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## Radical Theology and the “Weakening” of Bourgeois Institutions

### Keywords

radical theology, weak thought, Nietzsche, Vattimo, secularization, death of God, neoconservatism, neo-liberalism, the university, Ignazio Silone

### Abstract

Radical theology offers a different way to interrogate and critique bourgeois capitalist society and its institutions. Almost always institutional in location and focus, radical theology recognizes that the traditional religious underpinnings of liberal bourgeois society and its institutions no longer continue to operate nor offer a workable foundational basis. We could say, *contra* Habermas, that there is more than “the awareness” of what is missing; rather, what is missing is what is *necessarily* missing because “the what” of God is dead. The crisis of contemporary institutions is that, founded implicitly or explicitly on bourgeois religion and its God, they now find themselves with an ontological crisis most do not even recognize. Or rather, they recognize there is a crisis of meaning and purpose but are unsure or unwilling or even unable to engage with its foundational causes. Drawing on the weak thought of Gianni Vattimo, radical theology is employed as a way of rethinking institutions from within, against both their foundations and their current expressions, articulating a set of “weak possibilities” for ways forward.

## Radikalna teologija in »oslabitev« buržoaznih institucij

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### Ključne besede

radikalna teologija, šibka misel, Nietzsche, Vattimo, sekularizacija, smrt Boga, neokonservativizem, neoliberalizem, univerza, Ignazio Silone

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## Povzetek

Radikalna teologija ponuja drugačen način preizpraševanja in kritike buržoazne kapitalistične družbe in njenih institucij. Radikalna teologija, ki je glede na svojo umeščenost in fokus skoraj vedno institucionalna, izhaja iz spoznanja, da tradicionalni religiozni temelji liberalne buržoazne družbe in njenih institucij ne delujejo več in ne nudijo delujoče temeljne podlage. V *nasprotju* s Habermasom bi lahko rekli, da ne gre zgolj za »zavest« o tem, kar manjka. Prej gre za to, da je tisto, kar manjka, tisto, kar *nujno* manjka, ker je tisto »kaj« Boga mrtvo. Kriza sodobnih institucij je v tem, da so se institucije, ki so implicitno ali eksplicitno utemeljene na buržoazni religiji in njenem Bogu, znašle v ontološki krizi, ki je večina niti ne prepozna. Ali bolje rečeno, priznavajo krizo smisla in smotra, vendar so negotove, nepripravljene ali celo nezmožne obravnavati njene temeljne vzroke. Opirajoč se na šibko misel Giannija Vattima, pričujoči članek obravnava radikalno teologijo kot način ponovnega premisleka institucij od znotraj, zoperstavlja joč se pri tem tako njihovim temeljem kot njihovim trenutnim pojavnim oblikam, na podlagi česar lahko zariše niz »šibkih možnosti« za pot naprej.



The death of God was famously proclaimed—albeit as a question—on the cover of *Time* magazine on April 6, 1966.<sup>1</sup> Given Nietzsche had already proclaimed it in 1882 in *The Gay Science* and his proclamation was not that it had just happened, but that it had happened and no one had really noticed, it may be said that *Time* was behind the times in raising it as even a question. Perhaps we could say that *Time's* question was itself but a cave for the shadow of God? For Nietzsche also observed:

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After Buddha was dead, his shadow was still shown for centuries in a cave—a tremendous, gruesome shadow. God is dead; but given the way of men, there may

<sup>1</sup> For the cover and a discussion of what was in the article, see Lily Rothman, “Is God Dead?,” *Time*, 2016, <https://time.com/isGoddead/>; Leigh Eric Schmidt, “Is God Dead? A Time Cover Turns 50,” Religion and Politics, April 5, 2016, <https://religionandpolitics.org/2016/04/05/is-God-dead-a-time-cover-turns-50/>. For my discussion and analysis of the wider “death of God” debate see Mike Grimshaw, “Did God Die in *The Christian Century*?,” *Journal for Cultural and Religious Theory* 6, no. 3 (Fall 2005): 7–23.

still be caves for thousands of years in which his shadow will be shown.—And we—we still have to vanquish his shadow, too.<sup>2</sup>

As Graham Ward reminds us in *Cities of God* the question that theology “does not handle,” the question of “what God is in relation to the world” does become addressed in the question of “that relation and that world [. . . which . . .] is a question about history and salvation [. . .] the question becomes very specific; it becomes the question concerning ‘what time it is?’”<sup>3</sup> Or in this case, what or who was the God of *Time*?

Sitting at the heart of the question, and indeed, the critique of radical theology, is a further question: What does it mean if God is dead in relation to the world? That is, if we exist in the time of the death of God, then is the answer that this is now the time of radical theology—after God? Moreover, is the task of radical theology—perhaps paradoxically for many—to vanquish the shadow of God . . .?! What do I mean by the shadow of God?

In 1946 in a broadcast to post-war Germany, T. S. Eliot emphasized that while the unity of European culture as expressed in arts and ideas arose out of a history of a common Christian culture, this did not necessitate or mean there was a contemporary, unified Christian culture in the modern world. Rather, as he observed, the acknowledgment of a shared heritage did not necessarily involve a shared belief:

It is against a background of Christianity that all our thought has significance. An individual European may not believe the Christian faith is true, and yet what he says, and makes, and does, will all spring out of his heritage of the Christian faith for its meaning.<sup>4</sup>

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What do we actually understand of that heritage? The death of Christ is, as Gianni Vattimo notes, “the mysterious event that lies at the basis of our civilization

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<sup>2</sup> Friedrich Wilhelm Nietzsche, *The Gay Science: With a Prelude in German Rhymes and an Appendix of Songs*, ed. Bernard Williams, trans. Josefine Nauckhoff and Adrian Del Caro (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 109.

<sup>3</sup> Graham Ward, *Cities of God* (London: Routledge, 2000), 2.

<sup>4</sup> T. S. Eliot, *Notes Towards a Definition of Culture* (London: Faber & Faber, 1948), 122.

and of modern calculation of time.”<sup>5</sup> The death of Christ is the culmination of the incarnational event that inaugurated the death of God. Therefore, *contra* Eliot, what *actually* sits as the unacknowledged basis of both western civilization and of modern time is the death of God.

This is why radical theology is a critical engagement with the society of the death of God. Radical theology is the *gospel* of the death of God; that is, the proclamation of the good news of the death of God. While institutions and their representatives such as *Time* may wish to question, qualify, or moderate the death of God, reducing it to a question to be dismissed, radical theology *proceeds from* the death of God and so finds itself in an interesting position vis-à-vis those institutions that seek to maintain, return or resuscitate God.

Radical theology also has an ongoing alliance to critical theory as a different way to interrogate and critique bourgeois capitalist society and its institutions. What makes it of particular interest is that radical theology is almost always institutional in location and focus, arising from and engaging with the recognition that the traditional religious underpinnings of liberal bourgeois society and its institutions no longer offer a workable foundational basis. William Hamilton forcefully and thoughtfully articulates this protest in his outline of “The Shape of a Radical Theology.”<sup>6</sup> In this confessional piece from 1965, being a radical is not enough for Hamilton. One can either be a soft radical or a hard radical. For soft radicals, the medium of expression is the problem, but not the central message. For Hamilton and other hard radicals the message is problematic and God is experienced as real loss; God is not just absent or hidden, but dead. What follows is therefore the expression of a “hard radical” theology.

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Radical theology enables us to understand that the crisis of contemporary institutions is that, founded implicitly or explicitly on bourgeois religion and its God, they now find themselves with an ontological crisis most do not even recognize. Or rather, they recognize there is a crisis of meaning and purpose but are unsure or unwilling or even unable to engage with its foundational causes. This results

<sup>5</sup> Gianni Vattimo, *After Christianity*, trans. Luca D’Isanto (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002), 106.

<sup>6</sup> William Hamilton, “The Shape of a Radical Theology,” *The Christian Century*, October 6, 1965, 1219–22.

in a society of non-Nietzschean nihilism and institutions that at most realizes there is a crisis but is not able to properly articulate or interrogate why.

### The Role of Weak Thought

The framing of my discussion occurs in conversation with the weak thought (*pensiero debole*) initiated by Vattimo that combines, in particular, the influences of Nietzsche, Heidegger, and Gadamer in a hermeneutic expression of a postmodern ethic. Weak thought aligns itself with radical theology in being a herald of the return of religion into philosophy, but a return that is anti-metaphysical, a return that is theological in basis. Yet, it is a theology that itself is situated against all strong expressions of theology, faith and Christianity and its associated institutions, both those explicitly Christian and those implicitly expressing a Christian-derived culture and tradition. For weak thought arises from Vattimo’s engagement with the ongoing “profoundly Christian meaning of secularization”<sup>7</sup> wherein Christianity itself needs to weaken in order to facilitate its vocation and its authenticity. My radical theology weakening of institutions proceeds from a critical reading of Vattimo’s *After Christianity*, his text that lies closest to radical theology. What follows can be termed an annotative hermeneutics<sup>8</sup> that in turn weakens Vattimo’s thought and text in the process of an engaged weakening of institutions.

To begin, weakening is linked to belief and what Vattimo notes is “believing that one believes”<sup>9</sup> wherein faith, conviction and/or certainty also includes “to think with a certain degree of uncertainty.”<sup>10</sup> As Vattimo clarifies, the first “believing” involves the uncertainty regarding the believing involving faith, conviction and/or certainty. Therefore, radical theology has within it a central uncertainty that in turn exposes the central uncertainty of contemporary institutions *after God*.

Such uncertainty is in fact the central event of Christianity, an uncertainty that the institution of Christianity—and then the institutions of Christian culture and

<sup>7</sup> Vattimo, *After Christianity*, 98.

<sup>8</sup> See Mike Grimshaw, “Flanuering with Vattimo: The Annotative Hermeneutics of Weak Thought,” *Critical Research on Religion* 2, no. 3 (December 2014): 265–79, <https://doi.org/10.1177/2050303214552574>.

<sup>9</sup> Vattimo, *After Christianity*, 1.

<sup>10</sup> Vattimo, 1.

society sought—if not to undo, then at the very least—to ignore. This uncertainty occurs because of what I term the weak event of the incarnation. It is a weak event for in it lives the claim of weak thought, the weak event that acts against all strong thought; the anti-foundationalist event that acts against all claims for foundationalism. Therefore, to build Christian institutions and also institutions of Christian culture stands against the central claim and anti-foundational and anti-institutional act-event of the incarnation. For the incarnation is to be understood as the weak-event wherein the kenotic act, the self-emptying of God, what we will call the death of God, acts against all strong claims—and what is an institution but, from the start, a strong claim? Via Nietzsche, this means that the proclamation “God is dead” is the end of metaphysics as there is no longer an ultimate foundation and this also means that to claim “God does not exist” is to continue to participate in a metaphysical principle.<sup>11</sup> In other words, the death of God also ends both metaphysics and atheism. This is Christianity, but certainly neither in its common, foundational continuation nor in its institutions.

It is also important that the death of God is an announcement and not a claim. For the claim is the expression of metaphysics, while, in contrast, the announcement is that of “an event that transforms the existence of the person who receives the announcement—or which is entirely constituted by this transformation.”<sup>12</sup> This is why we can speak of radical theology as the gospel—the good news—of the death of god—for to receive such an announcement (god is dead) one entirely transforms oneself. So, if weak thought is announced, but not claimed, weak thought also transforms. Therefore, in regard to institutions, to announce the death of God to institutions is also to seek their transformation.

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How is this so? Firstly, the announcement of the death of God arises from that event which transforms God via the kenotic self-emptying. In other words, God stops being God and so transformed in turn transforms those who receive the announcement. Secondly, the death of God is the announcement that is heard, an announcement that is non-foundational but rather relational. Thirdly, the announcement of the death of God is political in that it proclaims against both what *was* metaphysics and what *is* the order of modern technological society.

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<sup>11</sup> Vattimo, 3.

<sup>12</sup> Vattimo, 13.

Most centrally, the announcement of the death of God, if received, transforms all institutions built of or on the claim of God. The announcement of death of God is therefore doubly situated as the announcement *contra* metaphysics and *contra* what has, for many, been derived from metaphysics as “the *de facto* order of the rationalized world of modern technological society.”<sup>13</sup>

This transformation is a liberation that recovers the weakness of the kenotic event of love, of charity, of *agape*. Via Heidegger our *Geworfenheit* amounts to us being thrown into a world of the kenotic event because God was self-thrown as the event of death. This self-thrownness of God positions all claims to foundationalism as a lie seeking to limit or stop human relation in the name of love, which is liberation in the secular world, the *saeculum*, the world of shared human experience.<sup>14</sup> A *saeculum* that the death of God enables. In this *saeculum* the issue becomes one of a “critical principle”<sup>15</sup> to ensure that myths and ideologies and their institutions do not become uncritical expressions which can in turn become a normative metadiscourse.

Vattimo links weakening with secularization, describing it “as the paradoxical realization of Being’s religious vocation.”<sup>16</sup> The weakening of Being is not only “akin to the secularization of the sacred in the western tradition;”<sup>17</sup> it is also the announcement of the secularization of institutions. Secularization is, as Vattimo notes, “an occurrence within the history of Western religiosity” and also “characterizes it very deeply.”<sup>18</sup> As such it is positioned (we could say, announced) not just against the return of overt “religion” which is actually the attempted return of metaphysics but also versus the continued metaphysical foundations and assumptions of institutions—whether explicit or implicit. The message of the Judeo-Christian heritage is still alive in institutions that have yet to hear the announcement of the death of God and be transformed in the process.

<sup>13</sup> Vattimo, 14.

<sup>14</sup> For discussion as to what this involves see Mike Grimshaw, “Gabriel Vahanian: From the Death of God to Wording and Worlding,” in Gabriel Vahanian, *Theopoetics of the Word: A New Beginning of Word and World* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), 1–24; Mike Grimshaw, “‘In Spite of the Death of God’: Gabriel Vahanian’s secular theology,” *Palgrave Communications* 1, art. no. 15025 (2015), <https://doi.org/10.1057/palcomms.2015.25>.

<sup>15</sup> Vattimo, *After Christianity*, 20.

<sup>16</sup> Vattimo, 24.

<sup>17</sup> Vattimo, 25.

<sup>18</sup> Vattimo, 25.

What does this possibly mean? Reading via Vattimo, radical theology is an interpretive event in what we term the poetic and leads to salvation which is linked by Vattimo with emancipation. Therefore, radical theology—especially I would argue in relation to institutions—is *a poetic interpretative event in the name of emancipation; a secular emancipation in that it occurs within and for the world of shared human experience*. If the salvation of the Judeo-Christian heritage, after metaphysics, is understood as appearing “as the lightening and weakening of the ‘heavy’ structures in which Being has manifested itself throughout human civilization,”<sup>19</sup> then radical theology is expressed and experienced as the lightening of those “heavy structures” in the name of emancipation. These heavy structures are nothing less than our religious, political, economic and social institutions.

Radical theology thus proceeds first from within Christianity yet against the institutions of Christianity and its culture that wish Christianity to continue as a metaphysical religion and not embrace its radical announcement of the event of the death of God. Radical theology identifies that in Christian institutions and the institutions of a Christian culture and society we sought to resurrect metaphysical Being and metaphysical God. Even as western society underwent secularization we did not seek to properly emancipate our institutions from their basis in metaphysical Being and metaphysical God, for to do so would mean a refocusing and rethinking of society as now composed of “a community of interpreters.”<sup>20</sup> Therefore, what continues is the seeking an authority over Being in the name of institutional power and tradition.

I now want to raise three different entry points for discussing radical theology, institutions and the death of God. I draw upon these because they occur outside of the normal discussions and make us consider just how problematic the death of God and its attendant collapse of foundational meaning for bourgeois capitalist society and its institutions has been—and continues to be.

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<sup>19</sup> Vattimo, 53.

<sup>20</sup> Vattimo, 67.

## Entry Point: Kristol’s Neoconservatism

I admit it is not often that a neo-conservative thinker such as Irving Kristol<sup>21</sup> is employed in a discussion of radical theology, which is perhaps a glaring oversight, when you consider the role and influence that Reinhold Niebuhr’s neo-orthodox theology of *Krisis* played in his thought,<sup>22</sup> especially in the articulation of what became known as Christian realism. Of course, Niebuhr was no death of God theologian, but he was a theologian who critiqued the failings of liberal bourgeois culture. This enabled Kristol to critically evaluate what was happening in liberal bourgeois society in his historical moment.

For the purposes of our discussion, I want to draw upon a statement made by Kristol in *Two Cheers for Capitalism* (1978).<sup>23</sup> Kristol positions his argument versus those “who indict bourgeois capitalism for not only failing to create a utopia for humanity to dwell in, but for even failing to try.”<sup>24</sup> As an aside, we can see how neoliberalism attempted to answer this—you create *your* utopia by *your* agency: whether in a communal fashion/societally via what would become progressive neoliberalism or, economically—at the level of individuals and families or at state and globalized level—by neoliberal economics.

Kristol and neoconservatism are antiutopian, arguing for a capitalist order that “begins with the assumption that the world is full of other people, moved by their own interests and their own passions, and that the best we can reasonably

<sup>21</sup> It was Kristol who coined the famous definition: “A neoconservative is a liberal mugged by reality.” This has an often not quoted extension: “The reference ‘mugged by reality’ is from Irving Kristol’s quote, ‘[a neoconservative] is a liberal who has been mugged by reality. A neoliberal is a liberal who got mugged by reality but has not pressed charges.’” Douglas Murray, *Neoconservatism: Why We Need It* (San Francisco: Encounter, 2006), 89; quoted in Lee Trepanier, “‘Mugged by Reality’: The Neoconservative Turn,” *Vogelinview*, July 15, 2021, <https://voegelinview.com/mugged-by-reality-the-neoconservative-turn/>.

<sup>22</sup> Kristol lists Niebuhr, Paul Tillich, Jacques Maritain, and later Martin Buber, Franz Rozenweig, and Gershom Scholem as his theological influences. See Irving Kristol, *Neoconservatism: The Autobiography of an Idea* (New York: Free Press, 1995), 5.

<sup>23</sup> Irving Kristol, *Two Cheers for Capitalism* (New York: Basic Books, 1978). For my discussion on Kristol, Foucault and neoliberalism see: Mike Grimshaw, “Is The Center Neoliberal?,” *The Philosophical Salon*, August 22, 2022, <https://thephilosophicalsalon.com/is-the-center-neoliberal/>.

<sup>24</sup> Kristol, *Two Cheers for Capitalism*, ix.

hope for is a society of civil concord, not a community of mutual love.”<sup>25</sup> This means, in Kristol’s reading, that “Capitalism is the least romantic conception of a public order that the human mind has ever conceived”<sup>26</sup> and this needs to be remembered in his later critique of Milton Friedman as being “heir to modern romanticism.”<sup>27</sup>

Kristol argues this from his conception of the central role of bourgeois virtue in bourgeois capitalism that began with “a kind of benign toleration of religion but a firm commitment to Judeo-Christian morality.”<sup>28</sup> In particular, bourgeois capitalism arose out of a protestant ethos and society that celebrated and endorsed “the domestic virtues” of “prudence, diligence, trustworthiness—and the ambition to better one’s condition.”<sup>29</sup> Kristol later expands this list to include honesty, sobriety and thrift,<sup>30</sup> all of which, in the Puritan-Protestant origins of bourgeois capitalism are connected to worldly success.

So, what has this to do with radical theology and its critique of institutions? It is here that Kristol provides a statement in line with radical theology. The trouble is that late twentieth century bourgeois capitalism was, for over 150 years, “living off the accumulated moral capital of traditional religion and traditional moral philosophy, and that once this capital was depleted, bourgeois society would find its legitimacy ever more questionable.”<sup>31</sup>

If we remember Nietzsche, the death of God was not only that of God but of all that which had been built on the claim of that God. If God dies, then bourgeois capitalism is exposed as now existing on the shadow of God—as are the institutions of bourgeois capitalism. This is why we can again draw upon Kristol who observes: “*The enemy of liberal capitalism today is not so much socialism as nihilism. Only liberal capitalism doesn’t see nihilism as the enemy, but rather as just another splendid business opportunity.*”<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> Kristol, x.

<sup>26</sup> Kristol, x.

<sup>27</sup> Kristol, 65.

<sup>28</sup> Kristol, *Neo-conservatism*, 33.

<sup>29</sup> Kristol, *Two Cheers for Capitalism*, x.

<sup>30</sup> Kristol, 64–65.

<sup>31</sup> Kristol, 65–66.

<sup>32</sup> Kristol, 66.

For this is not a Nietzschean nihilism, rather a nihilism from within the institutions of liberal bourgeois capitalism. To put it another way, after the death of God we need to be not just beyond good and evil but beyond the institutions of liberal bourgeois capitalism—and the neoliberal caves of their shadows.

This means the radical theologian can find an unexpected ally in Kristol the neo-con; (similar perhaps to how Žižek can draw upon the conservative Chesterton . . .?) for Kristol asks a question aligned to that of radical theology:

Who on earth wants to live in a society in which all—or even a majority—of one’s fellow citizens are fully engaged in the hot pursuit of money, the single-minded pursuit of material self-interest? To put it another way: Who wants to live in a society in which selfishness and self-seeking are celebrated as primary virtues? Such a society is unfit for human habitation: thus sayeth the Old Testament, the New Testament, the Koran, the Greek philosophers, the medieval theologians, all modern moral philosophy.<sup>33</sup>

Kristol also provides an unexpected entry point to critique neoliberalism by noting:

The inner spiritual chaos of the times, so powerfully created by the dynamics of capitalism itself, is such as to make nihilism an empty temptation. A “free society” in Hayek’s sense gives birth to in massive numbers to “free spirits,” emptied of moral substance but still driven by primordial moral actions. Such people are capable of the most irrational actions.<sup>34</sup>

In line with Kristol’s critique, what we fail to properly recognize is that neoliberalism is the ethos of not only a post-Christian society but actually an anti-Christian society. As he observes (in what is of course a highly contestable statement), “it is the ethos of capitalism that is in gross disrepair, not the economics of capitalism.”<sup>35</sup> This is because central to neoliberalism is the rebellion against tradition: culturally, societally, religiously, morally and economically. While on the one hand this is a rebellion against the institutions of Christian society, on

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<sup>33</sup> Kristol, 85.

<sup>34</sup> Kristol, 268.

<sup>35</sup> Kristol, *Neo-conservatism*, 112.

the other it is rebellion in the name of romantic market nihilism that still leaves us with the dominance of the caves of the shadows of God. Now we have new neoliberal institutions of the shadow of God: God as neo-liberal capitalism and market forces, God as agency of the individual within neo-liberal capitalism, God as the new institutions of identity politics or rather, the institutions that now enforce the individual romanticized politics of the shadow of God.

## Entry Point 2: Nash on the University

The second entry point comes from within one of the central institutions of modern bourgeois society, the university.

In 1949, amidst a wider rethinking of post-war western culture, values, and civilization that often looked to draw upon Christianity, appeared Sir Walter Moberly's *The Crisis in the University*.<sup>36</sup> Moberly's book was both an explicit and implicit Christian response to a wider "conviction that much ails universities today, that what is wrong with them is closely connected to what is wrong with the whole world; and that the chief seat of the malady is to be found in the underlying assumptions, largely unconscious, by which their life and work are determined."<sup>37</sup>

Moberly observed that the only recent work "which deals with the university today from a Christian standpoint" is "Arnold Nash's deliberately provocative and challenging *The University and the Modern World*,"<sup>38</sup> which is subtitled *An Essay in the Social Philosophy of University Education*. And it is to this secondary text, not Moberly's better-known text, that I want to turn.

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Nash provides a social theology of higher education that, having critiqued the issues and failures of, variously, the liberal democratic university, the Nazi university, and the Soviet university, then argues for a reconstruction of the university under a revived and rethought Christian framework. Nash's overall concern is the confusion and questions of meaning that arose as the basis of the university

<sup>36</sup> Walter Moberly, *The Crisis In The University* (London: SCM Press, 1949).

<sup>37</sup> Moberly, 7.

<sup>38</sup> Moberly, 7. Arnold S. Nash, *The University and the Modern World: An Essay in the Social Philosophy of University Education* (New York: Macmillan, 1943). I will refer to the later edition (London: SCM Press, 1945).

changed from that founded in a Christian culture of identity to one that sought a basis in scientific method and spirit. Nash argues that the totalitarian university of either the Nazi or Soviet system occurs as an inadequate answer and remedy to these issues as do the failings encountered in the liberal democratic university. The underlying concern is the absence of a meaning of life or history.

As Nash sets out in his preface: "What is at stake is the adequacy of the common premises of any tradition now current in the liberal democratic world on the nature and function of the university in society."<sup>39</sup> The focus of his discussion is what can be drawn upon to order experience "in the new world being born."<sup>40</sup> That is, the issue of the passing away of a world whereby its "*Geist* of rational individualism expressed itself in politics as representative democracy, in religion as liberal Protestantism, in thought as the scientific movement and in economic life as capitalism."<sup>41</sup> That is, the crisis in the university is a symptom of a wider crisis in liberal capitalist democracy,<sup>42</sup> whereby in the face of "the confusion and chaos of the liberal world view" the "liberal democratic university, by rejecting any real attempt to discover and then teach a unified conception of life refuses to be a university."<sup>43</sup>

That is, like liberal bourgeois capitalism, the liberal democratic university was living off an ever-depleting moral capital, yet unsure what to replace that moral capital with that would enable a unified conception of life that was neither nihilistic nor reduced to market forces. In short, the institution of the university became—and I would argue remains—yet another cave of the shadow of God. In the case of the university, of the shadow of God that scientific thinking can be the basis of meaning and history, whether in the natural and physical sciences or in the growth of the social sciences—or even in the turn of the humanities to justify themselves via forms of "the scientific method." This, Nash names the idol of science in the modern world. He traces this to the challenge to scholasticism undertaken by the Protestant reformation and how this in turn was challenged by the Enlightenment.

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<sup>39</sup> Nash, *University and the Modern World*, 11.

<sup>40</sup> Nash, 11.

<sup>41</sup> Nash, 16.

<sup>42</sup> Nash, 22.

<sup>43</sup> Nash, 35.

It is not that Nash wishes to undo the advances in human knowledge made possible by these changes, rather that the social turn to science created a philosophical gap in the meaning of life and of history that science has been unable to fill. In his discussion of the inter-relatedness of the rise of capitalism and that of the scientific movement, the point is made that neither science nor capitalism can provide that which is missing, and the result is chaos and nihilism—or the turn to totalitarianism.

So, what then is to be done? For Nash it is nothing less than that in the liberal democratic university, the task is “to accept the responsibility for the creation and teaching of a unified and coherent philosophy.”<sup>44</sup> This involves both its ontological reference (“the ultimate purpose for which knowledge is sought”) and its form, that is “the categories in which it is finally expressed.”<sup>45</sup> In other words, Nash is arguing that what is needed is “a new frame of reference in terms of which scientific knowledge can be ordered and understood.”<sup>46</sup> Nash saw this as occurring within moves towards a collectivized economy because of “the disorder in the socio-economic life of liberal capitalist society.”<sup>47</sup> Therefore, the questions becomes not shall an economy and its university be planned but rather, on what shall it be planned and to what purpose?<sup>48</sup> For this to occur, Nash argues that “knowledge can only be adequately understood in terms of its social origins.”<sup>49</sup> The university can therefore only be a *uni-versity* when it is able to work towards and proceed from such a rethought, intellectual synthesis that interprets human life and destiny in light of and in response to the crisis of modernity.

Crucially, it is here that radical theology asks that problematic question: but is not the university still the institutional cave of the shadow of God? Or rather, what would a university that embraces—rather than ignore or dismiss, or even not hear—the radical announcement of the death of God look like? Is the university actually even able to display an awareness of something missing? Is this why it has been so open to capture — in fact seemingly sought to be captured — by the romanticist nihilism of neoliberalism?

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<sup>44</sup> Nash, 163.

<sup>45</sup> Nash, 163.

<sup>46</sup> Nash, 164.

<sup>47</sup> Nash, 166.

<sup>48</sup> Nash, 166.

<sup>49</sup> Nash, 167.

### Entry Point 3: Silone on Liberalism on and Religion

Writing in the cold war journal *Encounter*<sup>50</sup> the Italian author and ex-Marxist Ignazio Silone in “The Choice of Comrades” discussed the question of a beneficial alliance between liberals and religion.<sup>51</sup>

The issue Silone identifies in 1954 is that which we can say proceeds in many ways from the still not yet fully acknowledged death of God:

The last forty years have witnessed the collapse of most of the great politico-social myths bequeathed to us from the 19th century. As a result, certain kinds of people who had relied on these myths as a compass find themselves in a state of spiritual vagueness and ambiguity that is still far from being clarified. This situation is one aspect of the general crisis of capitalism and anti-capitalism. we are confronted with the need for reassessment, not only of the question of how to behave but also the greater question of the meaning of our existence.<sup>52</sup>

Silone identified Nietzsche as the first one to identify this as “the nihilism of modern times,”<sup>53</sup> a world of spiritual crisis and nihilism in which modern progress, capitalism and communism are all found wanting, resulting in a world whereby “we are neither believers nor atheists, nor are we sceptics.”<sup>54</sup> Silone’s essay, in its signalling of a possible, provisional way out of post-war nihilism, was influential amongst North American Protestant liberals who became radical theologians; in particular it was a major influence on the American death of God theologian William Hamilton<sup>55</sup> and can be seen as one of the early expressions of secular theology. Hamilton describes Silone as expressing “the dilemma of the non-Catholic, non-Communist, non-humanist European intellectual.”<sup>56</sup>

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<sup>50</sup> For any overview history of religion and *Encounter* in the Cold War, see Mike Grimshaw, “Encountering Religion: Encounter, Religion, and the Cultural Cold War, 1953–1967,” *History of Religions* 51, no. 1 (August 2011): 31–58, <https://doi.org/10.1086/659608>.

<sup>51</sup> Ignazio Silone, “The Choice of Comrades,” *Encounter* 3, no. 6 (December 1954): 21–28.

<sup>52</sup> Silone, 21.

<sup>53</sup> Silone, 21.

<sup>54</sup> Silone, 28.

<sup>55</sup> William Hamilton, “On Doing Without Knowledge of God,” *The Journal of Religion* 37, no. 1 (January 1957): 37–43.

<sup>56</sup> Hamilton, 37.

I would argue that the situation of the radical theologian is very close to this statement by Silone from 1962:

Now I consider myself to be a Socialist without a party and a Christian without a church. I still feel bound to the ethics and idealism of each but I can no longer have any part of what the State has made of Socialism and the Church has made of Christianity.<sup>57</sup>

In such a context requiring “A Choice of Comrades” we are left with perhaps only “a few Christian certainties so deeply immured in human existence as to be identified with it.”<sup>58</sup> That is “founded on the inner certainty that we are free and responsible, and it turns on the absolute need of finding a way towards the inmost reality of other people. This possibility of spiritual communion is surely the irrefutable proof of human brotherhood.”<sup>59</sup> This is not faith, but trust and is therefore aligned to what Vattimo will describe as the announcement.

What really resonates with radical theology is Silone’s positioning of what occurs:

[T]he spiritual situation I have just described admits neither of defence nor of arrogance. Frankly, it is merely an expedient. It resembles a refugee encampment in no-man’s-land, an exposed makeshift encampment. What do you think refugees do from morning to night? They spend most of their time telling one another the story of their lives. The stories are anything but amusing, but they tell them to one another, really, in an effort to make themselves understood. As long as there remains a determination to understand and to share one’s understanding with others, perhaps we need not altogether despair.<sup>60</sup>

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## Conclusion

It is perhaps a necessary cliché to consider that, as Marx observes, with capitalist modernity “all that is solid melts into air, all that is holy is profaned, and

<sup>57</sup> Kenneth Allsop, “Ignazio Silone,” *Encounter* 18, no. 3 (March 1962): 49.

<sup>58</sup> Silone, “Choice of Comrades,” 28.

<sup>59</sup> Silone, 28.

<sup>60</sup> Silone, 28.

man is at last compelled to face with sober senses his real conditions of life, and his relations with his kind.”<sup>61</sup> Institutions were—and are—one central way modernity attempts to institute, justify and maintain into contemporary existence, what we can call “solidity.” Therefore, modern bureaucracy often seeks to inform and instil in us the belief that it is the role and duty of institutions to order our world. And yet they fail. It was another former hard-left liberal turned neo-conservative, Norman Podhoretz, who offered a reason why: most thinkers and critics being “unable to establish the connection between the spiritual condition of the individual and the institutions by which the condition was shaped and formed.”<sup>62</sup>

In conclusion, it is not institutions that enable us to live after the death of God, for our current institutions are either institutions of God and of the culture and society of God—or at most, caves of the shadow of God. What radical theology reminds us—via Silone—is that in taking a critical position against such institutions, and in finding ourselves after God, the choice of comrades takes on paramount importance.

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<sup>61</sup> Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, “Manifesto of the Communist Party,” trans. Samuel Moore, chap. 1, Marxists Internet Archive, accessed June 29, 2024, <https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1848/communist-manifesto/cho1.htm>.

<sup>62</sup> Norman Podhoretz, *Breaking Ranks: A Political Memoir* (New York: Weidenfeld and Nicholson, 1979), 50.

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