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Theology and Postmodern Imaginings: *Transfiguring God(S)*

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The hermeneutics of the concept of postmodernity and theology, conditioned by their separate history of origins, limits our scope of possible coinage of these terms to create a new conceptual domain. Postmodernity is a “style of thought”- as Terry Eagleton (1996) would argue, “which is suspicious of classical notions of truth, reason ,identity and objectivity, of the idea of universal progress or emancipation”, and sees the world as “contingent, ungrounded, diverse, unstable and indeterminate, a set of disunified cultures or interpretations which breed a degree of skepticism about the objectivity of truth, history and norms, the givenness of nations and the coherence of identities” (vii). Theology, on the other hand, when conceptualized as an insider discourse, a stable ontological ground of truth and trust, reflects upon confessional understanding of a particular religious doctrine and ethical stand regarding religious truth. It thus encourages in ingraining of monolithic model of ultimate reality. In delineating the interrelation between theology and postmodernity, it is necessary to decipher the status of theology in postmodernism’s cultural correlative--modernism as it is modern reductionism and materialism which challenged the purely metaphysical speculation of soul, and questioned many earlier assumptions of theology.

For both Marx and Nietzsche, the currents of modern history were ironic and dialectical (Berman, 21). Thus, Christian ideals of the soul’s integrity and the will to truth had come to explode Christianity itself. However, from the abyss of emptiness of value, a contrary possibility of a need for self-preservation, self-liberation, still lurks. It is the creative expression of the contrary. Modernism, as Berman (1988) says:

resonates at once with self-discovery and self-mockery, with self-delight and self-doubt. It is a voice that knows pain and dread, but believes in its power to come through. Grave danger is everywhere, and may strike at any moment, but not even the deepest wounds can stop the flow and overflow of its energy. It is ironic and contradictory, polyphonic and dialectical, denouncing modern life in the name of values that modernity itself has created, hoping – often against hope-that the modernities of tomorrow and the day after tomorrow will heal the wounds that wreck the modern men and women of today (p.23).

Modernism thus seeks a stable ground of faith, even after reeling from shocking experiences. A modern poet T.S.Eliot(1986) for example, in his poem *Ash Wednesday* , in the beginning presents a poetical diagnosis of a grave psychological malady, the inability of modern men and women to lead full spiritual life:

Because I do not hope to know again
The infirm glory of the positive hour
Because I do not think
Because I know I shall not know
The one veritable transitory power
Because I cannot drink
There, where trees flower, and springs flow, for there is
Nothing again (9-16)

But in the end of the poem despondency gives way to belief on the supreme:

Teach us to sit still
Even among these rocks,
Our peace in His will (St. John of the Cross)
And even among these rocks
Sister, mother
And spirit of the river, spirit of the sea,
Suffer me not to be separated
And let my cry come unto Thee (211-219). (Parenthesis mine)

The depressing situation “among these rocks” will be substituted by “His will”.

In this ‘project of modernity’ we thus notice a human endeavor to rationalize experience in understanding the meaning of the self in relation to the world. In theological term it is a quasi-religious, a teleological approach to comprehend a total reality—a human approach of mastering the Nature. In this rational project towards self-empowerment one notices an implicit desire to repudiate Christian notion of ‘original Sin’ which locates an irremovable weakness in the human condition. Modernism’s experiment with theology fashions a religiosity , which although is monolithic in spirit , but democratic in temperament in comparison to ultra-orthodox religious practices in the middle age, in so far as it allows religious matters to the realms of individual choice.

Jean-Francois Lyotard (1994) defines the term modern-- “to designate any science that legitimates itself with reference to a metadiscourse of this kind making an explicit appeal to some grand narrative , such as the dialectics of Spirit , the hermeneutics of meaning, the emancipation of the rational or working subject, or the creation of wealth”(p.xxiii). His main concern is the role of ‘metanarrative’ , a ‘master story’ that dominates over explanation of other stories, “ if a metanarrative implying a philosophy of history is used to legitimate knowledge, questions are raised concerning the validity of the institutions governing the social bond: these must be legitimated as well. Thus, justice is consigned to the grand narrative in the same way as truth”. (p.xxiii)

Postmodern to him follows a different trajectory. Lyotard defines postmodernism as “incredulity towards metanarrative” (p.xxiii). To Lyotard grand narrative has lost credibility and has been transformed into mere narrative. ‘Master story’ or master cause is unthinkable as it is the changeability of world-order in general that produces the ‘rules’ which is conditioned by a given state only to be reconditioned in another state. To quote Lyotard again:

Our working hypothesis is that the status of knowledge is altered as societies enter what is known as the postindustrial age and cultures enter what is known as the postmodern age/ This transition has been under way since at least the end of the 1950s, which for Europe marks the completion of reconstruction. The pace is faster or slower depending on the country, and within countries it varies according to the sector of activity: the general situation is one of temporal disjunction which makes sketching an overview difficult. A portion of the description would necessarily be conjectural. At any rate, we know that it is unwise to put too much faith in futurology (p.3).

In the postmodern world, knowledge is splintered into a plethora of inconsistent discourses. The infinite stream of knowledge, in the absence of grand narrative, moves in the multiple trajectories of discursive structures. It is this splintered knowledge, as opposed to “terroristic totality” of modernism, as Lyotard would call it, which is the new postmodern condition. Philosophically postmodernism’s defining features are its divorcement of logocentrism which results into a rejection of epistemological certainty which is the characteristic feature of western philosophy since Descartes.

What then is the state of theology in the age of postmodernity? Does the diverse, indeterminate condition of postmodernity breed serious skepticism about the religious ‘truth’ of modernity, relegating them as unnecessary? Or is it possible to recreate a new space for God and religion in the new condition of postmodernity? I maintain in this regard that postmodernity has opened up a unique scope before us, a scope to engage with a new genealogy in which religion, instead of being relegated into margins, has emerged onto the geopolitical stage of early twenty first century, as a powerful force which denounces the simplistic either/or—the God / no God, belief / disbelief contrasts of common religious practices. This

means to align with thinkers like Heidegger or Derrida in teasing out moments from their works, the nature of their addressing of the issue theology, which can offer new possibility of engagement with alternative genealogy of theology. Although all their observations may not be without any caveats, but such is the nature of the argumentative fissures of postmodern culture which brush off any possibility of alleviation of a particular interpretation or view point. Instead of the 'final' result of the engagement, it is the nature of engagement which opens up a new possibility of knowledge.

At the center of postmodernism's negotiation with religion, is their general rejection of foundationalism, a philosophical quest for 'absolute ground'. Such a view is a derivative from seventeenth century thinker Rene Descartes' ontological argument of privileging a vantage point for a comprehensive and transcendental view of reality and human experience. For postmodernist thinkers the whole epistemological enterprise begun by Descartes and continued by Kant and various successors in the nineteenth and twentieth century, was a momentous mistake. Postmodernism is seen as a movement which brings in the fore the radical consequence of this anti-foundationalism. Which literary theorist Stanley Fish (1989) describes as follows:

Anti-foundationalism teaches that questions of fact, truth, correctness, validity and clarity, can neither be posed nor answered in reference to some extra-contextual, ahistorical, non-situational reality or rule or value; rather, anti-foundationalism asserts, all these matters are intelligible and debatable only within the precincts of the contexts, or situations, or paradigms, or communities that give them their local and changeable shape. (Charlesworth, 159)

This means that it is impossible to know anything that is outside context. The idea of a God who is the be-all and the end-all, the foundation of all foundations, is thus converted into a seriously questionable concept.

This paradigm shift from a monolithic view of ultimate reality to postmodernism's polythetic model of ultimate reality reveals an abyss behind it with an associated unsettling feeling about existence. It is a state of loss, the spirit of which is hidden in the Nietzschean (1974) proclamation of death of God; "where is God gone?" he asks and then says, "I mean to tell you, we have killed him—you and I! We are all his murderers" (181). But this death, as Nietzsche calls it a 'murder' and we as 'murderers', makes us victims of a paranoia for an act of killing which is not predetermined but coincidental. God is dead but his ghost is alive and we are haunted by a fear of being caught by it. It is this fear – the root of which is our imbecility to comprehend the mystery of life—that reiterates the necessity of more serious engagement with theology in postmodern age. Nietzsche (1974) is well aware of our existential angst when he asks:

Who gave us the sponge to wipe away the entire horizon? what were we doing, when we unchained the earth from its sun? Whether is it moving now? Whether are we moving? Away from all sums? Is there still any up or down? Are we not wandering as through an infinite nothing? (181)

This, then may be a death of transcendental signifier; but this 'death' also leads to the 'birth' of other signification in our possible search for meaning of self and the system. Gone, in other words, is the drive to comprehend existence within some overarching narrative, by disregarding generic boundaries, and blatantly ignoring modernist thrust for new and original. Not considering the emergence of new trends in the spectrum of contemporary ideascapes, theorists like Fredric Jameson (1991), or Jean Francois Lyotard (1998) locate in it signs of a new representational system – the blurring of boundaries between different disciplines. A mode of liberation of knowledge is comprehended by a certain intensification of human experience. As Jameson writes:

The present of the world or material signifier comes before the subject with heightened intensity, bearing a mysterious charge of affect, here described in the negative term of anxiety and loss of reality, but which one could just as well imagine in the positive terms of euphoria, a high, an intoxicatory or hallucinogenic intensity (Drolet, 194)

Postmodernism is the new 'cultural dominant' by which subjectivity is remodelled to meet the new demands of the new system. Lyotard's characteristic expression of the postmodern condition as "incredulity towards metanarrative" is thus not an expression of postmodernity's skepticism about state of knowledge and self-realization, rather a new strategy in search of newer depths,-- not a Reality but

multiple realities. Lyotard defended his loaded term ‘incredulity’ by drawing directly on the work of Wittgenstein. According to Lyotard, Wittgenstein had convincingly shown, particularly in his work *Philosophical Investigations* (1998), that language’s work is not to “describe reality”. To Wittgenstein language does not have a specific purpose – language is actually a set of overlapping ‘games’ that we use in different contexts with varied purposes. None of these games has groundings in reality but it is the players of the game who determine the ‘meaningfulness’ of any given practice or belief. What seemed clear to Lyotard is that ‘validity’ is a description of a performative act of consent on behalf of those who are being asked to believe in the validity of proposition. It proves that truths are relative and ‘local’ and depends on some sort of consensus for its ‘validity’. This opens up scope of celebrating doubt; the ‘local’ or the ‘little’, ignoring any grand referential background.

Even Jacques Derrida’s criticism of Western philosophical tradition’s privileging of spoken (the *sonic*) over written language (the *graphic*) , which he calls phonocentrism and the subsequent breaking of the hierarchy by prioritizing writing as a necessary displacement of meaning within language – opens up similar scope of searching new possibilities of realities. Derrida’s critique of language is followed by critique of truth and meaning in philosophy – arguing that no text exposes a final truth. Theology as philosophical discourse of divine then does not guarantee truth but ends up being an involvement with the world. The epistemological indecisiveness coupled with multiplicity of interpretations makes postmodernism a new knowledge condition to engage with new theological issue.

For the present context, a serious search for the divine, thus, may lead to unfurling of new conceptual domain. In religious matters as Kevin J. Vanhoozer (2003) beautifully says: Postmodernism have played Hamlet to modernity’s Horatio, insisting : “There are more things in heaven and earth ...than are dreamt of in our philosophy”(Hamlet,Act.I,v).Postmoderns gesture not only in the direction of the other, but also toward the “beyond”.(16)

For different postmodern theorists this ‘beyond’ appeared in many different forms extending the horizon of the divine. French philosopher Emmanuel Levinas understands God as one sharing the suffering of humanity rather than a celestial monarch. We should know God through human beings. Other postmodern theologians like Mark C. Taylor, Jan-Lac Marion or Graham Ward conceptualized God in various ways. God as trace of the infinite, in the face of the other, God as unknown, the wholly other and the other ideas beside (Macquarize: 2003).

In this regard, Derrida and Heidegger’s engagement with the idea of God---- a theological quest which situates them in the forefront of postmodern theology---- demands special attention. Both Martin Heidegger and Jacques Derrida deny the proposition of existence of meta-contextual knowledge of a realm existing beyond our cognizable reality. Both of them deny and distinguish between the philosophical God of the main Christian tradition and what Heidegger calls ‘divine god’. Derrida shows the same unique approach in *Writing and Difference* when he says-“the divine has been ruined by God, that is, God as the agent of totalisation...the death of God will ensure our salvation because the death of God alone can reawaken the divine”. (Charlesworth: 165)

This is his way of stressing on the danger of uncritical belief or truth. The knowledge of inherent contradiction in ideas that shapes us must engage us in to a process of critical questioning .If monolithic religion blocks this questioning culture, postmodern theology liberates it.As an Algerian Jew writing in France during the post-war years in the wake of totalitarianism---- fascism on the right and Stalinism on the left---- Derrida understood very well the danger of blind faith or adamant ideologies. Fortunately he assures us, as Mark C. Taylor(2004) says, that the alternative to blind belief is not simply unbelief but a different kind of belief, one that embraces uncertainty and enables us to repeat other whom we do not understand “in a complex world, wisdom is knowing what we do not know so that we can keep the future open”. He further rightly opines about Derrida:

He understands that religion is impossible without uncertainty, whether conceived of as Yahweh as father of Jesus Christ, or as Allah, God can never be fully known or adequately represented by imperfect human beings ...Mr Derrida reminded us that religion does not always give clear meaning , purposes and certainty by providing secure foundations. To the contrary the great religious traditions are profoundly

disturbing because they all call certainty and security in to questions. Belief not tempered by doubt poses a moral danger. (2)

Both Heidegger and Derrida suggest that what postmodernist call deconstruction has an important part to play in revealing the primordial experiences which underline belief and practice. It is their use of the term in the positive and the revelatory sense which makes Heidegger to refer to medieval mystic Meister Eckhart. It is the mystic Meister Eckhart who emphasized the impossibility of conceptualizing God. While proposing ‘unknowing’, silence and detachment – i.e. spiritual annihilation of the self as being the only legitimate way of approaching the realm of divinity (McGinn,1981). By invoking the living significance of medieval mysticism, Heidegger (1967) makes his first attempt of ‘destruction’ of the tradition – which does not mean to level but to break through the conceptual surface of the western metaphysics, in order to recover and retreat. This deconstruction of metaphysics thus becomes a positive operation and is far removed from vicious relativism of stand points. (44)

Similarly, Derrida stresses that “deconstruction is not negative, neither it is destructive. It is rather a mode of gaining access to the mode in which a system of structure is constituted” (Charlesworth, 166). For example, in his essay *On the Name* (1995), he refers to medieval mystic Angelus Silesius and discovers the mystic’s polyphonic speaking about God which opens up a new pedagogical perspective— “go there where you cannot, see where you do not see, hear where nothing rings or sounds, so are you where God speaks.”(44) Silesius wants to free himself from fully positive or kataphatic affirmation in his speaking of God. This concern for the openness towards the otherness of God, as the impossible i.e. one who cannot be foreseen as the possibility – one who cannot be completely filled in, is a deconstructive theology that Derrida applies in his religious project.

Even for Meister Eckhart God lives without a “why”. Eckhart’s religious philosophy is based on one impersonal reality that is empty of any form, yet penetrates in every form—the Godhead. But Godhead can never be known in the same way all things are known, because it is not a “thing”. He again defines this as “space”, and then as a “force”. But not a fixed definition satisfies him:

A force in the soul; and not only a force , but something more, a being; and not only a being, but something more; it is so pure and high and noble in itself that no creature can come there, and God alone can dwell there. Yet, verily, and even God cannot come there with a form. He can only come with his simple divine nature. (Brown, 2)

Eckhart kept warning us about the contingency of the signifiers we deploy. The most startling expression of Eckhart in this regard is “I pray God that he may make me free of God” (McGinn, 202) Here although we sense a streak of Neoplatonic, henological metaphysics, in which everything gets cantered on the Godhead beyond God, on the silent unity of soul with God beyond time and space, but this notion of mystical unity does not contradict the onto-theo-logic but perfects it. It fulfills the metaphysical desire of presence in a way of which metaphysics itself was incapable, by prioritizing intuitive unity surpassing conceptual reason. However it is far beyond a mystical closure. Here we discover a medieval deconstructionist praying aloud for God to rid him of God, he was reminding us about the wide open instability of onto-theological discourse. Here is a medieval deconstructionist whose idea of Godhead is, as John D. Caputo (1989) says:

“...another effect of difference, a differential effect achieved by a discourse which deploys a God/Godhead distinction. Godhead sends us to skidding back to ‘God’, from which ‘Godhead’ derives its sense and impact. To reach out for the ‘Godhead’ beyond God is but to name Him relative to ‘God’, to remain within the chain of mundane predicates.’ ‘Godhead’, too, drags a chain of signifiers behind it. The Godhead beyond God is also a creature, what a religious person would call an idol, what Derrida would call an affect of *différance*, or Heidegger an issue of the Difference” (32).

Here is the Otherness or alterity of God, a search for ‘other’ or a ‘beyond’, a fluttering within a chain of signifiers, which brings a medieval mystic, Meister Eckhart and twentieth century philosophers Heidegger and Derrida, on the same plane. Following Derridean notion of *différance*, a neologism which combines two distinguishable meanings of French verb *differer*, ‘to differ’ and ‘to defer’, we notice the idea of God acquiring a neither/nor status.

One can locate in this regard a messianic turn in Derrida. According to Caputo (Macquarrie, 20) when Derrida was questioned about the resemblance of his philosophy to negative or apophatic theology, his answer was typical-‘Yes and No!’.Caputo further claims that Derrida’s beliefs are dominated by the word *Viens!* ‘Come!’ It is a messianism but messiah will never come, for that coming means closure, the end of possibility of faith and hope. Derrida, here distinguishes between messianic and messianism. Where the latter stands for the belief that a particular Messiah has already come, the messianic, by contrast, has to do with what cannot be determined. The messianic is the unforeseeable, the ‘beyond’ that is always desired but never attained. The ‘messianic’ has to do with an absolute structure of promise, of an absolute indeterminate, a sort of structural future, a future always to come. It is an absolute future, the very structure of the to-come that cannot in principle come-about, the very open-endedness of the present that makes it impossible for the present to draw itself into a circle, to close and gather around itself. The messianic is the structure of to-come that exposes the contingency of the present. The messianic future, the formless figure of the Messiah in deconstruction, has to do with something absolutely representable which breaks the spell of present construction. It is this faith in a religion-less religion which is the crux of postmodern theology.

The process of understanding God by stressing on what God is not, has in it a positive, affirmative character. Instead of being absolutely in negative mode, apophatic deconstruction here opens up a possibility of a religiosity that is neither negative/absent nor positive/presence, but appears in our very moment of involvement with the issue of theology. This involvement is , if I may use a phrase - an ‘appanage of engagement’—by which I stress on the necessity of an engagement which is a rightful perquisite, appropriate to one’s station in life. In other words, it is a ‘structure of experience’ where experience means running up against the other , encountering something we could not anticipate, expect, fore-have, or fore-see, something that unsettles us.As Hart (1989) puts the matter:

Deconstruction is neither theistic nor atheistic in any normal sense of the words...deconstruction offers a critique of theism to be sure, but it is directed to the “ism” rather than the “theos”, that is it offers a critique of the use to which “God” is put. In fact to the extent to which deconstruction is a critique of theism, it is also a critique of any discourse which denies that there is a God. (Charlesworth, 167)

Philosophical reason by itself can say nothing either for and against theism, and also for and against atheism.Postmodernism’s quasi-deconstructive function *vis-a-vis* the religious domain , leads to the necessity of polyphonic reading culture with enlightened rationality as tool, by which trans-disciplinary inter-cultural positioning of religious texts facilitate a quality understanding against the hegemony of faith.

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