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Religion, Politics, and the Earth: The New Materialism (Radical Theologies).

In the sea of literature on what is becoming known as the “New Materialism,” (NM) this book is a helpful reminder for why the NM matters. Drawing on physics, neuroscience, and the fruits of “post” discourses in philosophy, theology, and religious studies, this book articulates a new way of thinking about politics, ethics and identity for earth-based, evolving, meaning-making creatures. Like much thinking that falls under the umbrella of NM, this book starts by navigating a space between idealism and reductive materialism. The authors write, “We work against philosophical idealism by taking the earth as subject rather than simply asserting and upholding the vantage point of spirit” (xx). In other words, human thinking is re-placed as part of a larger evolving subjective community—the earth—rather than as the container of all life on earth. Furthermore, such a starting point also recognizes that reductive materialism is also just another form of idealism: that is, reducing the earth to human-constructed scientific categories.

The book starts with an analysis of the contemporary “digital” culture in which we in the United States (the West, and more and more via globalization the world) live at the beginning of the twenty-first century. This is a culture with blurred boundaries: self-other, virtual-real, matter-thought, one religion and another, one location and another, etc. Likewise, and as with other NMs, the radical immanence or flattening of space means that there is no longer a realm for thought that is in some removed objective space away from subjective concerns and action; rather, thinking is acting, and actions influence our thinking. The role of religious thinking is primarily anthropological and creative.

The authors develop a material theology that starts with Slavoj Zizek’s understanding of the Death of God (26). In my interpretation of Zizek, this means that
the radical freedom of thinking theologically, in terms of human freedom and becoming, comes with the death of God on a cross, at which time humanity and life is no longer contained between the borders of an embodied, material world and an ultimate, transcendent idealized world. In other words, real freedom and thinking, and meaning-making (in the terms of the ability for humans to co-construct meaning rather than discover a truth or meaning that is “out there”) begins with this shift towards a radical immanence. However, the project of objective, transcendent truth was carried on long after the so-called death of God during and after the so-called Enlightenment through the idea of a secular, objective (apolitical) space where science and economics reign, and a subjective (apolitical) private space where religious beliefs reside. Thus, the latest death of objectivity brought about by postmodern thought (another death of God as Reason) has led to a post-secular world in which all thought (scientific and religious) is re-politicized (44).

Lest one think at this point that the authors then slip into the specter of relativism, they begin to articulate their contextual, emergent understanding of meaning and thought. They write, “Thinking is a sculptural process … and art is a thought process where both are material and materialist insofar as they take shape and form” (66). In other words, thinking materializes in realit(y)(ies), and the material world shapes the contours of our thought in a feedback sort of process. In terms of religious thought, theology (and philosophy for that matter) become creative and iterative rather than representational. The point is that thinking becomes more about poesis. As material beings, such thinking processes are made possible by others and ultimately this means that a material theology transforms and is transformed by available energies (in this case earthly energies). “To live, humans and other animals must consume plants or animals, and the fact that other life becomes food for us provokes the most significant and problematic ethical reflection” (69).

Our ethical dilemma has been exacerbated, so the authors argue, by the fact that money has come to determine the ultimate value of all things (following Phillip Goodchild here among others). Abstract and indifferent money and money markets have literally persisted without paying attention to earthly energies and resources. They have persisted as if the earth conforms to their logic, rather than vice versa and this is the crux of our contemporary eco-social crises. Rather than face these problems with an equally abstract ethic based upon transcendent categories of good/evil, right/wrong, the authors argue that what we need is an ethic of participation. They write, “We affirm an active ethics of participation, an ethics of attraction that generates truth rather than discovers it, one that builds up connections rather than tears them down” (85–86).