy between the sacred and the secular in radical Islam. Nor does the dichotomy matter any more.

The *Aufklärung* laid waste the category when it stumbled upon the sublime? Must the entirety of the West, modern and postmodern, now lay waste the differend, particularly as it has been named "religious," when it confronts global jihad? Can we call again on Abraham? Or are we awaiting our own "apocalyptic" call?

CARL RASCHKE is professor of religious studies at the University of Denver and senior editor of the *Journal for Religious and Cultural Theory*. His most recent books are *The End of Theology* (The Davies Group, 2000) and *Fire and Roses: Postmodernity and the Thought of the Body* (SUNY 1996).

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