

NOT YOUR GRANDMOTHER'S THEORY OF RELIGION:  
AN INTERVIEW WITH CARL RASCHKE

The following is an interview conducted by JCRT Book Review Editor David Hale with the journal's Senior Editor Carl Raschke about his book *Postmodernism and the Revolution in Religious Theory: Toward a Semiotics of the Event* (Charlottesville VA: University of Virginia Press, 2012).

HALE: It was about two years ago that *Postmodernism and the Revolution in Religious Theory* was published with University of Virginia Press. What has been the reaction so far? Who has the book affected the most?

RASCHKE: The response has been generally good, so far as one can expect from a relatively technical academic book in philosophy of religion and religious studies. From communications I've received so far I get the impression that the primary readership has been those who hang out in the fields of Continental philosophy and philosophy of religion as well as theological studies. In other words, these are people who are familiar with my work as a philosopher, not as a theorist. I was hoping that it would find more of a readership among scholars in religious studies per se, but I don't see a lot of evidence in that direction - unfortunately.

HALE: Why do you think that is the case?

RASCHKE: Unfortunately, I think many scholars who identify with the field of "religious studies," or the "study of religion" - I'm not talking about theologians - are resistant to theory. Or at least they regard it as something you need in occasional doses, like vitamin C tablets, to ward off some more troubling pathology, such as academic irrelevance. When they do indulge in theory, they usually take a "great books" approach in refreshing themselves and their students with the "classics" of the field like Durkheim or Freud or Malinowski or Tylor. If you consider the vast majority of both graduate and undergraduate courses on the theory, not to mention the methodology, of religion, they consist in these classic tomes that basically end with the Second World War. Never mind that all these books are now ruthlessly criticized by feminists, and critical theorists as both "patriarchal" and thoroughly "colonialist" in their genesis and mindsets - not to mention that they are dated and inconsequential for most other disciplines. But these theory-minded "preservationists" in the academy believe it's good for our souls, and the souls of our protégés, to be steeped in the classic theory of religion - only.

HALE: So what's wrong with reading classical texts in the theory of religion? Isn't it better that people have a little theory under their belt than none at all?

RASCHKE: There's nothing wrong with reading the classic texts. But by excluding or ignoring most contemporary theory, particularly the new critical theory of religion with its post-structuralist origins, which has been forged in recent decades outside of the study of religion (especially in disciplines such as psychoanalysis, Marxist philosophy, critical feminism, and postcolonial theory as a whole), you end up self-marginalizing your own field of research. What if most of the creative work in economics were done in political science, or most of the new breakthroughs in cognitive psychology were carried out within the orbit of sociology and anthropology? You would ask, "what's wrong with this picture?" And something is definitely wrong with the current picture in the study of religion.

HALE: Some would note that you've been critical of religious studies as a field most of your career. You even wrote an article a generation ago about religious studies as a "default of critical intelligence". That is a pretty harsh way of phrasing it. Can't you just let the study of religion do what it does, and allow other fields to do the heavy lifting, which many of them appear to be already doing?

RASCHKE: When I used that phrase you reference - I believe it was the late 1980s or early 1990s - I had in mind the way in which every New Age cult to come along (and there were hundreds, if not thousands, in that day and age) was taken seriously and given an equivalent weight by certain scholars of religion, particularly those who formed the nucleus of what we have come to call the "new religions movement." But I think the same sort of lack of critical discernment persists, though it has taken entirely different forms, in the present era. The pathology is what I would call a "false positivism" or a *pseudo-phenomenology* that does not seek to probe, or dialectically reflect, beyond the bare given. The only way you can really approach religion as a researcher, as opposed to a committed practitioner of some sort, is to look at texts, or certain forms of codified discourse (for example, religious law, doctrinal statements, canonical renderings of *Torah*, *dharmā*, and so forth) - in other words, public, elite, literate renderings of what so-called religious believers believe, or that religious adherents adhere to. Jonathan Z. Smith stressed this point several decades ago. But that is to mistake the sign for the substance.

In many ways the academic study of religion seeks to function as a kind of secular clergy, offering up *ex cathedra* interpretations of what the profusion of faiths today are supposed to mean, or not mean. But the era when clergy spoke authoritatively for the masses is long gone. The masses, particularly in the West, are well-educated, and they have access to instant information and the exchange of ideas through social media. The signifying systems for which religious social elites once had exclusive custodial responsibility have now been diffused to the four winds, and can be picked up and utilized in any way that someone with whom they might resonate desires to deploy them. It is because of this disconnect that you have the folly of religious "experts", for example, proclaiming that ISIS is not "really" Islam. But alienated and unassimilated Middle Eastern youth in the *banlieux* of France are increasingly "getting religion" and going off to fight with the jihadists in the deserts of Syria and Iraq. Who decides what is "really" Islam? Certainly not programs in Islamic Studies at

American colleges and universities. It is the “signs” of Islam, no matter how they are used or supposedly misused, that count. This approach, in effect, has been the central and provocative thrust of French social theorist Olivier Roy in his best-selling book *Holy Ignorance*, which I cite approvingly in my volume.

HALE: In your book you argue – or seem to argue – that there is no such thing as the “phenomenon” of religion. What are you driving at there?

RASCHKE: A “phenomenon,” as the Greek etymology of the word implies, is “what appears.” In the philosophical discipline known as “phenomenology”, which its founder Edmund Husserl in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century defined as the “strictest of sciences”, there is always an attempt to discover somehow the “essence” hidden behind the phenomenon. The search for the “essence” of what we call religion – a pursuit now generally dismissed by critics as “essentialism” – occupied scholars for much of the late nineteenth and the first two-thirds of the twentieth centuries. Essentialism has now been connected by scholars, such as Tomoko Masuzawa, to strategies of colonial administration, something with which I heartily agree. Only when you’ve “tamed” religious impulses and idiosyncratic types of fervor by defining them in terms of normative canons along with unacceptable deviations can you politically control them, something the Romans discovered two millennia ago. The very notion of “world religions” or “religious traditions” – a taxonomy accepted uncritically by virtually every citadel of higher learning – belongs to this proto-colonialist strategy of typologization.

If we can cite Foucault, it is what we might call a *biopolitics of the transcendental signified*. But this sort of biopolitics has less the aim of regulating spiritual health for the sake of domestic tranquility and the seamless exercise of the “soft power” of the state apparatus. It has more to do with preventing in the name of such regulative hegemony the actual socially effective – and sometimes even insurrectionary – force that is present in religious conviction and motivation itself. It is only by reclaiming the signifying potential of religiosity per se that it can be emancipated from what Max Weber would have called the “iron cage” of the regulatory, secular apparatus of biopolitical control. In order to achieve that goal we need a whole new way of theorizing what we mean by “religion” – an anti-essentialism that is not merely the carping kind of protests against operative theoretical meaning-structures by numerous aggrieved partisans of certain presumed identities that have been excluded by the so-called “dominant discourse”. The dominant discourse ironically these days is *essentially* this kind of caviling identity politics of meaning. The kind of anti-essentialism (or let’s call it an *anti-phenomenalism*) I have in mind, and in which I try to flesh out in this book, relies on the tools and theoretical “technics” of contemporary post-structuralism – or what is popularly termed “postmodernism” – itself. It is a technics that heavily relies on the relationship between three terms that have dominated in this very powerful and prestigious discourse (a discourse tragically that has been either ignored, hijacked, or lamely co-opted by the real “dominant discourse” in religious studies). These terms were first enunciated by Jacques Derrida in the 1960s, and have to this day not been appreciated for their relevance or theoretical clout. They are *sign*, *singularity*, and *event*.

HALE: Perhaps now I might ask you to summarize exactly what your thesis is in this book, and how your engagement with those terms serve as building blocks for a new way of theorizing religion.

RASCHKE: Before I answer that question head-on, let me contextualize what I am going to say with a few remarks about the philosophical resources we tend to use, or to abuse, in the formation of the theory of religion. To begin with, I did not write this book because I thought we needed another work in the "theory of religion." One question we have to ask ourselves in an age when religious actors often tend to offend our moral, and even our civic, sensibilities is whether a theory of religion in the sense the so-called "classics" (for example, those contributions by Weber, Müller, Durkheim, Tylor, etc.) or even the more modish contemporary authors like Roy, Stark, or Vasquez is even relevant any longer.

If you look at the so-called "classics" you will find that most of them, with the exception of Weber, were not interested in "theorizing" religion in the larger way as they were in isolating its most primitive genomes so that they could explain somehow its persistence in a rapidly advancing and industrializing world. I think its hidden agenda was to use theory as a sort of vaccine to immunize the domesticated, secular mind against the excesses of the religious imagination. We know how the theory of religion in its youthful phases was tied directly to European colonial administration and the regulation of the cognitive and spiritual habits of colonized peoples. There was a not inconsequential concern about religion as a site, or force, of resistance against the colonialist *imperium*, which could have easily upset the apple cart, so to speak. Walter Mignolo has written extensively about this "darker" legacy of the Enlightenment, and I won't take the time to embroider on it here.

Nowadays things are different, but not all that different. Granted, there is no longer the familiar post-Enlightenment anxiety about religious motives gaining cultural ascendancy. But there remains a profound and mounting anxiety about the outbreaks of "fundamentalism," particularly the violent kind, and even more specifically the violent Islamist kind. Slavoj Žižek has observed rather sardonically that the intellectual's fear of fundamentalism masks a genuine fear about the power of religion to disrupt what I have elsewhere termed the Western intelligentsia's uncritical commitment to a "managerial rationality" that seeks, almost fanatically at times, to compass and control the rough and jagged edges of collective life.

Rather than excising, or exiling, those dangerous marginalia of humanity, or forms of human experience, abiding and circulating in our midst – as we did in the old days when we burned heretics or excommunicated ideological deviancy – we now adopt what Foucault calls a "biopolitical" regime designed to neutralize their habits of excess. American pluralism and the corporate diversity industry that guarantees it, while praiseworthy as an effective political strategy of promoting the ideal of making "one out of the many," is and has always been pure biopolitics in Foucault's sense. But biopolitics does not allow for what I term the "force of the exception." I wrote this book primarily to develop the alphabet for a theoretical vocabulary that empowers us to enunciate this "force of exception" – and to understand religion overall not as a grand global fair of

docile little "belief silos" through which the multi-culturally attuned might calmly browse and with which they can, under the properly orchestrated circumstances, personally engage, but as different versions of what Gandhi himself termed *satyagraha* ("truth force").

HALE: So why the title then? Why do you spend most of the book explicating the general theories of postmodern philosophy, or what historically we know as "poststructuralism"? How do you use those philosophical resources to break new ground, as you yourself profess, in the terrain of theory?

RASCHKE: Aside from the fact that the publisher wanted a generic, not a poetic, title to convey what I was talking about in the book, I wanted to show that the entire revolution in Continental philosophy over the past several decades was forcing the theory of religion to take entire stock of itself anew. Classic theory always drew on a sort of taxonomical "essentialism" that post-colonial theorists have come to excoriate and mercilessly criticize. However, the critics of the classical approach tend to fall back into some kind identitarian theory of exclusion and empowerment, which, if they ever bothered to become self-critical, would recognize is still essentialist at bottom. Nietzsche described Christianity as "Platonism for the mob." I would identify identity politics, and identity theory, as essentialism for the dislocated.

And that is where post-structuralism really comes in. Identity theory knows how to name difference without accounting for the process of *differencing*, other than relying on certain *faux* explanatory concepts like "domination," "exclusion", etc. which merely describe asymmetrical social structures without providing the sort of *genealogical* account that Foucault, following Nietzsche, insisted lies at the heart of any radical theory of the *differend* itself. Post-structuralism was always about two things - *force and difference*, notions that we can trace all the way back to Saussure's *Course in General Linguistics* and depend not on the philosophical notion of the "concept" or the "construct" (the staple terminology of essentialism), but on the analysis of the relationship between *signifier and signified*, the key distinction of the science of semiotics.

And there is a third important term that anchors post-structuralism to this approach we call "semiotics." That is the *event*. Hence my subtitle. The "moment of difference," as "deconstructionism" would have it, is always generative of new, dynamic sign-complexes and signifying capabilities for those iterations of language that strike us as meaningful and familiar. What "causes" these new types of *ontogenesis* to arise and multiply, especially when we think in terms of concrete history? Mohammed's "revelation" in the case and the sudden eruption of warrior armies that take over the Middle East; the crucifixion of a Galilean-Jewish-nobody under Roman rule in Judea, that within three centuries leads to the overthrow of the empire itself? It is the "event," or what I technically term the "singularity", in accordance with the word used in astrophysics to describe "black holes." Black holes are singular sources of creative energy, cosmic disruption, and material transformation that do not abide by any prior rule of generative logic. They are old stars that have collapsed into themselves, but out of that collapse emerges a new galactic "power source."

Žižek re-reads the standard doctrines of “materialism” in this new, radical way, claiming that what we term “dialectical materialism” has nothing to do with a grim machinery of lifeless and soulless matter chugging away according to the invariant laws of nature Newton first dreamed up, but, on the contrary, everything to do with what he terms “ontological collapse.” Something can only “be” once the idealistic machinery of explanation that we term “scientific language” breaks down. Remember, inside a black hole it is said the “law of nature” themselves no longer have significance. I want to treat religious reality in this manner - and, by the way, I refrain from using the term “religion” itself, which makes it an easy carrier of the essentialist bacillus, preferring to employ the phrasing “the religious” instead. I want to show that this “force of exception” is a real force, and in many ways cannot be tamed as easily as we in our managerial-rationalist fantasies, using essentialist or quasi-essentialist canons of inference, have assumed we can do.

HALE: You’ve talked rather eloquently about how your book throws down the gauntlet to the study of religion as a field. But what about philosophical and theological studies, which you say has so far been your primary audience? Do they get, or care, about the question of the “religious”?

RASCHKE: Philosophers are just as *uncomfortable* talking about religion as religious studies professionals are about theoretical, or theological, approaches to their subject matter. Let me start with the latter. I think one reason for the latter’s allergy toward the theoretical is not only the difficulty of philosophical thinking as a whole, but because they have a sort of “historical preservationist” instinct that wants to maintain the seemingly self-evidencing, unique set of data with which they believe they are dealing. They want to “locate” it somewhere - culturally, socially, historically - in order to give it a certain intellectual heft. However, they are oblivious to the fact, as Olivier Roy, in his latest work, so magisterially makes clear to us, namely, that there really is no such thing nowadays as a “cultural” matrix in which religion can be convincingly studied.

The “religious” itself, aside from the singular events that give it origin and sustain it, constitutes every shifting assemblages of signs and seemingly arbitrary sign-operations, which can be deployed for a variety of seemingly *outré* aims and objectives, such as *jihad* without the constraints of “just war,” or “Bible churches” where no one really reads the Bible carefully, if at all, or the multiple varieties of “yoga” that still retain residues of the ancient ritual language while making it merely a type of exotic calisthenics for busy urban professionals.

As for philosophers eschewing the subject of religion, the problem at one level of course go all the way back to the ancient Athens vs. Jerusalem debate. But I think the problem is even subtler. I think we are at the kind of “crisis of European philosophy” that Edmund Husserl named in the 1930s, and which Heidegger in his own fashion sought to draw our attention to. I would call it the *crisis of origins*. Post-structuralism has made us aware of a crisis of conceptualization (or what in my new book with Columbia University Press I dub the “crisis of representation”), what Nietzsche referred to as the “nihilism” that lurks in the cracks that are ever deepening in the proud tower of European rationality. But the crisis of origins calls for an altogether different response from what we are

used to, not the smug sort of *irenic irony* and discursive detachment conventionally associated with popular postmodernism. It calls for a *descent into the abyss* from which our meanings emanate and crystalize.

The question of the “religious” is as much an *existential question* for philosophers as it is for scholars of religion. To put it simply, it is Heraclitus’ question (which was of course Heidegger’s overarching question): what do we mean by *logos*? Questions of theory, questions of theology, questions of philosophy all come down to this question. Heidegger called it the question of “originary thinking,” but the Heideggerian nomenclature, while seductive as a sort of mantra for the post-structuralist reorientation of the mind in order to ask the question properly, doesn’t ultimately work. Our thoughts truly have to be “abysmal”, as Nietzsche called them. We need a “third way” from the choice of the *via negativa*, or “apophaticism”, and the *via eminentia*, that famous Medieval binary. I would call it the *via in abyssum*, the search for the molten center of the “earth” on the way to which we come across both marvels and monstrosities – as the old sci-fi movies would have us believe. Žižek, for one, has made us aware that the real and the monstrous are virtually inseparable from each other, and that goes for the “reality” of the religious.

The discourse of religion in all its interdisciplinary instantiations (some of which, unfortunately, are rather silly and fluffy in my estimation) is that broad zone of minimal intelligibility that runs up against the fearful boundary which in the science of black holes is called the “event horizon,” the boundary beyond which the source of what we know is catastrophically generated but remains impenetrable to our theoretical gaze. Here we have the opacity of the “event” itself from which the universe of signs, like starfields, nebulae, and particles of dark matter, are constantly generated.

There is no “essence” to the singularity. It is what I at the end of the book, citing a metaphor from Rilke, term the “fearful angel.” Our better angels of theory had better learn how to prostrate themselves before that one.

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