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

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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

1 This paper was originally written for a lecture given on September 28, 2005 in the "Forum in Culture, Value, and the Meaning of Life" in the Department of Philosophy at the University of Hong Kong.

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.
The Church as an Invisible Kingdom

"The Church is the dynamic, living organism of God's people, existing in history and affirmed in the Word of God. It is the community of believers united in faith and love, a body of God's chosen people, called to worship and serve Him. The Church is not a static, unchanging institution, but a living, breathing organism, growing and developing as believers live out the Word of God in their daily lives.

The Church fulfills several important roles in the plan of God:

1. **Worship:** The Church gathers together to worship God, singing praises, offering prayers, and studying the Word of God. This is a time for believers to come together and connect with God and with one another.
2. **Evangelism:** The Church is called to share the good news of Jesus Christ with a lost world. This includes both verbal and non-verbal witnessing, as well as providing opportunities for others to come to faith in Jesus.
3. **Discipleship:** As believers grow in their relationship with God, they are called to disciple one another, helping each other become more like Christ.
4. **Service:** The Church is called to serve others, both within the church and in the community at large. This can include acts of kindness, volunteering, and other forms of loving service.

The Church is a community of believers, united in faith and love, working together for the glory of God. As believers, we are called to live out the Word of God in our daily lives, seeking to honor God and serve others.
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-founded and self-grounding, is actually conceived in the image of God, traditionally thought of as ipsum esse subsistens, 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 “asity,” literally “being unto itself,” that is, self-generated and self-generating being. To this extent, secularism, as the declaration of the self-substantive 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.” 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.

Vahanian, “Theology” 14. I work especially from Vahanian, Dieu anonyme ou la peur des mains. A good digest in English of key ideas is Vahanian, “Theology and the Secular” 10–25.
post-society" description. The emphasis is on the dynamic and evolving nature of social identity, which is constructed and negotiated through social interactions and power relations.

In contrast to the concept of "post-society," the "empowerment" approach in social work emphasizes the importance of client agency and the active participation of individuals in their own empowerment processes. This approach recognizes the complex interplay of social, economic, and political factors that influence people's lives and seeks to empower clients to make choices that are meaningful and self-determined.

In summary, the "post-society" and "empowerment" approaches in social work represent different perspectives on the role of the social worker and the empowerment of clients. The "post-society" approach highlights the need for a systemic perspective, while the "empowerment" approach emphasizes the importance of individual agency and participation in reclaiming power.

From a developmental perspective, the "post-society" approach may be seen as a reaction to the perceived failure of traditional social work approaches in addressing the complex needs of contemporary society. The "empowerment" approach, on the other hand, may be seen as a more forward-thinking approach that seeks to empower individuals to overcome the challenges they face and to create meaningful change in their communities.

In conclusion, the "post-society" and "empowerment" approaches in social work reflect different perspectives on the role of the social worker and the empowerment of clients. While the "post-society" approach emphasizes the need for a systemic perspective, the "empowerment" approach highlights the importance of individual agency and participation in reclaiming power.

In light of these differences, it is essential for social workers to be aware of and responsive to the needs of their clients and to use evidence-based practices that are grounded in both the "post-society" and "empowerment" perspectives.
The passage discusses the importance of recognition and the role of emotions in our understanding of the world. It emphasizes the role of emotions in shaping our perception and actions, suggesting that without proper recognition and emotional intelligence, our understanding of the world can be flawed. The text argues for the integration of emotional intelligence into our educational systems and society as a whole.
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. 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 postmodernity 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 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” (xxvii). The very perfection of the unifying system of things that modern humanity has achieved in the age of globalization 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 contradications 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.” The so-called Radical Orthodoxy presents a postmodern theology that also styles itself “post-secular” (Blond). 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


[10] See also Milbank, Pickstock, and Ward, eds., Radical Orthodoxy.
This is a page from a document with text discussing pseudomodernism and religious expression. The text is not completely legible, but it appears to be analyzing the differences and similarities between religious expression and pseudomodernism. The document seems to be arguing that religious expression, like pseudomodernism, can be seen as a form of self-creation and self-expression that is often at odds with traditional religious frameworks.

The page contains several paragraphs that are difficult to transcribe accurately due to the quality of the image. However, some key points that can be discerned include:

1. The text mentions the idea that religious expression can be viewed as a form of self-creation and self-expression, similar to pseudomodernism.
2. It discusses the differences between religious expression and traditional religious frameworks.
3. The text hints at the idea that religious expression can be seen as a form of pseudomodernism, where individuals create their own religious identities and meanings.
4. The document seems to be arguing that religious expression is often at odds with traditional religious frameworks, much like pseudomodernism.

Overall, the document appears to be an academic analysis of religious expression, arguing that it shares similarities with pseudomodernism in terms of self-creation and self-expression.
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," "infinitely and qualitatively different" ("Postmodern Times" 187). Taylor's preferred term for this is "Altarity." This location 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 transcendance 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 transcendance. The power traditionally ascribed to transcendance is released within immanence. The politics of fascism and the art of modernity would not be possible without the transcendance 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. Transcendance 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 concept of modernism is often described as a rejection of traditional values and a celebration of new ideas and techniques. However, modernism is not a simple binary opposition of old and new, but rather a complex interplay of different forces and currents.

In the field of art and culture, modernism is sometimes associated with the idea of breaking away from the past and embracing new forms and expressions. This is often seen in the works of artists such as Pablo Picasso and Henri Matisse, who pioneered the use of non-representational forms and explored new possibilities for expression.

Similarly, in the field of science, modernism is associated with the development of new theories and methods, such as the theory of relativity and quantum mechanics. These new ideas challenged our understanding of the world and opened up new avenues for scientific inquiry.

However, modernism is not just about breaking away from the past. It is also about building on the past and finding new ways to express its ideas. Many modernist works, for example, draw on traditional techniques and forms, but use them in new and innovative ways. This is seen in the works of composers such as Igor Stravinsky, who combined traditional Russian folk music with modernist techniques to create new and exciting works.

In conclusion, modernism is a complex and multifaceted phenomenon that has had a profound impact on many different fields. While it is often associated with breaking away from the past, it is also about building on the past and finding new ways to express its ideas.
pition 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 secular immure 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. As Las Vegas enact 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 shimer of light places 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 niverse of pure artifice. It creates an illusion that is no longer distinguishable from reality. Reality in the sense of a material basis for this reaction 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 tertially 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 comes 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 atural 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 merican 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, as 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 Disneyland-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 bodlessness 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).  

The consumption of the body leaves the tomb empty and the labyrinthine 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 uncan-nily 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 nomenclature 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.

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19 Taylor recontextualizes these arguments in other writings ranging from Disfiguring to About Religion.
The death of God: theodicy. Theodicy, the justification of the existence of evil, is a problem for the existence of the concept of God as a benevolent, all-powerful, and all-good being. Theodicy challenges the idea that God can exist in a world where evil and suffering are present. Theodicy seeks to explain how a loving, omnipotent God can allow evil to exist.

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and thought out in many creative and intriguing ways. 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 Prometheus 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 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 Radical 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

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.
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.

Works Cited

