

# God in Postmodern Thought and Mysticism

Hamidreza Ayatollahy  
Allameh Tabataba'ii University  
Tehran- Iran

The term 'postmodernism' is loosely used to designate a wide variety of cultural phenomena from architecture through literature and literary theory to philosophy. The immediate background of philosophical postmodernism is the French structuralism of Saussure, Lévi-Strauss, Lacan and Barthes. But like existentialism, it has roots that go back to the critique by Kierkegaard and Nietzsche of certain strong knowledge claims in the work of Plato, Descartes and Hegel. If the quest for absolute knowledge is the quest for meanings that are completely clear and for truths that are completely certain, and philosophy takes this quest as its essential goal, then postmodernism replaces Nietzsche's announcement of the death of God with an announcement of the end of philosophy.

Postmodern thinkers speak of "God" in different ways. In recent years we have seen that some postmodern thinkers have pressed the claim that "postmodern" must be understood to mean or at least to include "postsecular," that the delimitation of the claims of Enlightenment rationalism must also involve the delimitation of Enlightenment secularism. A critical stance toward modernism goes hand in hand with a critical stance toward secularism. In France, Jacques Derrida's recent work has taken a turn toward what he calls "religion without religion," that is, to a thinking that involves a certain repetition of basic religious structures, most notably the "messianic." Derrida now analyzes in detail notions like the gift, hospitality, testimony and forgiveness that have always belonged to classical religious discourse. On the continent this

renewal is very much the effect of the impact Levinas's work has had. This is especially true of Derrida himself and also of Jean-Luc Marion, who speaks of a God "without being," without the "idols" of what Heidegger calls "onto-theo-logic."

The question of postmodern theology is the question of the nature of a discourse about deity that would not be tied to the metaphysical assumptions which postmodern philosophy finds untenable. In this research I am going to explain four famous kinds of postmodern view about God or deity. These are as follow:

First one is the a/theology of Mark C. Taylor. It seeks to find religious meaning beyond the simple opposition of theism and atheism, but without taking the mystical turn.

The second possibility is postmodern thought of Jean-Luc Marion. He seeks to free theological discourse from the horizon of all philosophical theories of being, including Heidegger's own postmodern analysis of being.

The third one is the process thought of David Griffin who is the founder of "The Center for a Postmodern World". His views are quite different from continent postmodern thinkers. His account of postmodern theology involves a naturalistic theism, which is equally distinct from the supernaturalistic theism of premodern and early modern theology and the nontheistic naturalism of the late modern worldview.

The fourth one is the negative mystical theology tradition of Pseudo-Dionysius and Meister Eckhart. It combines a vigorous denial of absolute knowledge with a theological import that goes beyond the critical negations of postmodern philosophy.

However, all of these expressions seem to be different from metaphysical idea of God but nearer to mystical account of deity. It seems that in most of postmodern assumptions of God there are some approaches to

direction which is nearer to mysticism than other attitudes. Let's survey first of all key themes in postmodern philosophy.

### **Postmodern Philosophy and Its Key Themes**

The themes of philosophical postmodernism whose bearing on philosophical theology is most direct are Heidegger's 'destruction' of the history of ontology and Derrida's 'deconstruction' of the metaphysics of presence. Heidegger's destruction, originally announced in *Being and Time* (1927), becomes a critique of 'the onto-theo-logical constitution of metaphysics' in *Identity and Difference* (1969). His point of reference is Aristotle's attempt to unify being, which is said in many ways. At the categorical level, it is substance that plays the role of unifying first principle for all the pros hen equivocals. But how is the world of actual substances itself to be unified? By a highest substance, God, who is universal by being first. In other words, the whole realm of beings can only be understood fully with reference to the highest being by whom their being is ordered.

Heidegger calls this confluence of the universality of ontology with the primacy of theology 'onto-theo-logy'. In a typically postmodern gesture, he treats this honored principle, whose modern fulfillment he finds in Hegel, with undisguised disrespect. He remarks that in onto-theo-logy 'the deity can come into philosophy only insofar as philosophy, of its own accord and by its own nature, requires and determines that and how the deity enters into it'. In other words, a tradition that stretches at least from Aristotle to Hegel uses God as a means to its own ends; anticipating the spirit of modern technology, it views even God as a resource in the service of its own will to power, the totalizing project of rendering the whole of being intelligible to human understanding. In transgressing this tradition, Heidegger invokes both a hermeneutics of finitude, which

views such a project as hubris, and a hermeneutics of suspicion, which looks for hidden and disreputable motives beneath discourses generously decorated with piety.

Heidegger insists that his critique, so far from having its origin in atheism, can be seen as a form of religious protest. Echoing Pascal, he says of the god of philosophy as onto-theo-logy:

Man can neither pray nor sacrifice to this god. Before the *causa sui* man can neither fall to his knees in awe nor can he play music and dance before this god.

The god-less thinking which must abandon the god of philosophy, god as *causa sui*, is thus perhaps closer to the divine God. Here this means only: god-less thinking is more open to Him than onto-theo-logic would like to admit.

Heidegger develops this critique explicitly against the Hegelian holism that would attain absolute knowledge by developing an all-inclusive categorical scheme, the *Logic*, and an all-inclusive theory of actual beings, the *Philosophies of Nature and of Spirit*.

Derrida has his own critique of Hegel, but in this context the deconstruction of the metaphysics of presence is best viewed as an assault on Cartesian foundationalism and its claim that, in a piecemeal manner and at the outset, we can achieve unambiguous meanings and final truths. It is just such meanings and truths that Derrida designates as presence, though the term ‘immediacy’ signifies much the same thing .

What is present is both here and now, and Derrida’s notion of presence has both spatial and temporal ramifications. To be fully present to the meanings and truths necessary for even piecemeal absolute knowledge is to have found the transcendental signified, a meaning or a truth so self-contained as to require no reference to anything outside itself in semantic

space and so finished as to require no reference to any clarification or validation subsequent to this moment in time. Deconstruction is not so much the assertion that we never reach the transcendental signified as it is the continuous showing of the spatial differences and temporal deferrals that undermine claims of total clarity and final certainty.

Derrida (١٩٦٨) invents the term *différance* to stand for this union of difference and deferral in the critique of logocentrism, which can be defined as the claim that absolute knowledge is possible, that either prior to all linguistic mediation (as in the work of Husserl) or subsequent to the essential completion of that mediation (as in the work of Hegel), human thought stands face to face with being.

We proceed, now, to describing those four attitudes toward postmodern accounts of “God” and theology.

### **- Postmodern Deity in the View of Mark C. Taylor**

The ‘postmodern a/theology’ of Mark C. Taylor is not a negative theology. Like Derridean deconstruction, a major source of its inspiration, it lacks the nostalgia and hope that mysticism shares with the positive theologies of theism. It has a strong Nietzschean bent and describes deconstruction as the hermeneutics of the death of God. But it describes itself as between belief and unbelief, because its response to Nietzsche’s announcement is neither the joyous, atheistic acceptance of God’s demise nor the angry or frightened, theistic rejection of it. This is not because it is indifferent to religious meaning, but because it finds both the simple affirmation and the simple denial of God’s reality to be too deeply enmeshed in the metaphysical thinking from which postmodernism seeks to extricate itself.

Taylor begins his a/theology (1988) with a deconstructive critique of four concepts that have been central to Judaic and Christian religion: God, self, history and book. In relation to tradition, this is an anti-theological gesture, but it purports to be of religious significance by opening up new possibilities for religious imagination. The positive rethinking of the four deconstructed themes is not described as reconstruction but as nomad thought in order to signify that it neither has nor seeks any fixed points of reference. Life is wandering and erring, and thus a maze; but this a/theology seeks for signs of 'mazing grace', as Taylor puts it.

The path from Nietzsche to Derrida leads all but inevitably through Heidegger. So it is not surprising to find an important Heideggerian theme in Taylor's project, namely the attempt to find a mode of thought that is not enslaved to projects of mastery, control and domination. The task of a/theology is neither to get a handle on God, nor to find in God the key to our mastery of the world.

### **- Postmodern theology of Jean-Luc Marion**

The postmetaphysical theology of Jean-Luc Marion owes no special debt to Kierkegaard; but it is written in a Kierkegaardian mode in the sense that it combines an uncompromising critique of the mainstream metaphysical traditions of the West with the desire to return to biblical religion. It points towards a dehellenized Christianity for those who still find themselves, or would like to find themselves, in the Church.

Marion (1982) stresses that the critique of metaphysics as onto-theo-logy is the critique of a certain kind of discourse. It does not entail either God's unreality or the absence of a divine character that is God's own, independent of our images and concepts of God. Its purpose is not to make the world safe for secularism, but to open the space for a new experience of God as love and as gift.

However, this space is to be found beyond the horizon of Being, and the Heideggerian notion that a critique of theology can represent a new openness to God is immediately supplemented with a critique of Heidegger. Marion affirms his identification of onto-theo-logy as the arrogant demand by philosophy that God enter its discourse on its terms and in its service. At least as strongly as Heidegger, he wants to free God from these constraints. But he insists that the ‘step back’ out of metaphysics is not a step back into Being. In other words, Heidegger’s attempt to think Being is more nearly a continuation of the onto-theological constitution of metaphysics than a decisive break with it. The move away from the Athens of Plato and Aristotle needs to be in the direction of the biblical Jerusalem rather than the pre-Socratic Magna Graecia.

The major premise of Marion’s argument is the distinction between an idol and an icon. It concerns the ‘how’ rather than the ‘what’ of perception, which means that one and the same object could be an idol for one observer and an icon for another. An object of religious significance is an idol when it satisfies our perception, fulfils our intentions, freezes our gaze and brings it to rest. We have arrived and need not go further. An object is an icon when our gaze finds it necessary to ‘transpierce’ it in search of what exceeds it, when the invisible remains invisible in its visibility, when what is presented opens an abyss that we can never finish probing. While the idol limits the divine to the measure of the human gaze, the icon signifies an openness to that which exceeds every human measure. This analysis can be transferred from the sensible to the intelligible realm. Concepts, too, can serve as idols, not by virtue of their content (their ‘what’) but by virtue of their use (their ‘how’). Any theology that professes an adequation between its concepts and the divine reality is ipso facto idolatrous; this is the fatal flaw of onto-theo-logy.

Heidegger's thinking of Being breaks decisively with the Hegelian-Husserlian drive towards adequate concepts. But by making the human understanding of Being the horizon for any understanding of God, Heidegger also compels the divine to conform to the measure of human thought. After *Being and Time*, he understood the goal of philosophy to be to let things show themselves in and from themselves. Marion argues that the horizon of Being undermines this goal. The self-revelation of God as love and as gift shatters this and every horizon, for love and gift do not signify concepts that would be adequate to the divine reality and with which we might rest, but the excess of the divine reality to every attempt on our part to think it. For Marion, postmodern theology is the attempt to preserve this self-revelation from every philosophical theory of Being, modern or postmodern.

### **- Postmodern Theology of David Ray Griffin**

David Ray Griffin in his book "God and Religion in the Postmodern World, Essays in Postmodern Theology" introduces a kind of positive postmodern thought that rejects "deconstructionism". He criticizes early and late modern account of theological thought as well as premodern one, but he thinks that process theology can provide a suitable account of theology which has enough consistency in supplying all aspects of human needs, theoretical, religious, practical or scientific. It seems to him that his new idea of "God" can solve all historical problems of theology.

He explains his position thus: The widespread loss of belief in God in intellectual circles in the modern world has been due, in part, to a problem inherent in the traditional idea of God and, in part, to problems inherent in the modern worldview. Recovering belief in God, while retaining modernity's formal commitment to freedom, experience, and reason, is possible today only on the basis of a postmodern worldview



that simultaneously overcomes substantive assumptions about nature and experience and traditional theism's assumption about divine power.

Such a postmodern worldview makes belief in God possible again, even natural. But the feature of it that makes theism possible makes traditional theism impossible. This postmodern worldview also contains a fourfold critique of the substantive assumptions of modernity, involving pragmatic, philosophical, historical, and scientific arguments. This fourfold critique of the modern worldview is merely the negative aspect of the emerging postmodern worldview.

Then, after explaining some positive features of postmodern thought, he speaks of postmodern "God" as:

God is the supreme, all-inclusive embodiment of creative power. As such, God both influences the world and is influenced by it. God differs from all other embodiments of creative power by being unlimited spatially and temporally and in knowledge and compassion. God's power and therefore, God's creative and providential activity, however, are not understood as they were in traditional theism. God does not have and could not have a monopoly on power and therefore cannot unilaterally determine the events in the world. The reason for this is that the creatures have their own inherent creative power to actualize themselves and to influence others, and this power cannot be overridden.

### **- Postmodern Theology as Mystical-Negative Theology**

By attention to postmodern philosophy of Heidegger and Derrida, the question of a postmodern theology that emerges is quite clear: what would a discourse look like that would still be theological but would vigilantly resist lapsing into metaphysics, which in this context signifies the confluence of onto-theo-logy, the metaphysics of presence, and logocentrism? Since Heidegger and Derrida are in agreement that we

cannot just decide to leave metaphysics behind and be done with it, such a postmetaphysical theology will not be the triumphant freedom from all metaphysical tendencies, but the militant struggle against enslavement to them. Partly because of the mystical element in Heidegger's thought, and partly because the negative character of Derridean deconstruction has from the outset suggested affinities with negative theology, the tradition of mystical theology that has Pseudo-Dionysius and Meister Eckhart among its leading figures is easily viewed as a paradigm of postmetaphysical theology.

Derrida's answer to the question whether deconstruction is a kind of negative theology is an emphatic negative. Negative theology for Dionysius and Eckhart is part of the *via negativa* (remember the explanation of God in Dionysius' view as one who has not existence but above existence, who is not good but above good, and we can only affirm of him as not in a manner which we know of existence and goodness) ; it is a skepticism in the service of mysticism. In so far as deconstruction can be construed as a kind of skepticism, it serves no mystical project. It does not posit a 'superessential' deity, a God beyond being; it knows no nostalgia or hope for a pre- or postconceptual experience of pure presence to such a deity; and it does not address such a deity in the second person language ('you' or 'thou') of prayer or praise. Moreover, the mystical project, like its cousin, the logocentric project of Hegel, is committed to an overcoming of difference that betrays an allergic reaction to the very experience of otherness that deconstruction seeks to preserve.

Kevin Hart (1989) believes Derrida is right to reject the suggestion that deconstruction is a kind of negative theology. But he argues that negative theology is a deconstruction of positive theology, and in this way the paradigm of postmetaphysical theology. He agrees with Heidegger and Derrida that what the former calls the 'step back' out of metaphysics is an

ongoing task. This means that negative theology will always be accompanied by positive theology, as it is in Dionysius and Eckhart.

But they have a distinctive account of the relationship between the two. For someone like Thomas Aquinas, positive theology is prior and negative theology is a supplemental check to see that our discourse is about God and not just our ideas of God. For Dionysius and Eckhart, negative theology is prior to all the statements of positive theology. At issue here is not the order of exposition, as if the question were what should go into Chapter One. The issue is whether the negative principle, the denial that our concepts could possibly be adequate to the divine reality, is the first principle of theology.

### **Conclusion:**

Because postmodern thought identifies with criticizing the all-embracing assumptions of modernism therefore it must challenge the atheistic approach of the late modernity and the enlightenment. It must reject both traditional theism and modern atheism as are incompatible for a postmodern world. Therefore, it may not reject God (as the supposition of the late modernity) but must affirm him but not in a traditional assumption. I think this situation, as the signs indicate, is providing a context for tendencies toward mysticism. However, as you observed, all that is said in against modern atheistic view and postmodern renewal views is hardly depend on Judeo-Christian tradition and doctrines which differs quite from an Islamic view. I think that these postmodern theologies, because of their different background, may have little to introduce for an Islamic culture.