

Between the Canon and the Messiah

The Structure of Faith in Contemporary
Continental Thought

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Introduction

Re-examining the normative traditions of theological discourse

In a recent book, *The Theological and the Political*, Mark Lewis Taylor suggests making a distinction between “Theology,” the traditional historical discourse on transcendence brought about by a hierarchical institutionalization of Christianity, and “the theological,” or that which moves along the margins of immanence, in the cracks and fissures of these institutionalized forms, offering a “transimmanent” perspective of the divine yet at work within our world.¹ The “theological,” according to this reading, is defined in contrast to “Theology,” which often functions more as a “guild” discipline through its attempts to preserve and protect its own essence. The latter, in this light, functions less as a bearer of divine revelation than as a political and cultural institution. For Taylor, the former is a spectral force that moves through our world and gives the voices of the oppressed a chance to disrupt those monolithic and ideological discourses that constitute our realm of political, cultural, and religious representations, “Theology” included. As he words it, the “theological” “. . . traces and theorizes the ways that persons and groups rendered subordinate and vulnerable by agonistic politics and its systemic imposed social suffering nevertheless haunt, unsettle, and perhaps dissolve the structures of those systems.”² For Taylor, the “theological” is clearly a larger phenomenon than it is usually considered as being—it is an unsettling presence that upends our most normative social claims and traditions, “Theology” foremost among them.

“Theology,” from this viewpoint, through its many historical (and even ongoing) attempts to divide “orthodox” positions from their “heretical” counterparts, often renders itself blind to its own structural features as well as its inherent limitations. For Taylor, “Theology” as a discipline has been complicit throughout history with those hierarchical orders that have sought to retain power through their extension into other representational fabrics of society, such as the family, the church, and the nation-state, for example. Complicit

with a long history of abuses, from slavery to colonization, from the Crusades to the Inquisition, among others, “Theology” has often greatly invested itself in justifications of certain nefarious political projects—ones which, in turn, benefited from “Theology’s” blindness to its own involvement.³ The task, for Taylor, is somehow, and despite such damning charges levied against it, to *assist* “Theology” in seeing its shortsightedness through a renewed examination of its political components. He thus trains his focus upon the theological *and* the political, their interwoven relationship in all its glory, but also in all its agony.

The insight that Taylor develops is in a certain sense—especially if viewed from *within* the boundaries of those who perform such guild “Theology”—provocative and unsettling. It is no surprise, however, that his argument runs parallel to *many* other voices, certainly those coming from feminist, postcolonial, liberation, and racially and ethnically-diverse backgrounds. What his position is attempting to address, no less, is the very manner in which politics typically unfolds within theological conversations, not to mention the world as a whole—those in power who have a vested interest in maintaining the normative structures of society are pitted against those who are bereft of power, their very existence, in many ways, a contestation of “the way things are.” Such arguments are hardly new to the history of politics and institutional structures. The real question, *the one that continues to search for its moment of articulation*, is how such a configuration of the political, as an embodiment of various contestations of power, is framed within theology today, or rather, how it could be framed better, especially for those not as accustomed to dealing with such overtly political formulations within what might seem to them as being an otherwise “neutral” discourse (“Theology,” formally speaking).

Such is the stage that is set for the present study, one that seeks to articulate the basic coordinates of this perpetual oscillation between normative, institutional structures of tradition and those accompanying forces that seek to undo their dominant narrative. That is, what I am seeking to unfold throughout this study as the *pre-eminent structural feature of western monotheistic thought* (primarily analyzed here in their Judaic and Christian forms) is, in some sense, just such an articulation of the political interactions that take place (and *often*) within the realm of “Theology.” My aim is to elucidate the theoretical edifice of such contrasts as they are witnessed—as a permanent and inherent tension between *canonical* forms (akin to Taylor’s “Theology”) and their *messianic* undoing (the “theological”). With this unending tension before us, I seek to disclose something of the true nature of the political struggle ceaselessly at work within

the various components of what constitutes T/theology tout court. I am hoping, thus, to make a fundamental theological investigation into the nature of western philosophical and theological languages concerning this tension, as well as how it is often discussed under its associated philosophical conceptualization—the contrast between *representation* and *presentation*, as I hope to make clear.

There is great merit to be found, I am wagering, in determining the essential coordinates of a theological terminology (of *canons* and *messiahs*) that seeks, not only to comprehend something of its own conceptual heritage, but also to understand its traditional development in light of a dualistically conceived realm of representations (the *antinomies* of thought or the *dialectics* of reasoning). By sketching this interaction, between the theological (*canons/messiahs*) and the philosophical (*representation/presentation*), I wish to perceive the formation of concepts that are central to both discourses as *parallel movements*, often feeding off each other and yielding insights that the other has either consciously or unconsciously adopted. Hence, a renewed understanding of the tensions that constitute any enduring representation—a task as central to our religious legacies as to our cultural, political and philosophical ones—is one that will mutually inform our sense of how canons function religiously. Likewise, any claim to present a “thing itself” beyond its inscription in representational limits the definition of *presentation* par excellence—will share a certain affinity with those messianic dimensions of religious thought that threaten to render any normative structures of history neutralized. Such will be the justification, at any rate, for my taking up, from the outset of this study, those major philosophical debates concerning representation as a primary subject matter with significant implications for theological practice.

The pressing question of this study, and one that I intend to address head-on, is whether or not a messianic undoing of our canonical traditions and norms leads inevitably to a necessary restructuring of such norms, possibly making them more just governing structures along the way, *or* whether such an undoing is a terminus in its own right, an open-ended, perpetual kenosis of sorts that eschews any structural–canonical attempts (i.e., doctrines, creeds, dogmas, scriptures) to express such a messianic event. While seeking an answer to this most pressing theological question, I hope to demonstrate that this issue, which otherwise would seem to concern itself only with historical religious traditions, is the same issue continuously affecting contemporary continental philosophy—*no small claim, to be sure*. My intention at several points throughout this study, therefore, is to analyze the philosophical discussion of such terminological

usages, and, by doing so, to point to those places within such conversations where their theological resonances are more than simply coincidental to the discussion at hand. I intend, as such, to show how the major lines of philosophical thought over the last century cannot help but invoke a certain theological line of inquiry at this juncture (somewhere along the lines of the “return to the religious” in contemporary philosophical thought), which is, for reasons I hope to make clearer, a point that, if scrutinized further, outlines the very foundations of what we consider “the theological” to be.

These reflections are not the only stakes being weighed within the present work. They, in fact, constitute a portion of what I hope to uncover within Part One of this study. Before proceeding directly to my main focus, however, it might be helpful to gain a first glance into a related model of these dynamic tensions within representation, as such a model utilizes the same language with which I am here working and can serve, therefore, as a guide to our study as well as a preeminent illustration of what I am attempting to talk about. What such an illustration shows us, moreover, is that the preference given here to the use of the terms “canonical” and “messianic” is not accidental to the inquiry itself. It is rather the case that their usage opens us up to a wider horizon of cultural, political, and religious representations that we would do well to bring with us throughout the individual studies that follow. As will hopefully also become clear, the terms “canonical” and “messianic” serve as something of a shibboleth or pass code for unlocking the complex web of conceptual relations found in the writings of much twentieth century thought, and as such, merit a brief digression upon their theological background and usage. As I intend to show in what follows through the interwoven conceptual terminologies of Walter Benjamin, Jacques Derrida, Giorgio Agamben, and Paul Ricoeur, these specific terms are central to the many varied conversations occurring in both theological and philosophical realms.

Dialectics versus the antinomies of (antinomian?) thought

The tensions of religious thought I have outlined above form the basic coordinates for understanding the—mainly philosophical—debates that will follow. As we will shortly see, from Walter Benjamin to Jacques Derrida, to Giorgio Agamben, a direct line of the development of these contrasting terms has been drawn, one wherein a particular brand of *messianism* appears to flavor

everything it touches. In brief measure, and so that we might begin to grasp something of the nature of the phenomenon, it could be said that, for each of these authors, the force of the messianic, always understood as a “weak” force or one of utter poverty, is that which works from *within* a given canonical form to undo its normative or proprietary claims. The messianic, as Derrida will later claim, for example, is what offers us the hope for a justice always yet “to come,” and seemingly from beyond the inscriptions of law, for example. In this sense, every canonical form could be said, at some point in history, to receive its undoing at the hands of a messianic force working from within that particular history (i.e., within a given “History,” just as within a given “Theology”) to re-write its narrative and offer something more just perhaps, more worthy of those oppressed and marginalized voices which had previously been overrun by the “strong” force of the canonical form.

In one sense, it could be argued that the messianic plays the antithesis to the canonical form’s thesis, an illustration of the grand dialectics of history portrayed at work within a specifically theological sphere. Such will be the contentions of Derrida, for example. In another sense, however, the messianic will be seen as the complete suspension of canonical forms, elements of thought that are too exclusive and exclusionary (purely *antinomies*) to be retained historically, if they can be retained at all. Such thought will define the counter impulses of Agamben, a thinker who will appear to us at times as more than just coincidentally antinomian.

As such, I would like to further frame the terms of this debate, beyond the canonical/messianic or representation/presentation divisions, as really being ones concerning the contrast between *dialectical* thinking and those *antinomian* impulses mustered in the refusal of such totalizing gestures. This classic division, one initiated historically almost entirely within *theological* circles, is one that yet permeates and circulates through our contemporary western, theological, and philosophical discourses, whether we recognize its legacy and impact or not.

The centrality of Walter Benjamin to this study is, therefore, also a reflection on his centrality to contemporary continental thought on the whole, and for this reason—the struggle between providing dialectics or antinomianism as a solution to the tensions present within thought is one, I would wager, that Benjamin tried to resolve directly, and was that which caused him to sketch a “productive” vision of history that incorporated elements from both his own Jewish heritage (“weak messianic forces”) and his Marxist revolutionary leanings (“dialectical images”). His efforts, as John McCole has put it, were in general

focused upon “. . . the inextricable entwinement of elements of continuity and discontinuity in his conceptions of tradition and history.”⁴ By trying to find a solution to such an apparently irresolvable tension, Benjamin isolated the (Kantian) antinomies of thought as essential indicators of both religious and political historical activity. There was a fundamental aporia within our basic religious and political histories that Benjamin seized upon and wedded to the structures of thought as a whole.⁵

For Benjamin, but also for the benefit of framing the present study, the aporia of historical thought could be defined as such—tradition can only be founded through a rupture. Continuity is possible, but only at a cost, one calculated by the presence of the oppressed *to* history, and yet *within* history. Benjamin’s goal was to bring such oppressed or marginalized elements to light, what he sought to do through the restoration of a dialectical image of the oppressed that brought the past into the present, and which was also a bringing of “dialectics to a standstill.” The construction of such an image that is at once a continuation of tradition—*but also its interruption*—was what made “the antinomical tensions” that Benjamin focused upon both productive and successful, according to McCole.⁶

It is of course possible to read Benjamin as being, in some sense, an antinomian thinker, one who sees the grinding to a halt of dialectics as the only possible way to maintain one’s fidelity to the oppressed of history (and such will be Agamben’s interpretation, as we will see). It is also possible to read him as being more open to the *restoration* of tradition, as we will see in my re-examination of Benjamin’s relationship to scripture (to be taken up below). At the very least, there are certain conceptual clarifications that need to be made within Benjamin’s all-too-incomplete account, clarifications that have been missing over time and that have consequently given rise to the struggles between Benjamin’s various inheritors who, more often than not, remain divided by their theological *or* political readings of his work. In many ways, what I am offering in this study is a possible solution to this struggle in interpreting Benjamin’s confrontation with this essential aporia of (theological *and* philosophical) thought. I am aiming in the end, then, to provide a hermeneutic, not only for reading Benjamin’s struggle with this particular aporia of historical representation, but also for reading those philosophical and theological debates between the tensions of canonical forms and messianic forces, as well as those representations—and any supposed presentation beyond representation—that accompany them.

The question of dialectics, how they can be *maintained*, or how they can be *evaded*, if at all, finds a deep resonance in this study, in many ways providing

impetus to this inquiry in its near entirety. In this sense, the various plays between dualistic understandings (e.g., canonical/messianic, law/justice, identity/difference, etc.) with which the authors under scrutiny engage, can be read as so many varied attempts to come to terms with the dialectical procedures of representation, as well as the issue of whether or not dialectics pertains only to our material world, or whether it holds any relevance for those traditionally “other-worldly” (*religious*) matters. Such is the background for the many questions that will continuously crop up here and there throughout this study, including whether or not a balance can be struck between presentation and representation, whether a form of life can exist outside of representational norms, or whether a messianic form can permanently (or just *partially*) disrupt such dialectical movements.

Finding out whether the Kingdom of God is the same thing as a (often Marxist) political utopia, for example, depends on our understanding of dialectics and their role in (or *beyond*) historical and representational matters. Indeed, simply to ask whether the Kingdom of God is a political utopian form would, for many, already concede too much ground to the sphere of the political, forsaking the “deeper matters” of faith. But, then again, as others might contend, what would such “deeper matters” be, other than one’s very real and present relationship to something so defining of oneself such as one’s relationship to violence? Sifting through the various possible answers to these questions, from within a particular philosophical debate and opening up to its theological resonance, is the main aim of the present inquiry.

Outline of this study

The work that follows is divided into two parts, each intending to draw conclusions related to—though also distinct from—the other. The first part is concerned mainly with problematizing the boundary between philosophy and theology. To do this, I draw upon the manner in which the contrast of canonical forms and messianic forces was (and *is*) played out in historically Judaic terms, though ones, I will argue, that have been at the center of several recent philosophical returns to Pauline literature. In particular, I will examine the related insights of Gershom Scholem and Jacob Taubes, two Jewish thinkers of the last century who sought to comprehend the paradox of a bizarre seventeenth-century Jewish movement known as Sabbatianism. Through tracing their commentaries on the movement,

I seek to perceive both thinkers' oeuvres through their contrasts between *orthodox* (canonical) and heretical *antinomian* (messianic) forces working from within a Judaic representational worldview. As such, Taubes' insistence upon the crucial distinction between *presentation* and *representation* as that which lies at the heart of the separation of Judaism from Christianity (or even Judaism *from itself*, much as Paul had once seen in the contrast of flesh from spirit) will help us to frame much of the philosophical discussion that follows.

The concentration of this first part of the thesis is in demonstrating that such religious understandings and divisions are central to contemporary continental (philosophical) thought, though their incorporation into particular philosophical debates has not necessarily advanced the discussion as far as might be thought. To further describe this stalemate, I will next turn to an exemplary case of just such a situation—the debate that still rages (and despite the death of the former) between the philosophers Jacques Derrida and Giorgio Agamben, the two obvious strands of this intellectual struggle with these dynamic and often competing forces of representation. By playing the one writer off the other, and vice versa, I am aiming to clarify the stakes of their divergence, as well as their indebtedness to the religious dimensions of thought outlined in the first chapter. As such, I will highlight how their framing of the interaction between canonical forms and their messianic undoing lies at the center of their various appraisals of sovereign power, law, violence, the tension between representation and presentation and, ultimately, religious identity. One of the major points I attempt to make is how their feud lies at the heart of the divisions often perceived between certain historical forms of Judaism and Christianity (as Taubes already suggested).

As the analysis of the tensions between the canonical form and its accompanying messianic forces begins to adhere closely to this particular script of contemporary thought, it also begins to reveal its even closer alignment with the heart of theological speculation. This is to say that as we begin to look around for ways to bridge the gulf between the presentation of the “thing itself” (“as such”) and its various representations (“as if”), we begin to see the separation existing between religious identities (multiple Judaisms from myriad Christianities, and both groups even as individually split from within) as more than a simple divergence of opinion as to the Messiah's potential (or actual) life and death. We begin, in fact, to re-conceive of belief itself as something of a political force continuously working within our world, though not an easy one to discern, to be sure. It is with such an insight in mind that I begin to view the

recent increased emphasis placed upon a “theology of immanence” (as opposed to traditional transcendent forms) as the movement of a very relevant and timely “political theology,” one geared toward opening up our understanding of what constitutes the “theological” tout court. Indeed, Agamben’s turn toward a terminology that includes words such as “profanation,” “immanence,” and even “revelation” is an indicator that our current manner of thinking through the theological is perhaps in need of reformulation.

The subsequent chapter begins to discern just what such a “theology of immanence” might look like in our world today, following fast on the heels of Taubes’ suggestion that Jewish messianic movements often turn toward certain forms of pantheistic belief in order to redeem the entirety of creation before them. By focusing on a brief historical sketch of where such “theologies of immanence” derive their inspiration (i.e., Baruch Spinoza, and company), I look toward exploring Agamben’s thought as a form of prophetic speech, one often juxtaposed uneasily against its more “canonical” counterparts within Judaic history and scripture. As such, I am hoping to recover something of the prophetic witness that Agamben’s work brings to light, seeking to retain its significant message as one portion of the fullness we consider theological witness to be. Though such a co-opting of antinomian impulses within a dialectical framework may appear too clean from certain perspectives, I do so with an eye already focused on the next part of this study, wherein I will take the opportunity to justify such co-opting methods from a hermeneutical standpoint.

While the first part of this thesis is concerned mainly with problematizing the borders and boundaries that have been established between philosophy and theology—as also between representation and presentation, or canonical forms and messianic forces—the second part attempts to establish a form of *radical hermeneutics* as a possible solution to the aporias encountered in the first part. To do so, I try to sketch an alternate vision of reading canonical forms in relation to messianic forces, one that returns to the central scriptural canons at the origin of the debate. Accordingly, the first chapter of the second part will look into the tensions between the messianic and the canonical through the contemporary theorist Jan Assmann, a prominent thinker of historical and cultural memory. It is his ability to think through such matters within a religious–canonical setting that merits its special status in this study, as he provides a fitting complement to what follows, developing for us a criterion of *violence* as a key to reading differing canonical and religious movements within the ancient world. That these musings are not simply historical–literary constructs is illustrated by bringing

their viewpoints into precarious alignment with the thought of Walter Benjamin, someone for whom the relationship between the canonical (scriptural) form and its “weak messianic” forces was an often veiled, though entirely dominant thematic within his writing, from beginning to end. By making an argument for Benjamin’s discovery of their intertwined nature, I am hoping to demonstrate not only his close proximity to the theories espoused by Assmann, but also the profound foundation that he laid for a good many continental philosophical thinkers (Derrida and Agamben foremost among them).

By taking into account the influence of one’s historical context and background (even of the *fact* of historical context itself), something missing at key moments from both Derrida and Agamben, though critically present in Benjamin’s own life and work, as I intend to show, I therefore aim to develop a *radical hermeneutics* that takes the excessive (hyperbolic) role of language seriously, and thus, in a very practical sense, is able to deal with the distance between Derrida and Agamben, for example, as that which results from an attempt to displace ourselves from our historical grounding. By locating a possible reason within Benjamin’s life history for downplaying one element (the canonical) in favor of another (the messianic), we might be better able to discern some of the possible reasons for this displacement as well as the use of an excessively one-sided language. In turn, such an admittedly biographical reading may offer us another key for understanding and re-defining the impasse encountered in the first part of the study.

In order to further solidify the claims of this second part, as well as to descend deeper into the development of a radical hermeneutical methodology, in the chapter that follows, I advance the analysis of these representational logics within the hermeneutical context expressed in the writings of Paul Ricoeur, a figure who often drifted in between the philosophical and the theological. In this fashion, I hope to provide further supporting evidence for the centrality of canonical forms and messianic forces in our positing of identity and tradition. I do so by noting how Ricoeur works through their various manifestations in the contrast between the Pharisee and the Prophet, the varied definitions of scripture that he works with, the role of violence in preserving cultural memory and, finally, the tensions present between metaphor and politics, before turning in the end to a consideration of what just such a radical hermeneutics might look like (with a little help from the insights of Judith Butler). By re-inspecting certain Judaic origins at question within Ricoeur’s work, I am ultimately seeking to confront the aporias at the heart of all representational logics so that we might begin to

understand what genuine messianic (or antinomian) forces are already at work in our most cherished canonical formations. It is in this last chapter, moreover, that we can begin to see how Ricoeur's understanding of the Aristotelian contrast between *potentiality* and *actuality* is actually able to provide some much needed clarification of the philosophical stakes of this study's ongoing analysis. By bringing his view on their difference into juxtaposition with Agamben's own take on the matter, I hope to show how Ricoeur's work points toward an almost *utopian* hope, in many ways similar to Agamben's claims, providing a new horizon for thought beyond the exclusionary representational logics in which we typically (socially and politically) live, but also fully immersed in the metaphoric (linguistic) nature of human existence. It is only in this way, I will conclude, that we might begin to see how hermeneutics can possibly take into account its apparently external antinomian elements.

It should come as little surprise that the lengthy cast of characters assembled here for study is not as diverse as might appear at first glance. The influence of one author upon another, as I have tried to indicate throughout, is not simply a haphazard affair, but a delicate patchwork of resonances and affinities deliberately quilted together in order to arrive at a somewhat similar product.⁷ In the end, perhaps these affinities are even capable of becoming something more than mere speculations made concerning a possible utopian existence or a messianic "Kingdom" still to come or existing "elsewhere." Perhaps they can even go so far as to call us back to re-determine the lives we live here and now in their present and often very political contexts. Such insights would certainly seem to provoke the formulation of a "radical political theology" indeed.⁸