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A LIBERAL POST-MORTEM?
OR, THE IMPOSSIBLE POSSIBILITY OF RADICAL
LIBERALISM

Review of Peter C. Hodgson, *Liberal Theology: A Radical Vision*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2007. Hardback. 134 pages. ISBN 978-0-8006-3898-6.

In his review essay from the Winter 2008 issue of this journal, Carl Raschke examines Mark Lilla's *The Stillborn God: Religion, Politics, and the Modern West*. Raschke calls the work "a kind of heritage book, an archaeology of the misread and misunderstood."¹ Where Raschke is best and most insightful is when explaining the meaning of Lilla's own title, an explanation that is even better and more precise than Lilla himself ever manages to provide. As Raschke writes:

The stillborn God is not necessarily identical with Nietzsche's more familiar "dead" God, though both are haunting figurations. They are tropes that remind us . . . that what the gloomy prophet of Sils Maria derided as the 'Christian moral interpretation of the world'—the melding of Jewish legalism with Platonic idealism and German pietism that alchemized into modern liberalism—has never been any real match for primitive religious passions or profound, innocent faith convictions . . . The deceased God is in many ways the liberal God. . . Such a God was 'born' not in ancient, but in modern times. And he was *born dead*.² (italics his)

Raschke continues, "The modern liberal God was stillborn . . . because he is a God that has been *conceived*, not "revealed. A God that serves primarily a hermeneutical or a 'constructive' . . . function in authorizing what are largely autonomous and 'godless' social or political agendas is no God at all. He is dead on arrival."³

Thus, in a nutshell, we have Lilla's concern not only with modern liberal theology—namely, the God of liberal theology is a stillborn God—but

¹Carl Raschke, "The Religion of Politics: Concerning a Postmodern Political Theology 'To Come.'" *Journal for Cultural and Religious Theory*, vol. 9, no. 1 (Winter 2008), 103.

²Ibid., 106.

³Ibid.

also with the dominant strand of modern Western political philosophy. Put simply, when it comes to its reckoning of religion, modern Western political philosophy fails by wanting to have its cake and eat it too. In making this argument, Lilla has in mind the likes of Rousseau, Kant, and Hegel, each of whom was responding in his own way to the perceived extremes of the dark religio-political vision of Thomas Hobbes. As Lilla writes of Hobbes' *Leviathan*, it "contains the most devastating attack on Christian political theology ever undertaken."⁴ What makes *Leviathan* such an important work is that it effectively reversed the order of understanding: "To understand religion and politics," Lilla explains in reference to Hobbes, "we need not understand anything about God; we need only understand man as we find him, a body alone in the world."⁵ This changes the traditional subject of theology from God and God's creation to humanity and humanity's own religious nature. As Ludwig Feuerbach once observed, theology so understood is nothing more than talk of humanity in a loud voice. For Lilla, it is Hobbes who paves the way for the advent of modern liberal theology with Friedrich Schleiermacher and his more radical heir Feuerbach. And while it is well-known how Karl Barth was critical of Schleiermacher for his theology-turned-anthropology, Lilla seeks to salvage the political possibilities this reordering of our religious epistemology presents. By changing the subject of Western political and theological discourse, Hobbes effected what Lilla terms "the great separation" wherein "we learned to separate our investigations of nature from our thoughts about God or the duties of man." This was to put an end to political theology in the modern West because if Hobbes were to have his way all appeals to divine revelation and religious authority would be considered illegitimate for the purposes of political philosophy.

Yet beneath Hobbes' constructive argument concerning the proper nature of modern political discourse was a scathing portrait of humanity's religious psychology, a psychology born of fear, anxiety, and need. While it is true, as Lilla writes, that Hobbes' principles "did not necessarily touch on the truth of Christian revelation, or any revelation," to borrow the phrase from Slavoj Zizek, he did leave the distinct impression of the "perverse core" of religion, and it is precisely this denigration of religion from which Rousseau, Kant, and Hegel recoil. In so doing, Lilla explains, they sought a third way between the extremes of the God-less, irreligion of Hobbes and the theocratic ambitions of the church, whether in its medieval Catholic guise as witnessed in Calvinist Geneva. While certainly modern in their philosophical orientation, the irony is that this strand of modern Western thought represented by Rousseau, Kant, and Hegel also, and perhaps unwittingly, laid the foundations of a new political theology, one that successfully defused

⁴Mark Lilla, *The Stillborn God: Religion, Politics, and the Modern West* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2007), 75.

⁵Ibid., 76.

the power of priestly authority by reigning it in within the limits of reason, but also elevated the cult and culture of religious life to the point that it “sanctified the banality of modern bourgeois life, offering reconciliation on the cheap.”⁶

These “children of Rousseau,” as Lilla refers to them, represent a wrong turn, a missed opportunity, or more forcefully even, an erasure of a hard-fought legacy that is still, perhaps now more than ever, worth retrieving. In other words, while we are heirs to the great separation, we have taken another path, the path of liberal theology that already concedes religion as a human projection, but that still nevertheless argues for the rational religion of moral progress and the all-too-easy harmonization of church and state wherein the church sanctions the political state as its own consummation. Thus, Lilla offers the following critical assessment:

Liberal theology was a political theology—an implicit one, a weak one, a complacent one, but a political theology nonetheless. . . The liberal theologians did not preach a revealing God who dictated the character of the good society. Instead, they divinized human religious yearnings as institutions of a God who works through history, and then divinized history as the sacred theater where human morality is developed and realized.⁷

In other words, not only was the God of liberal theology a stillborn God, but the modern political theology it both developed and sanctioned was a complacent and impotent one, utterly unable, in not unwilling, to rise to the various political crises with which the twentieth century was besieged. It could not, and cannot, have its cake and eat it too. As Lilla concludes:

There is no effacing the intellectual distinction between political theology, which appeals at some point to divine revelation, and a political philosophy that tries to understand and attain the political good without such appeals. And there are, psychologically speaking, real dangers in trying to forge a third way between them. One danger is the theological sanctification of a single form of political life, which is a common story in human history. Another is spiritual despair in the face of political failure, which is central to the story recounted here.⁸

To summarize, then, and admittedly to twist Lilla’s analysis towards my ends, we might say that the test of liberal theology is in its politics. That

⁶Ibid., 213.

⁷Ibid., 231.

⁸Ibid., 307-308.

is because, as Lilla's genealogical account shows, Rousseau and his liberal heirs had good philosophical, cultural, and religious reasons for softening the blow Hobbes had landed against the ancient political theological order. Yet in so doing they set the stage for a still more virulent—if only because it was more modern, and thus more ruthlessly proficient—form of messianic political theology that would stake a claim on the passions of modern day societies. Meanwhile, as these passions turned to bloodlust in all too many cases, liberal theology stood on the wayside, not entirely idly, but certainly impotently, making good sense, cataloguing the horrors of the modern age, but unwilling or incapable of mounting a response.

Of course, Lilla stands in good company with this harsh assessment of modern liberal theology. Not only is there the aforementioned Barth, whose theology of revelation first articulated in his commentary on Paul's *Epistle to the Romans* was said to land like a bomb-shell on the playground of modern theologians, but there is also his American neo-orthodox counterpart Reinhold Niebuhr who faulted liberal theology for its overly optimistic assessment of human nature, or more precisely, for its failure to take seriously the Christian doctrine of sin. More recently, there is the British school of Radical Orthodox thought, which rejects not only the humanistic starting point of liberal theology, but even more, modern liberalism writ large as being essentially nihilistic and for being in league with the postmodern consumer culture of late capitalism. This latter critique is shared by any number of political theorists on the Left for whom liberal democracy is in a perpetual state of crisis making the "state of exception" the working paradigm of government throughout the so-called liberal democracies in Western Europe and the United States.⁹ And finally, there are those from the various schools of liberation theology for whom modern liberal theology was insufficiently political by its lack of a critical theory that would meaningfully confront the ruling episteme and regimes of power.

In such a climate as this, one must wonder at the prudence of Peter Hodgson, the longtime Professor of Theology from Vanderbilt Divinity School, whose latest book is entitled *Liberal Theology: A Radical Vision*. By the title alone, the reader can already tell the seemingly impossible task Hodgson sets for himself. Of course, Hodgson is well aware of this post-liberal, if not anti-liberal, climate. As he writes in the Preface, "Liberalism has been under sustained attack for many years, and its diminution or loss would have tragic consequences both politically and religiously. We would be left with the alternatives of fundamentalism and neo-conservatism on one side, and atheism and secularism on the

⁹For instance, see Giorgio Agamben, *The State of Exception* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2005). See also Jacques Ranciere, *The Hatred of Democracy* (New York: Verso, 2007).

other – the reigning dogmatisms of our time” (ix). This acknowledgment continues in the opening lines from Chapter 1:

Postmodernity poses a complex set of challenges to liberal theology. On the one hand, it calls into question many of the assumptions of modernity upon which liberalism is presumed to rest, assumptions about the primacy and universality of reason, the autonomy of the individual, the accomplishments of science and technology, the superiority of Western societies based on free-market capitalism, and so on. (1)

Indeed, once one recognizes the various lines of attack against liberal theology, specifically, and liberalism, more generally, one can appreciate how Hodgson’s argument that there is something “intrinsically radical” both about theology for purporting “to make assertions about *God*,” and the liberal tradition as not the counter-intuitive proposition it may seem. In this way, Hodgson’s “radical liberalism” is akin to the “radical centrist” position of certain supposed post-partisan politicians. In defining this radically liberal theology, Hodgson goes to the semantic roots of the terms. The root or *radix* of radical theology, according to Hodgson, is God’s radical freedom. Coinciding with this starting point, is the central message of both liberal theology and the liberal tradition – namely, *libertas*. As Hodgson would argue, liberal theology is made radical by tracing its theological claims to their root, wherein it finds that humanity’s freedom is derived from, or made possible by, the freedom of God. Put more succinctly, *God gives freedom*, and to the extent that liberal theology is an emancipatory theology, it is doing the work of divine justice. Therefore, “if and when liberal theology takes up its work again in the complexities of our present situation,” Hodgson argues, “it will find itself driven to its roots, the *radix*, and it will become a ‘radical liberalism’” (2).

The remainder of the book includes Hodgson’s mapping out the position and sketching out the possibilities of this notion of radical liberalism. As he sees it, radical liberalism is situated between, and moderates the excesses of, evangelical or fundamentalism on one side, death-of-God and deconstructive a/theologies on another, and post-liberal and radical orthodox theologies on still another. As for the various forms of evangelical and fundamentalist theology on the right, Hodgson does not have a great deal to say, basically seeing these movements as essentially reactionary and without a constructive theological or political vision. Regarding death-of-God and deconstructive theologies, Hodgson borrows the label “radical postmoderns” from Paul Lakeland. As both Hodgson and Lakeland see it, these radical postmoderns share too many of the cultural assumptions of contemporary society wherein the individual has become nothing more than a commodity, and is given over to a “culture that is increasingly fragmented and oriented to the values of consumerism, sensual gratification, and gratuitous violence”

(2). If, in this sense, the radical postmoderns are hyper-modernists, post-liberal and radical orthodox theologies represent a counter-modern trend in contemporary thought. As Hodgson writes, they are the ones “for whom modernity itself is a problem (its liberalism, moral relativism, secular humanism, and so forth)” (4).

To again borrow the label from Lakeland, those who identify with the tradition of radical liberalism, by contrast, are called the “critical postmoderns,” and are characterized by living “critically in the postmodern world, affirming some of it (the decentering of the human person, Western culture, and Christ), challenging other parts of it (its relativism, atheism, aestheticism), wanting to carry the unfinished project of modernity forward but in a vastly changed cultural world” (4). It is this last claim of “wanting to carry the unfinished project of modernity forward” that truly differentiates Hodgson from his counter-modern or post-liberal counterparts. Or, as Hodgson would prefer to put the difference, his main point of contrast with radical orthodoxy is found in what precisely is in need of radicalization. As he writes, “I believe that what needs radicalization is not orthodoxy in the form of patristic creeds and medieval practices but the *liberality* at the heart of the gospel—a liberality that demands openness to and mediation with the modern/postmodern world of which we are critical, and that blocks imperialistic theological claims” (9).

In a surprise, even to myself, (especially considering the fact that I would count myself among the radical postmodernist camp which Hodgson rejects) there is little in this account with which I can find fault. No doubt, this delineation he is offering relies on some bit of caricature. Consider the case of Jacques Derrida, for instance. As the presumed father of deconstruction, he is also the thinker who figures most prominently in the early development of postmodern a/theology. Both Raschke and Mark C. Taylor famously identified deconstruction as the hermeneutic of the death of God. Yet, as many commentators on Derrida have persuasively shown, far from being the radical postmodernist who revels in the hyper-reality of today’s virtual culture, Derrida identified himself more with the Enlightenment than whatever might be meant by the term postmodern culture. For instance, John Caputo writes, “While Derrida is often made out to be the sworn enemy of the Enlightenment, he would contend, and we with him, that in fact the deconstruction he advocates is a continuation of what is best about the Enlightenment, but by another means.”¹⁰ Likewise, in her introduction to the volume *Philosophy in a Time of Terror*, which includes

¹⁰John D. Caputo, *Deconstruction in a Nutshell: A Conversation with Jacques Derrida* (New York: Fordham University Press, 1997), p. 54. See also Jacques Derrida, “The Principle of Reason: The University in the Eyes of Its Pupils.” *Diacritics*, vol. 13 (1983), pp. 3-20.

a dialogue with, and a critical commentary on, both Jurgen Habermas and Jacques Derrida, Giovanna Borradori concludes:

Those who interpret Derrida as a certain kind of postmodernist—a counter-Enlightenment thinker with a leaning toward relativism—would use his deconstruction of the universal reach of tolerance in support of their argument. To the contrary, for Derrida, demarcating the historical and cultural limits of apparently neutral concepts of the Enlightenment tradition such as tolerance expands and updates rather than betrays its agenda. . . Far from curtailing the demand [Enlightenment] demand for universal justice and freedom, deconstruction renews it infinitely.¹¹

So, for what it is worth, where Hodgson identifies radical liberalism with the desire to carry the unfinished project of modernity forward, Derrida and the so-called radical postmoderns who follow in his wake would heartily agree.

This caricature of radical postmodernism should not be a surprise considering that Hodgson only mentions Derrida once, and that comes only in a footnote in which Hodgson cites a critical study of Derrida that conflates his work and impact with that of Michel Foucault. But perhaps more significant is when Hodgson lumps postmodern deconstructive theologies with atheism and secularism. On this point, Hodgson is woefully, even belligerently, off the mark. Anyone versed in deconstructive philosophy and theology knows that far from being beholden to a secularist agenda or mindset, it is the thinkers from these discourses that have in many ways led to discussion on the global resurgence of religion, a resurgence that has gone hand in hand with postmodernism.¹² While it is true that a first generation of deconstructive theology took its distance from traditional expressions of religiosity and was characterized by in large by its hermeneutics of suspicion, it was quickly rounded out by a plethora of new voices affirming the religious passion that drives deconstruction and demonstrating the potential affinities between select religious communities and a postmodern deconstructive analysis of culture. For a case in point of the latter, one need look no further than the Emergent Church Movement in the United States. In addition to this dated view of

¹¹Giovanna Borradori, *Philosophy in a Time of Terror: Dialogues with Jurgen Habermas and Jacques Derrida* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2003), p. 17

¹²For instance, see *Religion*, edited by Jacques Derrida and Gianni Vattimo (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998), which contains the proceedings from a conference held in 1994 in Capri on the apparent “religious revival” that was taking place. This book has been credited with drawing attention to, if not prompting, the religious or theological turn in contemporary philosophy.

secularism, Hodgson also recycles a reductive account of atheism, at least insofar as it pertains to death-of-God theology. As Gianni Vattimo has shown, not only has the death of God “liquidated the philosophical basis of atheism,” but it has even gone further in renewing the possibility of religious experience and the philosophical credibility of belief.¹³ Indeed, it was this insight that was the impetus for Vattimo’s co-authored book with Caputo entitled *After the Death of God*, in which the argument is made precisely that after the death of God what we find—ironically perhaps, but no less assuredly—is religious belief.¹⁴

These minor criticisms (which really amount to little beyond a small-scale turf war) notwithstanding, this work is a generous and soul-searching book, one presented as a gift to a new generation of theologians and scholars of religion by a keen and active mind who has earned through his many years of teaching and writing the badge of wisdom. But returning to where we began, the question that must be asked is whether Hodgson’s radical liberalism rises to the challenge Lilla lays out. Specifically, given Lilla’s argument that the God of modern liberal theology is a stillborn God bequeathing to us an impotent and complacent form of political theology, what in Hodgson’s account would cause us to reconsider and reclaim this tradition of liberal thought?

One key for offering a response to this challenge is with Hodgson’s alternative reading of Hegel. Like Lilla, Hegel plays a central role in Hodgson’s analysis. But whereas Hegel’s political theology represents the bourgeois ideal of the liberal tradition for Lilla, for Hodgson a serious critical engagement with Hegel represents “a departure for liberal theology” (31). Liberal theologians have traditionally eschewed the speculative character of Hegel’s thought. Nevertheless, for Hodgson it is Hegel who allows the theologian to think holistically without reducing everything to sameness. That is to say, for Hegel, as Hodgson writes, “God mediates between nature and humanity, preventing their collapse into each and other, and that God becomes a concrete spiritual God through the mediation of nature and finite spirit” (43). Hodgson continues, “In this complex interaction God does not cease to be God (the absolute, the universal), but God *is* God only as a multifaceted wholeness that is cosmotheandric” (44, emphasis his). This more holistic form of thought that still maintains difference and that conceives of God as a self-differentiating whole, a God that is both transcendent and immanent, both spiritual and material, also provides the contemporary liberal theologian the “way to affirm both tragedy and redemption” (48) and thus, complete and correct the impartial worldviews provided by radical postmoderns on the one hand and Christian triumphalists on the

¹³Gianni Vattimo, *After Christianity* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002) p. 16.

¹⁴See John D. Caputo and Gianni Vattimo, *After the Death of God*, edited by Jeffrey W. Robbins (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007).

other. In addition, as Hodgson argues, “the geography of religions that Hegel actually offers . . . points in the direction of pluralism” (61).

It is not as if Hodgson is unaware of the critique of Hegel, but the key to understanding Hodgson’s theological appropriation and exposition of Hegel, especially in contrast to Lilla, is discerned in the purpose to which Hegel is deployed. For Hodgson, while Hegel is “the mediating thinker of modernity par excellence” (31), he is just one of the many resources the liberal theologian has at his/her disposal. And if and where Hegel is found wanting, the inner logic of Hegel’s dialectics can be read against itself. Thus, like Lilla, while Hodgson acknowledges that Hegel “does not anticipate the terrifying forms of dehumanization that have appeared in late modernity” (49), and criticizes him for his hierarchical and teleological form of thought that presents Protestantism as the final consummation of the history of religion, this only requires the “deepening of Hegel’s own understanding” such that any closure of thought is shown to be premature. As Hodgson writes:

A Hegelianism at the beginning of the twenty-first century readily acknowledges that the divine Spirit does not reach its goal in history, that Christianity belongs among other determinate religions on the path to consummation, and that the religion of freedom is a work in progress shaped by a diversity of cultural trajectories. (62)

In other words, the problems with Hegel are merely accidental, and certainly not symptomatic of the problems endemic to the liberal tradition writ large as Lilla sees it.

But while Hodgson does an admirable job making the case for Hegel’s enduring relevance, one cannot help but wonder whether it is enough, or whether that is all there is. Indeed, read in the context of Lilla’s concerns, we find in Hodgson’s Hegel a more palpable figure with the reigning orthodoxies of our day, but therein lays Hodgson’s fatal flaw. The problem with the liberal tradition as Lilla defines it is not its triumphalism or its exclusivism, but its complacency – or even worse, its sanctification of the common episteme. The fact that Hegel is even deployed at all confirms Lilla’s critique of the liberal tradition – namely, the God of liberal theology is a stillborn God precisely because it is a God conceived, and not revealed. Thus, while Hodgson’s deployment of Hegel shows the pliancy of liberal theology, this might just as well be central to its political shortcomings. What is needed instead for this liberal vision to be truly radicalized is a willingness to subject this tradition to a radical critique, a critique that risks the tradition’s own dissolution. This is the model of political and religious philosophy offered by Vattimo in his parallel account of the history of the weakening of being and the secularization of Christianity. Like Hodgson, Vattimo’s cause is freedom, but unlike Hodgson, Vattimo embraces the nihilism of

postmodern culture as the condition of possibility for a truly emancipatory politics.¹⁵ Or there are those committed to a radical democracy by which the presumed basis for democratic theory and practice—namely, the notion of popular sovereignty—provided by modern liberalism is put into question.¹⁶ This not only provides a more radical vision than that of Hodgson's, but a renewed promise for the very idea of democracy itself.

Liberal theology will not and cannot provide a radical vision so long as it remains invested in salvaging the past and defending its legacy. Of course, it is perhaps unreasonable or unfair to ask Hodgson and the tradition of liberal theology he so proudly defends to be anything other than what they are, but in so being they reveal perhaps better than any external critique could, the very shortcomings they hoped to overcome. I have no doubt, along with Hodgson, that liberal theology in particular and liberalism more broadly are in need of being radicalized, but once radicalized it stands the risk of becoming something other than what it was, a risk that Hodgson apparently dare not assume.

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¹⁵See Gianni Vattimo, *Nihilism and Emancipation*, edited by Santiago Zabala (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004).

¹⁶For example, see Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Empire* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2000), and *Multitude: War and Democracy in the Age of Empire* (New York: Penguin Press, 2004).