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THEORY FEVER: ARCHIVALISM AND  
THE FUTURE OF RELIGIOUS STUDIES

*The silkworm produced outside itself, before itself, what would never leave it, a thing which was no other than itself, a thing that was not a thing, a thing which belonged to it, to whom it was properly due. It projected outside what proceeded from it and remained at bottom at the bottom of it: outside itself in itself and near itself, with a view to enveloping it soon entirely. Its work and its being toward death. The living, tiny but still divisible formula of absolute knowledge. . . . preparing itself to hide itself, liking to hide itself, with a view to coming out and losing itself, spitting out the very thing the body took possession of again to inhabit, wrapping itself in white night.*

— Jacques Derrida, "A Silkworm of One's Own"

*Let us encrust a second citation into the exergue. Less typographical than the first, as we said, it nonetheless still maintains a reference to the graphic mark and to repetition, indeed to printing of the typical sort. Recurrent and iterable, it carries literal singularity into figurality. Again inscribing inscription, it commemorates in its way, effectively, a circumcision. A very singular monument, it is also a document of an archive. In a reiterative manner, it leaves the trace of an incision right on the skin: more than one skin, at more than one age. To the letter or by figure. The foliaceous stratification, the pellicular superimposition of these cutaneous marks seems to defy analysis. It accumulates so many sedimented archives, some of which are written right on the epidermis of the body proper, others on the substrate of an "exterior" body. Each layer here seems to gape slightly, as the lips of a wound, permitting glimpses of the abyssal possibility of another depth destined for archaeological excavation.*

— Jacques Derrida, *Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression*

**T**HEORY, AS A WAY OF CALLING ATTENTION to previously undisclosed presuppositions<sup>1</sup> or as a mode of radical inquiry, never escapes the persistent, univocal demand for its banishment. Early in her career,

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<sup>1</sup> See Murray Krieger, *The Institution of Theory* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1994).

before “theory” took hold across the humanities, Julia Kristeva referred to the institutional aggression toward the emergent (post)structuralist philosophies of language (theory) as “the thoughts of archivists, archaeologists, and necrophiliacs.”<sup>2</sup> This assault on (early) theory, the impulse to force it into the category of the extraneous or the supplemental has been theory’s greatest obstacle, until now. Recently, a new opposition to theory has emerged from within theory itself. The brute shoving to the margins that was indicative of the early anti-theory era, has been replaced by the fevered activities of the “theory archivist.” This “fever,” Jacques Derrida’s concept for interrogating the formal establishment of the Freud Archive, is the most recent installment in a long history of silencing theory. Just as the Freud Archive forces an end to the conversation that we now call “Sigmund Freud,” this particular “archive fever” makes theory invisible not by erasing it from memory, as we have witnessed for decades, but by making it visible, by putting it on exhibition and, thus, bringing it to an end—Kristeva’s warning of “necrophilia” come to fruition.

Theory, in general, suffers at the hands of the archivist, but it is religious theory that is now being circumscribed or redacted in the interest of an aggressive “archivalism.” If studies in religion, as many textbook editors contend through their many candid photographs of people “being religious,” amounted to exhibiting scenes of the “Holy,” as they appear across time and traditions, then the work of “religious theory” would be to clarify these views and, as inconspicuously or invisibly as possible, sharpen the resolution of “religious” inquiry. “Religion,” as the culmination of an unseen ocular act, with the “Holy” as its object, is, in this context, the archival activity in which the invisible is made visible, rendered more clearly and more insightfully. The study of religion, according to this perspective, enacts processes of revelation, opening, like an aperture, any religious experience to its complete theological, historical, cultural, or philosophical dimension. Those religious experiences that remain unseen, out-of-focus, or in the background are settled into the category of “mystery” or the *mise en scene* of the spectacle and thus become visible through their “invisibility” or obscurity. As the spectacle of the “Holy” falls into place within this religious studies paradigm, we find ourselves in an immense visual archive, a repository of phenomena that collectively forms the world exhibition of religion. “Theory” (*theoria*), “inhibited” and as a function of this endeavor of a “world exhibition of religion,” an “ocular device,” a “monocle,” provides the “unseen” methodological framework for displaying the various hierophanies, clearly and fully.

Today’s religious studies “archivalists” crowd theory into the category of method, compressing it into its object of study in order to make it imperceptible.

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<sup>2</sup> See Julia Kristeva, *Revolution in Poetic Language*, trans. Margaret Waller (New York: Columbia University Press, 1984).

The portion that is remaindered becomes subject to a fleeting chronology in which the specific analytics of theory are reduced to a “style” of scholarship, i.e., another way of saying or seeing the same old thing, *neti, neti*. Theory, however, as we have discussed it since the inception of *The Journal for Cultural and Religious Theory*, is not a scholarly style or a decorative “eyewear,” or some neutral methodological mechanism by which the objects of religious study come into fuller, crisper view. Theory is not something to be archived, either. Instead, as Gregg Lambert and I argued in a special issue, “The Future of Theory?,” (Vol. 4, No. 2, April 2003) theory belongs to future conversations, future instances that require that heretofore undisclosed presupposition be critiqued or that seeing be seen. Theory, as it is understood as a discipline or sub-discipline across the humanities and social sciences, disavows the place of the neutral “view-finder” and, contrary to this mechanistic analogy, insists on being seen as that which remains concealed, as impossible as that is. Arguably, the first lesson of postmodern theory that was widely learned comes from Michel Foucault’s *The Order of Things* in which he famously detailed Velasquez’s occupation of *Las Meninas*: “No gaze is stable, or rather, in the neutral furrow of the gaze piercing at a right angle through the canvas, subject and object, the spectator and the model, reverse their roles to infinity.”<sup>3</sup> Although subtitled an “archaeology” of the human sciences, Foucault’s concept entails an elaborate theoretical analysis that calls into question the simple excavation of history. This should not come as any surprise to those in philosophy and religious studies since it was Aristotle who in the *Nicomachean Ethics* presents *theoria* as the companion to *phronesis*, a necessary extension of episteme into speculation or contemplation. This Aristotelian definition of *theoria* was in turn accepted by medieval philosophers as the central element of theological inquiry. So, how is it possible to archive that which has resisted the archival impulse for centuries? Two additional questions come from this consideration of theory: Why has religious studies become, nearly exclusively, a non-theoretical sub-field of anthropology? And, what is the “future” of theory in religious studies?

The “future” of theory in religious studies will be determined by its *future*, which is the occasion of this manifesto.

Recently, in leading journals such as the *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, *Diacritics*, and *Critical Inquiry*, articulations of theory’s past, with each providing a narrative account of the rise of theory in the disciplines, have taken on greater ideological importance. This “witnessing” to the past of theory fails to consider the complexity of theory’s rise in the area of religious studies and in the humanities. I’ll argue that the contest, here, is not defined by who or what is

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<sup>3</sup> Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things: Archaeology of the Human Sciences*. (New York: Vintage, 1973), 3.

included in the “archive of postmodern religious theory,” but the concept of the archive itself.

Documenting the flight of theory from, let’s say, Carl A. Raschke’s “first” explorations of contemporary continental philosophy in *The Alchemy of the Word* (1979) to the present is a marginally useful enterprise. Historicizing texts and ideas, at the very least, provides a sense of the conversation or the occasion of a discourse. This is not intended to “patent” or “parent” postmodern religious theory, but to illustrate the contours of its rise and, as some would argue, fall. Such a “history” should mention the demise of Scholars Press and the success of university presses, namely The University of Chicago Press, in making widely available early monographs in continental philosophy of religion. The chronology, therefore, speaks to the institutional nature of postmodern religious theory--how it joined the mainstream academic world *via* the organs of legitimation, e.g. university presses in the 1980s. The documentation, here, is not of a timeline, but of a series of occasions by which theory (religious theory) was transformed into a sub-discipline of religious studies and, then, forgotten. Once that history is told, we must return to the concept of the “archive,” to “archive fever” to think about the future of postmodern religious theory.

The “archive” of religious theory we see being designed loses sight of the “archivalization process,” the blind, fevered desire to both finish and begin a discourse or a life. Jacques Derrida’s *Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression* is a helpful reference here as it draws the reader into the tomb of history, allowing a momentary reflection on the subtle mechanisms that close off the addition to or subtraction from a body of work--Freud’s in this instance. Derrida’s text, however, is not simply about finishing off Freud, converting Sigmund Freud, the writings of Sigmund Freud into the “Freud Museum.” This “domiciliation,” as Derrida calls it, is a “house arrest” in which the dynamic exchange between a figure and his or her world is severed. Of course, in the case of Freud, the “person” Sigmund Freud will never converse with the world, but the “text” of Sigmund Freud is still very much at work in the world. The question of whether or not the archive begins or ends the conversation is Derrida’s concern. Initially, the museum’s archive offers a complete collection of Freud’s life and works, thus inviting scholarly activity. After some consideration, however, the museum’s archive, as a complete collection, closes off the possibility of certain conversations. The authoritative collection, therefore, has a dual purpose: to open and to close. The same concern that one finds in Derrida’s work can be expressed in the context of postmodern religious theory or the so-called “future of theory” in general. The impulse to inventory leaves a number of unanswered questions, with the first being, Whom or what is being collected?

For whom should we reserve shelf space in the “Postmodern Religious Theory Archive,” PRTA? There is room for many and many will be honored. What will be archived, however, is not opened to unlimited space. And, even if it were a virtual archive, with all of electronic space to be filled, the “collection,” by its nature as a collection, must have a limit, an end. In this sense, the proper archive of postmodern religious theory must shut out any discourse, document, or inquiry suggesting that the archive is not complete. PRTA must be exhaustive and account for all of postmodern religious theory and this only could be accomplished in two possible ways: 1. archive everything; 2. erase somethings. The first possibility is impossible, so that leaves the second option. What to erase? Forget? To erase any particular thing (text or person) will not amount to much and may be too time-consuming. The only option, therefore, to properly archive postmodern religious theory or theory, in general, is to completely erase or forget theory itself. That is, erase or forget the possibility of excess that makes the archive *impossible*.

The archivist of theory is to theoretical inquiry what the historian of science is to scientific research. Any archive or fleeting history of theory overlooks this distinction. Neither activity actually engages in the intellectual processes of discovery that define each respective field. The archivist of theory, in this formulation, must forget the theoretical process in order to complete the exhibition. He or she must think spatially, in square footage. Theory, then, as a dynamic activity oriented toward the future must be “warehoused” in the past and apart from the archive—since the archive cannot contain its own negation. Theory, defined as an engagement with that which is to come, is too expansive for the archive and, contrary to every “collection,” would in fact contain the collection itself—bring it into a theoretical consideration. As terrifying as this is to the archivist, necrophiliac, it is a moment of reversal that we, “theorists,” should embrace, although theory would exceed that and this limit as well. As theory reaches past any limit, especially the limitation of style, it shouts one demand to us—that we not make an archive or a tradition of it.

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