The Palgrave Handbook of Radical Theology

Edited by
Christopher D. Rodkey · Jordan E. Miller

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Radical Theologies and Philosophies

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This project would not have been possible without the support and assistance of Mike Grimshaw and Burke Gerstenschlager. Mike has been a partner with this project since it was just an idea and encouraged it to happen. Burke was instrumental in developing this project in its earliest forms.

We would also like to thank the Arts, Religion, Culture (ARC)-sponsored Radical Theology and Theopoetics Working Group that Jordan convened at the American Academy of Religion meeting in Boston in 2017. Its participants include Jennifer Bailey, Karen Bray, Daniel Boscaljon, J. Kameron Carter, Jon Ivan Gill, James Howard Hill, Jr., L. Callid Keefe-Perry, Kate Lassiter, Lakisha Lockhart-Rusch, Jeffrey W. Robbins, and George Schmidt. This group of scholars, clergy, and activists is doing the work of real radical theology, out in the open, in a way that is bare, honest, and politically engaged. In conjunction with the work of the Westar Institute's Seminar on God and the Human Future, of which many of this volume's contributors are fellows, we can say that the future is bright for radical theology and other post-theistic thinking. Thanks for showing the way.

Praise for *The Palgrave Handbook of Radical Theology*

"Radical theology today is an emergent discipline in need of handbook that tells who to read and what the issues are. Jordan Miller and Christopher Rodkey have provided that for us in this adroitly constructed and wide-ranging collection, with entries on the major figures and central topics preceded by masterful introductory materials which make this the place to start in the study of radical theology."

—John D. Caputo, *Thomas J. Watson Professor of Religion Emeritus, Syracuse University*; *David R. Cook Professor of Philosophy Emeritus, Villanova University, USA*

"It is an important moment, not without its irony, when a revolutionary multiplicity of thinkers can be kneaded into a heritage, indeed a tradition deserving of a handbook. The irony doubles: how many current thinkers even realize that "radical" and "theology" cohabit? Rodkey and Miller have nobly mobilized a spirited assemblage of voices about prior voices for this needy time—when standard secularism fails along with conventional religion to energize the justice, the ecology and the creativity of a shared life."

—Catherine Keller, *George T. Cobb Professor of Constructive Theology, Drew University, USA*

"This is a truly encyclopedic treatment of a conversation that for a couple of decades made theology an important contributor to the cultural and intellectual conversation. This book may help to re-enliven radical theology and renew the sense, now all too anemic, that theology is important."

—John B. Cobb, Jr., *founding co-director of the Center for Process Studies and Process & Faith; Ingraham Professor of Theology Emeritus, School of Theology at Claremont*; *Avery Professor Emeritus, Claremont Graduate School, USA*

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PART I

Background and Introduction

CHAPTER 1

Introduction

Christopher D. Rodkey and Jordan E. Miller

The Palgrave Handbook of Radical Theology is the result of nearly ten years of work, from its first visioning as a project to the book or e-book you now engage. This is the first edited volume of its type in over fifty years—since Thomas J.J. Altizer edited *Toward a New Christianity* in 1967.[1] As such, this resource was first conceived out of a necessity for researchers and students, especially those new to radical theology who may be exploring the subject in academic or religious environments hostile to radical theology. No other recent and comprehensive introduction to the subject exists, and even references to radical theology have been intentionally written out of historical texts on twentieth- and twenty-first-century theology.[2]

We also create this book in an environment where radical Christianity is not only conveniently omitted from theological discourse, but the reality of theological education today is that theological schools largely no longer teach theology to future clergy. Perhaps the specter of radical theology haunts academic American theology as the forbidden direction away from which students must be directed as a means of policing doctrinal, gendered, and racial "boundaries" of a formal subject in decline. As theological schools are, indeed, closing today, from our perspective it appears that the death of God theology has been more predictive about religion in the West than what had been previously credited, now that it is obvious that neither the "secularization thesis" (that "god" is simply disappearing as a concept) nor the rise of the new evangelicalism (demanding America to fully actualize the myth of a "Christian nation") fully explains the complexity, pervasiveness, and danger presented by the status of

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religion in America today. Furthermore, one could today point to the death of God theology and its public "controversy" in the late 1960s as an essential touchpoint for making sense of public perceptions of religion and secularism, the resurgence of Christian fundamentalism, and the decline of "mainline" Protestantism in the United States.[3]

For practicing Christians within churches, it would appear that the nightmare of the death of God theology has since come true, which is to say American civic religion has anointed the church as its own namesake and acolyte. Meanwhile, those outside of the church in the United States look at the 2016 presidential election, with its race-baiting, immigrant-scapegoating, nationalist ugliness as a *product of both the church and the state*. That year the largest Protestant denominations (Southern Baptists, Mormons) spoke too late and too flaccidly about the incompatibility of racism and Christian teaching, but those institutions have neither teeth nor relevancy in a state religion. And consequently, we have since learned that the "Christian voting bloc" who deviated from their denominations' teachings no longer identify with any particular sect or church. Being American assumes church membership, and by "church" we mean natural-born citizenship.

Still, the lamentations about the culture wars (prayer in schools, the "War on Christmas," etc.) continue as a litany pronounced by many in our society, and so often the 1960s is the target of the index finger pointing blame. Christianity lost its way in the 1960s, it would seem from these popular voices, by conceding civil rights, by opening conversations about sexuality in new and uncomfortable ways, by giving women access to education, and by integrating the military. In other words, the nihilism of American Christianity was predicted by its prophets of the 1960s. Altizer, William Hamilton, Gabriel Vahanian, and Mary Daly were screaming voices that were at that time *within* the church. Yet the church has blamed them and their influence, and what they represent, for its own decline; it is easier to blame the messenger rather than take an introspective look into a mirror.

That said, radical theology has seen a recent resurgence of interest for a variety of reasons—ecclesiastical and political—and one could easily surmise that radical theology had been invented by John D. Caputo, Slavoj Žižek, or Peter Rollins in the early twenty-first century. Telling and indicative of the situation is the absence of a professional society or a group within the American Academy of Religion (proposed and denied) has led to a lack of a coherent and accessible history or comprehensive introduction to radical theology. In the Western world, more laity than ever are searching for theological language and answers to the recognized theological problem that is the Western world itself, and the options of "New Atheism" and secularized evangelicalism are immediately accessible and available as neither helpful nor productive answers to larger theological problems. In fact, we believe them to be dishonest and even *dangerous* choices. We contend emphatically that radical theology is today a necessary direction of thinking about the situation of humanity in the Anthropocene.

Organization

So often those of us who identify as "radical theologians" are asked where one can start to make sense of this theological counterculture and its appendant bodies. As a "movement" its written origins are grossly out of print and unavailable at best, and esoteric in style and content at worst. We intend this work to inform the new generation of radicals wishing to engage theology and culture from radical perspectives and draw knowledge and inspiration from our cloud of witnesses.

In essence, we have created this reference book with the hope to inspire new work, new writing, new singing, new preaching, new testifying, new protesting, new resistance, new and faithful heresy, and new and renewed means of artistic expression because we believe it to be necessary for the future of Christian or theological discourse. We believe the content relevant to our political and cultural situation. Radical theology stands between what Paul Tillich names the "relevant" and "irrelevant": if we are successful in our endeavor, our labor *should* soon be irrelevant.[4]

With this theological "crisis" in mind, a goal of this book is to present a reference work which introduces the subject to the novice, situates the field in its present, and spawns new thinking—all in as an accessible manner as possible. As a reference work primarily aimed at library and digital use, we intend this book to be, put simply, *a reference book*, that is, a starting point for students as well as presenting well-researched and thoughtful considerations on subjects that might at first seem to be iconoclastic or outside of normative scholarship. This book, while voluminous in size, is not intended to cover every detail of radical theology, but to present the subject to readers in a way that challenges pedestrian views of religion and theology and how they relate to a multiplicity of various subjects.

As a reference book, we offer this book as a *starting point* for future scholarship. Yet we publish this material with confidence that these chapters will be in the future *essential resources* through which those pursuing graduate or professional study in theology in general, and radical theology in particular, must pass. While this book is, and is designed as, a reference book, the content of these chapters are constructive contributions to the field. In some cases, we here include the first work published widely on some topics. In other instances, this book features the first explanatory chapters written on a subject or figure. Yet other chapters are the first comprehensive treatment of their subjects to appear in print *in decades*. Finally, given the hostile and unfair responses to the death of God theology in the 1960s, we might be able to boast the first collection of responses or chapters on the subject *by authors who actually read the books and understand their subjects.*

Structure

That being said, we wish to explain the organization of *The Palgrave Handbook of Radical Theology*, why we have organized and presented it in this way, and suggestions on how this material could be engaged or used.

First, we present a significant *historical introduction* written by Clayton Crockett and Jeffrey Robbins. Crockett and Robbins are well-known thinkers and writers among the Generation X-aged radical theologians, and both arise from what was the doctoral program in religion at Syracuse University, the institutional home of names we encounter later in this volume, such as Gabriel Vahanian, Charles Winquist, and Charles Long. Robbins and Crockett's prolific academic writing of the past fifteen years positions them as the appropriate experts and inheritors of the "Syracuse school" or thread of radical theology in America. Their chapter constitutes a readable, coherent, intellectual history of what we primarily today call "radical theology."

Second, this book offers a section of chapters which introduce *major figures* of radical theology. With the exception of the single entry on Joyce and Gene Marshall, these chapters are each devoted to a single thinker. We are aware that an immediate criticism will be that certain authors or figures have been omitted from this text, which is the inevitable criticism of any project such as this. We make no claim that our list of figures presented is exhaustive.

However, we have chosen to follow a few principles for these editorial decisions. First, we err on the side of *older* figures rather than those actively publishing today. As a reference work, adhering to individual thinkers with a larger corpus of work decreases the shelf life of this work. Second, we have decided to bias figures—older or newer—whose work is employed as a *resource* for contemporary theologians and issues within the field. In some cases, we have made an editorial decision based upon whether we consider a forgotten figure to be relevant or worthy of return as a resource.

Leslie Dewart is perhaps the most obvious example of such a figure, who had a significant impact upon North American Catholicism for a time—even causing a heresy stir at the University of Dayton and numerous responses (i.e., entire books) to his controversial work. Yet he himself would later abandon his work in theology, practicing law and writing philosophy for which he expected, but received no audience. His former students were reluctant to include him in any project remotely "theological." Yet we insist that he should not only be considered a concurrent figure with the "death of God" theologians (Altizer, et al.) but that his is a particularly unique voice within the larger cohort of our included figures. Dewart is Catholic, Spanish, Cuban, Canadian, and post-Christian. His first book was on the Cuban Revolution; his mid-life work took up serious questions of theism and the limitations of language; his more obscure, later directions, we believe, belong in conversation with D.G. Leahy and John D. Caputo—and in the case of the latter, *taught Dewart in introductory courses* at Villanova University, an Augustinian, Catholic University.

In some ways, Dewart represents the convergence of liberation and radical theologies, and we hope that these presentations are exciting to those who are even already and actively engaged in radicalism and may not even be aware of his work.

Occasionally, we could not identify any scholars actively researching a figure or any radical theologians who are significantly engaged in a figure's work. This

made not only locating a qualified expert to write for this book difficult but also led us to question whether the individual should be included. We attempted to paint with a broad brush, and we are aware that our decisions will not please everyone. We offer these details of justification not only to preemptively assume criticism but because we wish to own and openly acknowledge the omission some important theological figures whose work intersects with radical theology (Malcolm X, Edith Wyschogrod, Nelle Morton, Robert Scharlemann, John Cobb, Jean-Luc Marion, Jeremiah Wright, Rubem Alves, and Norman O. Brown come to mind immediately for us); those whose primary work exists formally outside of theology (Mark Rothko, James K. Morrow, N.W.A., Andres Serrano); and, again, those with active writing agendas in the present. Many of those represented in this final category are actually many of the authors in this book.

In some cases, these missing figures factor significantly into chapters in the third section, often in ways that are significant regarding a particular topic rather than an entire body of work. In our view, while a broad study of twentieth-century theology must include, for example, John Cobb, Jr., his primary contribution within the realm of process thought does not squarely belong here. Yet Cobb and process studies will make appearances in the chapters along the way. Rubem Alves, discussed earlier, *could have had* a full entry here, but his influence upon radical theology arrives to us through the development of what is called *theopoetics* and is best associated—for a starting-point reference work—with that particular topic. To speak to the issue of contemporary figures: we respect and appreciate Adam Kotsko and Peter Rollins, whose public personae have raised the profile of radical theology in their writing, blogging, speaking, and social media engagement. Neither have contributed to this volume, but their names will be found peppered throughout the notes. It is premature to attempt a legitimate starting point engaging their projects as they continue to unfold and may not ultimately really belong in a reference work on radical theology.

That being said, then, the third section of this *Handbook* includes numerous *topics* which span the breadth of the various directions of radical theology, highlight concepts germane to radical theology, and define new directions. We, again, wished to paint with a broad brush and tried to avoid overlapping sets of ideas or concepts, and wanted to present the multiplicity of interesting and important avenues being traveled by those who identify as radical theologians. These chapters are shorter than the figure chapters and are of various lengths. Some chapters engage tremendous topics within the study of religion (e.g., Hinduism), while others introduce ideas or concepts which may be relatively novel (such as play theology), and yet others might be surprising or iconoclastic for those new to the field of radical theology or theology in general (e.g., hip-hop or theopoetics). A few of the topics are presented in a nonacademic style, reflecting the broad influence and impact these directions take outside of scholastic discourse.

Here, too, decisions had to be made about inclusion and omission regarding topic chapters. While we intended to be broad in our approach, we considered

redundancy, whether the topic is fully formed enough to be explained in a linear way, and whether there is anyone actually writing or engaging this subject apart from a particular figure who would be represented in an earlier chapter. Bishop J.A.T. Robinson, for example, could very well deserve to be included as a figure, but his primary contribution, the controversy surrounding one of his books, is what more directly factors into the history, development, and future of radical theology.

We offer this explanation and apology to not only preempt a pedestrian criticism of the work but to emphasize the mission of this project. We do not wish to prefigure exclusions of future research and development, nor do we want to paint inclusion as a "lifetime achievement award" program, but we also want to contain a sense of unity, coherence, and integrity to the work of creating a *reference book* which primarily functions as a starting point.

Limitations

Radical theology suffered a critique of being the pinnacle of white, Eurocentric, male-powered, pretentiously degreed discourse. James Cone, for example, in his radical work *God of the Oppressed* (1972), charged that while the death of God theology might indicate a death of God in the American white church, God is very much alive in the black church. Even Billy Graham jumped into the ring of critics with a formal response to something he had not bothered to read, which likely strengthened his credibility among evangelicals.[5] At face value, it might be easy to claim that the death of God theology of the 1960s did open the door for white Christianity to reject Cone's dismissal and continue to march to the beat of the Moral Majority, the Promise Keepers, the Compassionate Conservatives, and the *Praise the Lord* and Focus on the Family media empires as clear expressions of the dominance of the white church, and implicitly with it, white supremacy.

We suggest that while this line of discourse is true, if we were to back up a bit, we *could* consider the death of God theology as *potentially* opening the door for the acceptance of liberation theology in certain sectors of the American church; in fact, some important and credible theologians such as Rosemary Radford Ruether have made such claims.[6] More importantly, clean and clear ideological and intellectual genealogies and pedigrees aren't the exigent work before us. Instead of considering that *A* influenced *B*, therefore *C* ad nauseam, A and B—in this case, radical and liberation theologies, for example—actually shared similar influences, were born out of concurrent historical contexts, and are not really exclusive to each other, but rather *siblings*, even if the racial and cultural contexts were quite different. We mean this not as the mark of validation of one theology over another, but rather a big-picture avenue for conversation for two "schools" of contemporary theology *with similar ends*. We both hold a bias in this work which orients radical and liberation theologies toward each other, and we believe that the most fruitful work moving forward at this time is and will be these intersections.

Now over thirty-five years after Gustavo Gutiérrez's publication of *A Theology of Liberation* (1973), we today call upon radical theologians to "step back" to see the bigger picture of how radical theology *has in fact* functioned as a mechanism of oppression and whiteness and how radical theologians have committed the sin of racism, especially when carving out and policing the small, marginalized spaces that they themselves inhabited by virtue of their privilege.

The primary error of radical theology from its outset was to not directly engage liberation thought, to not ask the questions and stand in solidarity with peers from the Global South, and to dismiss many of those voices as legitimately or sufficiently radical. While we can find examples of dismissiveness of liberation thinkers toward radical theology, in many cases liberation theologians were the *only* voices even engaging them at all. Radical theologians, in turn, collectively encountered the challenges of liberation theology *as a threat*—likely because everyone else in the academic theology scene treated them with hostility and dismissiveness. On the whole, though, emerging liberation voices in the 1960s and early 1970s were not directly rejecting American radical theology.

The response was, however, that these voices, particularly from the Two-Thirds World, again, *were not really radical*.[7] It was not the case that emerging liberation voices patently rejected American radical theology, but it was, unsurprisingly, the other way around. Perhaps the best artifact demonstrating this is in a *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* review of Rubem Alves' *Tomorrow's Child* (1972) written by Thomas Altizer. Early in the short critique, Altizer writes:

> Surely *Tomorrow's Child* would not even have been considered for publication if it had not been written by a Third World theologian. And it has so little logical consistency, imaginative form, and coherence that little purpose would be served by negative criticism. My one fear about the book is that it will yet further sanction that growing mass of homiletic literature which presents itself in a theological guise.[8]

Essentially, Altizer is looking to Alves to write a radical, revolutionary theology because it is theology from the Third World—the Third World that is caricatured by a desire from a First World theologian for a handmaiden for its own agenda. Altizer concludes that perhaps Alves is writing for the *church* and as such must have a goal very different from his own.

Altizer's review implies that Third World theology has value to First World theology when it serves the First World's expectations, and that churchly theology as a second-class exercise is the best Alves could be considered. The mistake Altizer makes is that there are different kinds of theology, one type is better than the other, that is, academic over ecclesial. Altizer could not have been more wrong; those engaging theopoetics today, for example, identify a coherent line between Altizer and Alves. Isaac and Ishmael may be rivals with

different mothers, but they share the same paternity. To wit, the thousands-of-years-old question of which child is the actual spiritual inheritor bears no fruit except for the rivalry itself and the maintenance of such rivalry.

In fairness to Altizer, our conclusions here are taken hyperbolically, but we do so to emphasize the problem of race and privilege so inherently infused with criticisms of radical theology—and we should acknowledge that Altizer is far more critical, directly or indirectly, of many white theologians. Altizer's primary target is the God of America, which is an inherent mechanism of whiteness, even if he does not employ this language. It is worth noting that radical theology was born out of political opposition to racism and fascism, whether one dates radical theology's origins to Paul Tillich or Dietrich Bonhoeffer. Yet even with this charitable origin story, the significant problem of the white savior remains; Altizer's well-known feud with James Cone underscores for us the complicated genealogy of the discipline.

This is a problem and sensitivity that we wish to underscore and acknowledge vulnerably and openly, here at the very beginning of *The Palgrave Handbook of Radical Theology*. This challenge and critique is not unique to radical theology, and while we can offer examples of radical theologians taking courageous stances for civil rights, radical theology is not immune to their apprehension. We acknowledge our ancestors and their inconsistencies with one another—even if there are numerous points of intersection.

The position of radical theology in American academia has been one of marginalization and dismissal. Altizer spent most of his career in a comparative literature department at a state university. William Hamilton was dismissed from the seminary and alienated from the church and seriously engaged and supported the Civil Rights Movement in his body of work. Mary Daly's entire career is marked by closed doors for her sex and her ideas. Paul van Buren blazed new pathways for dialogue and understanding between Jews and Christians not previously realized. Despite this importance, as an Episcopal priest van Buren would never serve an appointment at a seminary; one might argue that had more influence upon contemporary Judaism than Christian theology. Harvey Cox's early engagement with liberation theology today, in our opinion, belongs to the canon of liberation thought as a whole. Even though the primary cohort of death of God theologians were white men and have not always unfairly been accused of being a purely "white" theology, several of these figures took risky positions defending others' rights and intellectual freedom. Radical theology was theology from the margins that rarely stayed silent—even and especially when it needed to listen and give airtime to other marginalized voices.

At the same time, we recognize that there are times where radicalism has not spoken, or has *not spoken enough*, and this silence has contributed to racism, misogyny, homophobia, transphobia, and the scaffolding of white, cis-privileged power. We offer this observation not so much as an apology or excuse, but rather *to own* these problems in our own theological work and particularly in this volume. Moving forward, the theological project at hand is