

CONVERSATION WITH THE AUTHOR

IVP Academic editor David Congdon asks author Carl A. Raschke about his new book, *Critical Theology*.



AUTHOR
CARL A.
RASCHKE



IVP EDITOR
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CONGDON

Many of our readers will be unfamiliar with the literature and debates that you engage in this work, ranging from Bultmann and Horkheimer to Badiou and Žižek. Could you set the stage for this work? What are the origins of what you call “critical theology”?

RASCHKE: Critical theology is in many ways the ongoing twenty first-century legacy of so-called pomo theology. Post-modern theology, which started off in the 1980s as an effort to develop an immediate theological application for the tremendously influential philosophy (at the time) of Jacques Derrida, gradually became an extension of what Hent DeVries termed in the late 1990s the “religious turn” in continental philosophy as a whole.

Right after the turn of the millennium the more youthful cadres within evangelical Christianity became quite interested in these philosophical thinkers, and they became a significant readership for not only two of my earlier books (*The Next Reformation*, 2004, and *GloboChrist*, 2008) but also for a variety of other works by leading philosophical theologians, such as John D. Caputo and James K. A. Smith. Figures like Alain Badiou and Slavoj Žižek (the latter especially) are leading stars in this galaxy of contemporary philosophical figures who have drawn a considerable following and have become their own household names among academic religious thinkers.

So what changed after the turn of the millennium?

RASCHKE: If in the 1990s we experienced a “religious turn” in postmodern philosophy, ten years later we witnessed what might be called a “political turn.” The political activism of many young people during the 2008 election combined with the world-shaking global financial crisis of that year was a major factor in the emergence of this trend. But the social conscience and heightened political sensibility of the young millennials was also a decisive element. The importance of so-called political theology, a concept that had gone into hibernation after its moment of glory in the late 1960s and early 1970s, was suddenly revived in the second half of the last decade and became an instant academic sensation at about the same time in both America and Europe. The widespread influence of the journal *Political Theology*, both in its print and online version, for which I currently serve on the board of editors, is one testimony to its importance.

With the revival of political theology, however, has come a profound new interest in so-called critical theory, a term once used exclusively for the work of the writings of the Frankfurt School, which flourished from the late 1920s until after World War II, but in

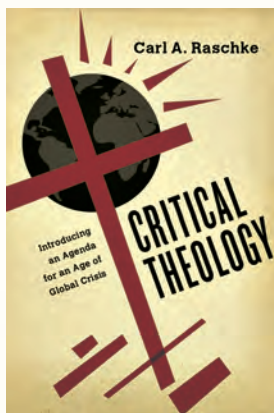
the last two decades has come to be used for a wide variety of contemporary theorists who draw on the discourses and explicit sociopolitical critiques found in continental philosophy (as well as psychoanalysis). That latest iteration is often known as the “new critical theory.” The interdisciplinary interest in critical theory is also expanding rapidly in the present college and university environments. My own institution just this past year inaugurated such a curriculum because of student demand.

I asked myself, if the “political” turn in continental thought has given us the new critical theory, should not the persistence of the religious turn within the same constellation of thinking yield something we call “critical theology”?

—CARL A. RASHKE

What differentiates critical theology from the new critical theory?

RASCHKE: The Frankfurt School, with its classical Marxist and secularist biases, was notorious for giving short shrift to the religious dimension of experience, while largely dismissing the importance of the theological in framing the discussion about human emancipation. So I asked myself, if the “political” turn in continental thought has given us the new critical theory, should not the persistence of the religious turn within the same constellation of thinking yield something we call “critical theology”?



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There is a palpable sense of global crisis that you are tapping into in this work. We have also seen a number of attempts to respond to this crisis (e.g., Occupy, Arab Spring). What can theological reflection contribute?

RASCHKE: Both of the phenomena you mention were political movements that can be considered ad hoc, on-site reactions to what were perceived as oppressive circumstances but were only barely understood in the larger setting. Both were, in effect, efforts to implement

utopian or standard liberal fantasies without any real theoretical sense about what was going on around them. Theology by its very nature, especially in its original biblical context, represents a comprehensive theory of who we are, and how we should act, in a universalistic perspective. Furthermore, theology is always at its core communitarian, and therefore inherently political, as the late Jewish philosopher Jacob Taubes always noted. The critical function of theology is always to unmask the “principalities and powers,” including the subtle ideologies, that enslave us. Genuine emancipation requires that we submit to what Badiou calls a “truth procedure,” and “the truth shall make you free.”

You write that critical theology “must do something that the classical Western theological enterprise has not done, or only quite clumsily accomplished. It must address the question of the ‘religious’ head-on and straightaway in a manner that theology is not always comfortable with, or accustomed to.” How did religion become a problem for Western theology and how do you hope a new generation will address it?

RASCHKE: The problem goes back many generations, perhaps as far back as the mid-nineteenth century when European colonial expansion led to an encounter with vibrant and complex forms of

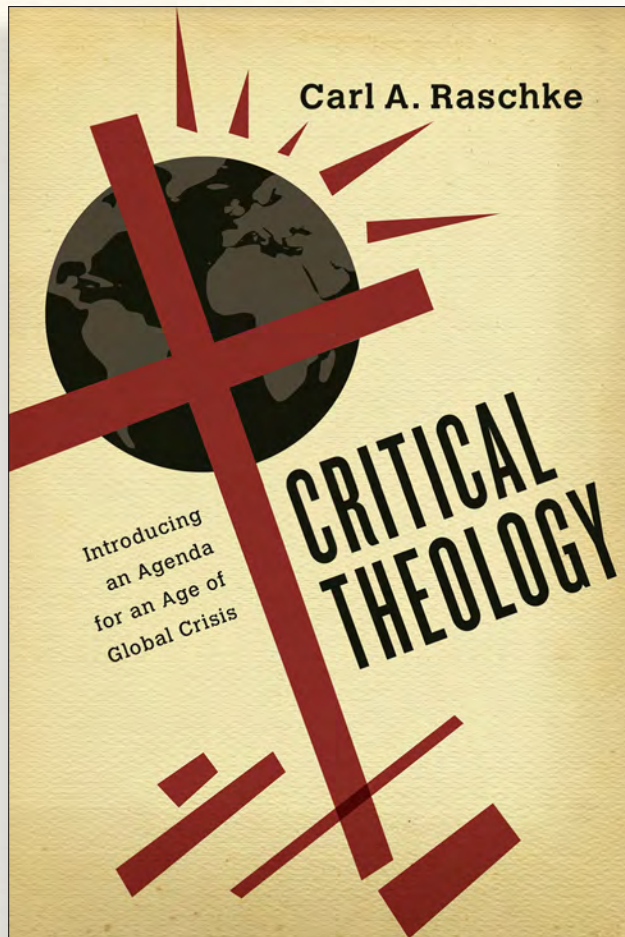
religious expression. Most religious alternatives to Christianity, other than Judaism, were regarded mainly as some form of heresy or superstition. It was the development in the late nineteenth century of the so-called “social sciences” that especially pushed Western religious thought in this direction. The social sciences claimed it was possible to understand religion without deciding whether religious claims were actually true or not. This eventually led to the development of an entirely new field of academic study known as “religious studies,” which claimed to be nonconfessional and independent of theology.

For administrative, political, and of course ideological reasons, theology and religious studies have kept themselves for at least two generations now at full arm’s length from each other. But I have strongly and consistently argued since at least the early 1980s that they need to find some common ground once more, especially since neither one on its own is capable of truly comprehending the power of the “religious” factor in today’s world. Religious studies as a field tended to direct its focus toward the collective externalities of religion, such as texts and rituals as well as historical and cultural artifacts. It, therefore, totally ignored the “faith” factor as something that must be explored from the “inside,” which had classically been the purview of theological inquiry.

Critical theology affirms the faith factor, but does not regard it as a pure datum exclusive of the complex, turbulent universe of religious symbols and meanings in which that “something” we know historically as Christianity has always been situated. Critical theology, therefore, declares the emancipatory power of the Christian faith, yet it views faith not as a confessional posture but as what Badiou terms a “singularity” as well as an “event” that can be observed from the outside, but radically changes the tapestry of observed history.

Classical Christian theology is understood as “faith seeking understanding” (*fides quaerens intellectum*). You argue that a critical theology is “faith informed by critical thinking” (*fides informata cogitatio discrimine*). What is the significance of this difference? What changes when we move from understanding to critical thinking?

RASCHKE: One could of course argue that the *intellectum* of classical theology always has a critical edge to it, something I would not at all dispute. But, even more significantly, I want to show not just the relevance but also the indispensable character of “theological thinking” (not theology in the usual confessional or ecclesial sense of the word) to the task of “critical thinking” overall. To borrow (shamelessly and excessively) from Schleiermacher, I want to say that I am explaining theological thinking to its “secular despisers” while giving an ardent account of how we should train ourselves to think seriously every time we confront the bewildering and often depressing daily headlines about what is happening in the world.



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CONTENTS

Preface

Acknowledgments

1. Globalization and the Emergence of a New Critical Theory for the Age of Crisis
2. The Need for a New Critical Theology
3. From Political Theology to a Global Critical Theology
4. The Question of Religion
5. Toward a Theology of the "Religious"
6. What Faith Really Means in a Time of Global Crisis

Notes

Author Index

Subject Index

What is the future of theology in the midst of rapid geopolitical and economic change?

Carl A. Raschke contends that two options from the last century—crisis theology and critical theory—do not provide the resources needed to address the current global crisis. Both of these perspectives remained distant from the messiness and unpredictability of life. Crisis theology spoke of the wholly other God, while critical theory spoke of universal reason. These ideas aren't tenable after postmodernism and the return of religion, which both call for a dialogical approach to God and the world.

Rashke's new critical theology takes as its starting point the biblical claim that the Word became flesh—a flesh that includes the cultural, political and religious phenomena that shape contemporary existence.

Drawing on recent reformulations of critical theory by Slavoj Žižek, Alain Badiou and post-secularists such as Jürgen Habermas, Raschke introduces an agenda for theological thinking accessible to readers unfamiliar with this literature. In addition, the book explores the relationship between a new critical theology and current forms of political theology. Written with the passion of a manifesto, *Critical Theology* presents the critical and theological resources for thinking responsibly about the present global situation.



CARL A. RASCHKE (PhD, Harvard University) is professor of religious studies at the University of Denver, specializing in continental philosophy, the philosophy of religion and the theory of religion. He is an internationally known writer and academic who has authored numerous books, including *The Revolution in Religious Theory: Toward a Semiotics of the Event*, *GloboChrist*, *The Next Reformation* and *The Engendering God*.