CHAPTER 10

Government, University and the Category of Religion: A Response from Critical Theology

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What does the survival of theology in the modern university mean for how we will understand what goes on in that institution today? Put more sharply, how are we to understand discourses that seem, perversely, to resist the commonly accepted partitioning of religious and non-religious space? Engaging this theme in a manner that can only appear provocative in a landscape in which these divisions are taken for granted will, I hope, shed illuminating light on the nature of the religious-secular boundary as it is currently configured. My thesis is this: theology proper, also known by its older denominator “divinity,” is the one university discipline that is not founded on or organized with reference to the category of “religion.” To substantiate this claim I will introduce a minority tradition of modern theology that both grants a clearly delimited validity to the concept of religion, admits that Christianity can be understood as a religion, but refuses to conclude that the most important aspects of Christianity can be contained by this category. I will suggest that the implications of this thesis go far beyond the university, as the disciplining of academic knowledge is only part of a broader process by which Christianity has been domesticated (or enculturated) in the west precisely by labeling it “one of the religions.” In conclusion, I will explain why the refusal of this domestication is important in sustaining a tradition of political dissent.

In the first part of my chapter, I will briefly trace the longer history of how government—especially in the modern period—has come to play the role once occupied in Christendom by ecclesial hegemony. The second part of the chapter will offer the university as a case study of how this process of ecclesial hegemony being replaced by the hegemony of the secular has occurred in practice. In the third and final part, I will indicate something of how what I will call critical (or still more provocatively, Nietzschean) theology has comported itself in response to these developments in order to remain intellectually coherent and to retain its capacity to narrate its own political identity.

Let me begin with a sketch in the broadest strokes. For the first three hundred years of the Christian era, philosophically aware Christians felt, for good reason, that they had to position themselves among intellectual elites as proponents of a better philosophy (Hadot 1995: 126–144). But with the conversion
of the emperor Constantine and the rise to intellectual dominance of the thought of Augustine, pagan philosophies and cults were submerged and eventually smothered or incorporated into what came to be the dominant theological rationality of the Middle Ages. It was only after Renaissance and Enlightenment developments paved the way that 19th century freethinkers could invent a non-Christian culture to be inhabited as a living alternative to Christian culture and did so most often in the mode of recovering the learning and aesthetic sensibilities of classical Greek culture.1

I use the term “Christian culture” intentionally, because much of what early modern non-Christians (freethinkers) and modernizing Christians were reacting against was an insipid cultural Christianity that was seen by some as not cultured, and by others as no longer Christian in any meaningful sense. Continuing the Reformation trope of “purifying” Christianity, Immanuel Kant spawned the cultural Protestantism that has become dominant in contemporary theology and religion departments, in which a vision of Christianity is articulated “within the bounds of mere reason.” It is this tradition that has been constantly preoccupied with updating Christianity to make it a tolerant religion. In other words, this account of Christianity is linked very tightly and explicitly with the project of modern nation states to do all in their power to moralize the citizenry by fostering “tolerant” attitudes.2 Given the intellectual atmosphere of Christendom within which these critical impulses were developed, it should also come as no surprise that they drew on a language of the freedom of conscience as they did so, a language which itself had a long and important role in traditional theological accounts of mission, belief and conversion.3

The Christian tradition with which I identify myself was one that drank deeply from the wells of these Christian and non-Christian reactions to Christianity gone cultural and insipid. One of Kant’s most theologically penetrating critics

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1 For what I will call a theological (rather than religious) narration of this story, see Bonhoeffer 2005: 106–107.

2 All the main early Enlightenment political philosophers were concerned with this theme, perhaps none more so, and more influentially so, than Spinoza, in his Tractatus Theologico-Politicus. Reinhold Niebuhr is the most influential late modern representative of this tradition of Christianity. He is broadly influential among English speaking theologians interested in questions of secularity. His position, his influence on contemporary positions, and a catalogue of the opponents of this position can be found in Stout 2004.

3 Spinoza, the apostle of toleration, germinated his ideas on this account of Christianity while in the company of politically engaged members of virulently dissenting Christian sects. To this day there are strong strands of Christianity to be found among dissenting Protestants for whom the concepts of tolerance and the freedom of conscience are premier theological doctrines (Brock 2011: 273–293).