Review Essay: Graham Ward: *True Religion*

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Graham Ward, *True Religion,* Blackwell Publishing, 2003.

Secularism is about to implode, Graham Ward warns the reader; one can see the signs of a return of the religious in the cultural arena and in the consumer market. The book is dedicated to interpreting the manifestations of this return of the religious and, to a great extent, devoted to helping religion find its way out of the consumer market to a more appropriate home. In *True Religion,* Ward undertakes to explain how religion ended up in the consumer market in the first place and under what guises by revisiting, in a remarkable tour de force, more than five hundred years of cultural and political history. This genealogy of religion is constructed by alternating broad panoramic views of the cultural matrices in which the changes in the understanding of religion occurred with powerful close readings of key texts that allow Ward to investigate religion's "formations and transformations as a discourse" (3) from the sixteenth-century to the present.

The story of the various transformations of religion since the advent of modernity has been told by specialists from diverse fields — ranging from political science and sociology to religious studies, literary studies, and psychoanalysis. Quite often, the story of religion is told in relation to something else: an account of the rise of the European nation-state, or the birth of liberalism, or the emergence of secularism and the Enlightenment. Ward, however, drawing on a wide variety of specialized voices and discourses (Charles Taylor, Talal Asad, Jean Baudrillard, Paul Virillio, Jacques Derrida, Slavoj Zizek, Stephen Greenblatt) does not lose sight of religion itself: religion as lived, imagined, understood, puzzled, and worried over

Iowa Journal of Cultural Studies 7 (Fall 2005)
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at various key-moments in more than five centuries in which it was shaped by the cultural matrices of European and, eventually, North American culture. Ward chooses a wide variety of cultural media (film, poetry, plays, architecture) as well as philosophical discourses and treatises to analyze the deepest anxieties and dreams at work in the way the understanding of "true" religion morphed over time.

True Religion's thesis is that the very birth of the quest for "true" religion is a symptom of a concern that true religion is about to be lost, or at least unhinged from its truth. One of the paradoxes of Western Christianity seems to be that the more intense the search for "true" religion, the more alienated the pursuer of truth from his object. Over the course of five centuries, Western Christianity tried to find the core of religion by stripping it of what it deemed at the time to be unimportant particulars: rituals and sacraments which seemed to weigh heavily on the spiritual life of the believer, the particularity of the human body in worship and, eventually, the embodied Christ himself. Christianity, alternately, becomes a set of rational and moral laws, a pantheistic philosophical and artistic understanding of the universe and its infinity, and eventually mere kitsch and special effects, meant to stir the viewer, but offer no glimpse of any kind of transcendence, when the infinite sublime lost its depth and collapsed into mere surface. Paradoxically, interventions meant to purify and spiritualize religion in the quest of an abstract absolute ultimately secularized it. The relentless excising or demoting of the material world of sacramental traditions and objects left the worshipper prey to commodity fetishism instead of leading him towards a healthy spirituality. "True religion," Ward warns his readers, "consumes itself for it consumes all religious specificities, while meaning itself and value itself become fashion-led and therefore arbitrary. As a concept religion implodes. Having radically dematerialized its institutions and liturgies, sacred texts and solemn rites, confessions and invocations, true religion becomes a pantomime…it becomes simulation…Art, as religion's supplement, as the formal expression of the sublime experience, also dissolves. It, too, becomes simulacra; a surface without depth." (117)

The first chapter, "Religion Before and After Secularism," gives the reader the argument of the book in nuce. In this chapter, Ward contrasts the text of Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* to twentieth-century adaptations by Zefirelli and Luhrmann. Shakespeare's play, as it might have been understood and performed at the end of the sixteenth century, sits on the cusp between a sacramental and a secular world-view. Religion here is still a practice of faith, an intimacy with the liturgical calendar, with Catholic sacraments and ritual practices. As against familiar accounts that associate the rise of the individual with the rise of secularism, Ward surprisingly argues that "[t]he precious particularity of Romeo as Romeo and Juliet as Juliet, and their shared love, is maintained only because of the divinity that enfolds them and makes them to be much more than they are while being who they are." Shakespeare celebrates the remains of a world in which [i]t is an incarnate spirituality that transfigures into angels, saints and worshippers the physical, sexual and social energies in which they both participate" (18). The play bears testimony to a belief in and awareness of a fluidity between "different worlds". There is "a liturgical fluidity between court, theatre and church" (9), but moreover "the world

of nature and of church intermingle" (12). The play, however, testifies to an alteration in the way religion is understood, to a depoliticization of religion, a severing of the sacred from secular politics. In Luhrmann's postmodern version of Romeo and Juliet, the end point of many twists and turns in the understanding of religion, religious objects have become mere glamorous and empty fetishes, and religion itself is "cultural production and nothing more" (31). Luhrmann's lavish production entices the viewer to enjoy special effects; "the only transcendence is experience of the spectacular itself" (29).

The quest for true religion is unmistakably linked to the universalization of Christianity. In his second chapter, "Religion and Temporal Goods," Ward points to a number of factors that jointly triggered the change. The conflict between Catholics and Protestants, the rise of the nation-state, and the discovery of the new world (and subsequent colonialism) are, as suspected, the major factors. It is warfare and bloody conflict, which Ward claims, "occupied the best resources of Western Europe for almost two centuries" (8) and led Herbert of Cherbury in his plea for religious tolerance to level the specificities of major religions by boiling down all religions to five shared and apparently universal laws. The same warfare led John Locke, in the wake of Cherbury, to argue not only for the separation of church and state (thus inventing a new and insecure space of the secular), but also for further reducing Christianity to an inward emotional state, a private feeling, divorced from the public space or one's public persona. The politics of the nation-state has a tremendous impact on the way the discourse on religion is fashioned and the space of religion is carved. Starting with James I, "a new politics of the state was emerging, a new mythology in which one's profession of faith was also one's profession of national identity (45)." The economic interests of the nation-state, from seventeenth-century Britain to nineteenth-century Germany, dictate a politics of inclusion and tolerance towards religious and ethnic outsiders by reducing Christianity to a set of rational laws. The birth of colonial empires as well forced Europeans to account for the supremacy of Christianity over other faiths or paganism. From Columbus' accounts to Ferdinand and Isabella about the innocent pagans he encountered, to Grotius' formal treatises teaching sailors how to respond to whatever challenges other religions might pose or Defoe's Robinson Crusoe educating the cannibals, the sacramental load of "true religion" is made lighter and lighter, to be carried with ease on board of a ship. Religion becomes Christian Protestantism and is reduced to a moral code and a providence meant to serve the interests of the white European colonist and soothe his distress whenever he panics in a world from which God has been evacuated.

Ward's third chapter, "True Religion and Consumption," brilliantly analyzes the effects of another transformation of religion, from a rational and ethical tool in the hands of the nation-state to a mystical feeling of the sublime in the hands of the poet-diviner; a feeling which relies not on reason, but on imagination and negative experience. Having cast out or demoted all specificities of religion, romantic poets celebrate a pantheistic universe in which worship becomes consumption and annihilation of difference. Worship is reduced to a negative experience of the universe, an experience of the impossibility of experiencing God. The mystical experience that

religion has morphed into calls for a destruction of the self in a desire to be consumed by the infinite: one can only experience the whole by losing one's particularity. Ward's analysis of the works of Novalis, Schleiermacher, and Hegel against the background of European imperialism is extremely thought provoking. Having consumed the wealth of the colonies as well as emptied out the material and spiritual wealth of one's religious traditions, the consumer wants to be consumed, the possessor to be possessed. What is left behind is a tradition under erasure and a cannibalistic drive. Ward's analysis of the consequences of the "implosion" of religion wedded to the cannibalistic drives of capitalism culminates in a brilliant reading of Melville's *Moby Dick*. When all the particulars of religion are consumed, the only thing one is left with is unleashed desire and empty spaces.

It is through this complicated story (the particularities of which this abstract review can not do justice) that Ward takes the reader to the already familiar world of postmodern kitsch and commodity fetishism in his concluding chapter "Religion as Special Effects." Ward believes, however, that we are in a transitional phase, and that the postmodern has already been left behind. His reading of Rupert Wainwright's *Stigmata* leads him to believe that there is hope for a meaningful revival of religion, a return to religions that remember their theology, the particularity and the materiality of their religious practices; religions that remember that spirituality is incarnate. A healthy revival can only come from within active theological traditions rather than neo-tribal associations based on the latest fad, such as Christian religious groups that hearken to fashion rather than theology, and which threaten to dissolve the social into the cultural. The Orthodox priest, the Quaker, the Imam, the Christian evangelical, the Rabbi, the Sikh, can oppose "the omnivorous rule of global capitalism" (153) only by refusing to allow their traditions to be commodified. Universalism, as liberalism has shown, can only privilege someone's universals over another's.