

Can Evangelicals Learn Anything From Postmodern, Atheist, Deconstructionist Theologian Mark C. Taylor?

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I. Postmodern A/theology

Negative theologian Thomas J.J. Altizer suggests that Mark C. Taylor¹ may be considered the first American “post-ecclesiastical systematic or philosophic theologian” who is “free of the scars or perhaps even the memory of Church theology, and the first theologian to address himself solely to the purely theoretical or cognitive problems of theology.”² Taylor believes that “[d]espite its overt atheism, postmodernism remains profoundly religious, and this atheistic religiosity offers a promising point of departure for a truly postmodern theology.”³ Taylor calls this an “a/theology.” Taylor has been greatly influenced by the work of Jacques Derrida’s deconstructionism, and actually uses deconstructionism to do theology.⁴ Taylor has published numerous books and articles which refer to his theological views, but it is in his book *Erring* (1984), where he most thoroughly develops his deconstructive theological manifesto.⁵

The essentials of Taylor's theology are based on the deconstruction of four basic elements throughout traditional Western theology: God, self, history and the book. For Taylor, these traditional notions are not stable or certain as many believe. We will briefly address each of these four “deconstructed” topics in Taylor's a/theology, which provide the backdrop to his “negative” affirmations.

¹ Mark C. Taylor is Cluett Professor of Humanities at Williams College, Williamstown, Massachusetts.

² Thomas J.J. Altizer in foreword of Mark C. Taylor, *Deconstructing Theology* (New York: Crossroad, 1982), p. xii. Altizer notes that Taylor began his professional work studying Kierkegaard from a modern theological perspective, where theology is free from the influence of the church and “thereby free of the very power and ground which theological thinking itself negated in realizing its modern epiphany.” p. xii.

³ Mark C. Taylor, *Deconstructing Theology* (New York: Crossroad, 1982), p. xx.

⁴ Taylor claims that “[o]ne of the distinctive features of deconstruction is its willingness to confront the problem of the death of God squarely even if not always directly... *deconstruction is the “hermeneutic” of the death of God.*” Mark C. Taylor, *Erring* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1984), p. 6. William A. Beardslee has also related Taylor’s work to Lyotard: “Taylor, like Lyotard, rejects conventional narrative and replaces it, as the title of his book suggests, with “erring,” which means both wandering and, like Lyotard’s parody, transgressing – breaking the established patterns in the directionless movement of life.” William A. Beardslee, “Christ in the Postmodern Age: Reflections Inspired By Jean-François Lyotard” in David Ray Griffin, William A. Beardslee, and Joe Holland, *Varieties of Postmodern Theology* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1989), p. 67.

⁵ Taylor, *Erring*. Some of his ideas were previously articulated in his book *Deconstructing Theology* (1982), and in a chapter he wrote titled, “Text as Victim,” in *Deconstruction and Theology*, ed. Thomas J. J. Altizer (New York: Crossroad, 1982), pp. 58-78. Since then, Taylor has written additional theologically significant works including, *Altarity* (1987), *Tears* (1990), *Disfiguring: Art, Architecture, Religion* (1992), and “Reframing Postmodernisms” included in Philippa Berry and Andrew Wernick, eds., *Shadow of Spirit* (1992).

A. Death of God

In Taylor's view, many contemporary philosophers of religion and theologians are unaware of the death of God and continue to relate to him as if he were still alive, well and relevant for our lives. For Taylor, this mistaken notion is what prevents most Western theologians from embracing postmodernism. We must affirm with Nietzsche that we have culturally killed God by our secular materialism, and accept that God is irrelevant to everyday life. No longer are there any divine foundations for society.⁶ Taylor submits that we must abandon all previous conceptions that we have had regarding "God."⁷

B. Death of the Self

Taylor's deconstruction not only "welcomes the death of God" it also "embraces the disappearance of the self."⁸ The humanist of modernism resists the death of the self, failing to see it as an outworking of the death of God. However, the postmodern deconstructionist sees this connection. For Taylor, nihilism can be seen favorably if one simply accepts the loss of the self.⁹

Perhaps the clearest way to present this position in more traditional theological terminology would be to assert the fact that if God disappears, then the *imago dei*, the self created in God's image, also disappears.¹⁰ Taylor says that a death of God a/theology is really a "radical Christology" which "finds its completion in the crucifixion of the individual self and the resurrection of universal humanity."¹¹

C. Denial of history as directed process

⁶See Terrence W. Tilley, *Postmodern Theologies: The Challenge of Religious Diversity* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1995), p. 61.

⁷See Taylor, *Disfiguring*, pp. 318-319 as quoted in Tilley, *Postmodern Theologies*, p. 65. By "God", Taylor is referring to the personal God of Christianity. See Mark C. Taylor, *Altarity* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1987), p. 136.

⁸Taylor, *Erring*, p. 104. The notion of "self" to which Taylor is referring is the "narcissistic" subject of modernism, the independent center of consciousness and identity – unique and autonomous. Mark C. Taylor, *Erring* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1984), pp. 32-33, 86. James H. Olthuis describes this dethroned self as the "self as the child of enlightenment, fully present to itself, self-conscious, sovereign, absolute agent, given power over the world as object ... a production of this very world and processes it was said to master." James Olthuis, "Crossing the Threshold: Sojourning Together in the Wild Spaces of Love," in *Knowing Other-Wise: Philosophy at the Threshold of Spirituality*, ed. James H. Olthuis (New York: Fordham University Press, 1997), p. 238.

⁹Taylor, *Erring*, p. 33; Cf. Millard J. Erickson, *The Word Became Flesh* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1991), p., pp. 320-321.

¹⁰David Ray Griffin, "Postmodern Theology and A/theology: A Response to Mark C. Taylor," in David Ray Griffin, William A. Beardslee, and Joe Holland in *Varieties of Postmodern Theology* (New York: State University of New York Press, 1989), p. 33. See also Mark C. Taylor in "Imagologies and Other Philosophical Conversations With Mark C. Taylor," Interview by David Lionel Smith, January 1997. Available from <http://www.williams.edu/mtaylor/interviews>; Internet.

¹¹Taylor, "Text as Victim," p. 73.

Along with a hermeneutic of the death of God comes the elimination of history as a directed process. There is no pre-determined beginning, middle and end. There is no “ideal” to which we are headed.¹² History does not end in apocalypse, but with “deferral.”¹³ The end of history presupposes the death of a transcendent God and the notion of a sovereign self. Taylor summarizes this negative eschatology in the following words:

the denial of utopia can become utopian and the loss of the dream of salvation can become a salvation. The impossibility of reconciliation means that there is no resurrexit here or elsewhere, nor in the future.¹⁴

Although Taylor does concede that dramatic features of history are important insofar as they stage the flight from death.¹⁵

D. The Closed Book

The notion of the “closed book” is a natural outworking of Taylor’s deconstructionist theology.¹⁶ In view of Taylor’s deconstruction of God, self, and history, it follows that there cannot be an authoritative “book” which is prescriptive for all of life. As Taylor writes, “a text is not a finished product, but is an ongoing production which continuously emerges in and through the activity of interpretation.”¹⁷ Taylor affirms that Christianity is a religion of the book, and the West is a book culture. But, for Taylor the “closure of the book” is being repeatedly rewritten since it is part of an unfolding theological network. If the book is regulative, the tendency of theology will be systematic and scientific -- the direction to which Western theology consistently leans. The systematic theologian will do his work as a book -- with a beginning, middle and end. The notion of an omnipresent incarnate logos, Taylor submits, is the center of the book for the Christian, which structures, defines, and closes.¹⁸ Instead, for Taylor, writing is always an endless series of traces, cuts and wounds to expose the fact that traditional limits cannot stand.¹⁹

¹²See Griffin, “Postmodern Theology and A/theology,” p. 34.

¹³ Charles E. Winquist, *Desiring Theology* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), p. 116.

¹⁴Taylor, *Disfiguring*, p. 317 as quoted in Tilley, *Postmodern Theologies*, p. 69.

¹⁵Taylor, *Erring*, p. 151.

¹⁶ As postmodern theologian Charles E. Winquist notes: “[Taylor] sees that the death of God proclaimed by Nietzsche follows the proclamation of *absolute knowledge* by Hegel. It is Hegel’s proclamation of absolute knowledge that is both the end of history and the closure of the book.” Charles E. Winquist, *Desiring Theology* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), p. 115.

¹⁷Taylor, “Text as Victim,” p. 66.

¹⁸Taylor, *Erring*, p. 79. Like a novelist who cannot finish novels, we must write and re-write, realizing the book can never portray things as they really are. (pp. 79-80).

¹⁹Tilley, *Postmodern Theologies*, p. 64. Also see Mark C. Taylor, *Tears*, (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1990), p. 231: “To write after the death of God . . . to write beyond the end of theology is to betray nothing

For Taylor, following the lead of Derrida, this perspective also implies the elimination of any translinguistic referent for linguistic signs, because signs only refer to other signs -- there is no "real thing" beyond language. This denial of a translinguistic referent is deduced from the death of God but also from experience. We have no access to uninterpreted data, nor to a prelinguistic world.²⁰ As Taylor submits,

The free play of signs subverts the economy of signification that grounds the ontotheological tradition of the West. ... Without a signified to serve as a secure anchor, signifiers float freely within a field that appears to be endless. Signs, in other words, are always signs of signs.²¹

II. Taylor's Optimistic Nihilism: An "Erring" Grace

As one can imagine, Taylor's radical deconstruction of these crucial areas of theology certainly leave an empty hole in Western thought.²² In their place Taylor proposes an a/theological "affirmative" nihilism: "rather than suffering these losses passively, it actively and willingly embraces nihilism and thereby overcomes it."²³ He says "it might be defined as something like a nonnegative negative theology that nonetheless is not positive. A/theology pursues or, more precisely, is pursued by an alterity that neither exists nor does not exist but is beyond both Being and Nonbeing."²⁴ Yet, ironically, Taylor likens death of God theology to Christian redemption in that death leads to rebirth. Taylor adds: "When negation is doubled, it yields affirmation. By negating transcendence, the death of God leads to the total presence of Being here and now."²⁵

A. Erring

"Erring," according to Taylor, is wandering -- a deviation from the intended course.²⁶ Consequently, the erring thinker is not black or white, not necessarily theological nor nontheological, theistic nor atheistic. An a/theology is for those in the margin. This / of Taylor's a/theology (which can be written, yet not spoken) signifies

. . . . Write to betray nothing. An end "beyond" the end of theology. And end that never arrives but always betrays."

²⁰Griffin, "Postmodern Theology and A/theology," p. 33.

²¹Taylor, *Erring*, p. 172.

²²See Tilley, *Postmodern Theologies*, pp. 61-62.

²³Griffin, "Postmodern Theology and A/theology," p. 34. See also Taylor, *Erring*, p. 140.

²⁴Taylor, *Disfiguring*, p. 316 as quoted in Tilley, *Postmodern Theologies*, p. 62. Taylor's approach should not be confused with pure "negative theology." Taylor succinctly articulates the difference: "While negative theologians tend to regard nothing as the binary or dialectical opposite of being, the a/theologian interprets nothing as neither being nor nonbeing." Taylor, *Tears*, p. 225.

²⁵Mark C. Taylor, "Reframing Postmodernisms," p. 19.

²⁶This term does not originate with Taylor. For example we may note Heidegger's usage of this term in his essay, "On the Essence of Truth," in *Basic Writings*, ed. David Farrell Krell (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1993), pp. 132-135. Heidegger states: "Man's flight from the mystery toward what is readily available, onward from one current thing to the next, passing the mystery by -- this is *erring*." (p. 133)

both closeness and distance, likeness and difference, interior and exterior.²⁷ As Taylor asserts:

This strangely permeable membrane forms a border where fixed boundaries disintegrate. Along this boundless boundary the traditional polarities between which Western theology has been suspended are inverted and subverted. Since it is forever *entre-deux*, a/theology is undeniably ambiguous. The a/theologian asks errant questions and suggests responses that often seem erratic or even erroneous. Since his reflection wanders, roams, and strays from the “proper” course, it tends to deviate from well-established ways. To traditional eyes, a/theology doubtless appears to be irregular, eccentric, and vagrant. At best it seems aimless, at worst devious. Within this framework, a/theology is, in fact heretical. For the a/theologian, however, heresy and aimlessness are unavoidable. . . . The erring nomad neither looks back to an absolute beginning nor ahead to an ultimate end. His writing, therefore, remains unfinished. His work is less a complete book than an open (perhaps broken) text that never really begins or actually ends.²⁸

Taylor believes that through the tool of deconstruction, and by staying in this “middle” position, it will reveal a brand new way of reading and writing scripture.²⁹

B. Mazing Grace

Another important concept for Taylor is his notion of “mazing” grace. A “maze” is a labyrinth of winding, interconnecting, passages. To “be mazed” is to be perplexed, to wander about in one’s mind either through delusion or deception. Taylor implores us to wander, to err and move about, to deviate, free from the false security of modernism.. It is through this erring by which we experience grace. Taylor says: “Mazing grace situates one in the midst of a labyrinth from which there is no exit.” He claims that this is a “second innocence” which presupposes the death of God. To straightforwardly accept the death of the transcendent God is grace.³⁰

III. What can we learn?

As evangelicals, can we learn anything at all from Taylor when he seems to radically transgress everything we cling to? We believe that we can glean some helpful insights from Taylor’s a/theological concerns.

A. Serious Contextualization?

²⁷Taylor, *Erring*, p. 12. François Nault points out a similar ambiguity in the French, *L’athéologie*: “Cette affirmation ne peut s’entendre, le ‘a’ de l’athéologie étant inaudible, comme le ‘a’ de la différence derridienne. La spécificité de l’athéologie se réduit ainsi à un *trait d’écriture*.” François Nault, *Derrida et la théologie: Dire Dieu après la déconstruction* (Paris: Les Edition du Cerf, 2000), p. 119.

²⁸Taylor, *Erring*, pp.12-13.

²⁹Ibid., p.13.

³⁰Ibid., pp. 150-151; 168-169.

Millard Erickson, in *The Word Became Flesh*, contends that Taylor's book, *Erring*, is intended to be read as an apologetic work. We would not be so inclined to agree. Erickson points out that Taylor is attempting to cling to some type of belief network while drawing upon elements in historic Christianity. In order to address those people who are struggling in the “margin” of belief and unbelief, Taylor uses the insights of contemporary philosophical innovations in deconstructive thought to address their struggle.³¹ In this age many simply ignore all elements of Christianity, yet Taylor actively takes many Christian ideas and thoughts and interacts with them in view of contemporary culture.³² We may credit Taylor for taking recent intellectual developments seriously as Erickson suggests, but it is difficult to understand Taylor's proposals as apologetic in any typical use of the term. Although he clings to fragments of Christian vocabulary, the fragments become only truncated specimens of a lost Christianity. In our estimation, this has little or nothing to do with either positive or negative apologetics in the broadest sense of the term.

B. “Mazing”

We may notice a parallel between Taylor's notion of “mazing grace” and Derrida's notion of the messianic. Both involve a continual wandering and “hoping” of sorts. Both are seeking – endlessly seeking in earnest expectation of that which is to come yet never will arrive -- the continual *viens – viens toujours*. Perhaps, there are some positive aspects of such notions for the evangelical Christian -- opening us up to unlimited expectations of hope and promise for the coming eschatological kingdom.³³

Taylor does describe, through his notion of “mazing”, a perpetual predicament of humanity. We *are* extremely limited in our knowledge of outcomes. We do walk or “wander” through life not knowing or understanding the course of our lives. Qohelet certainly instructs us in this in Ecclesiastes 3:11. God has “set eternity in the hearts of men; yet they cannot fathom what God has done from beginning to end.” (NIV) But is this wandering to be embraced as joy and freedom in the sense that Taylor seems to characterize it? We do wander and “maze” through this enigmatic life unaware of what it may bring – either in forms of happiness or extreme grief and suffering. However, for Qohelet, this “mystery” or “mazing” through life, being unaware of the outcome, is not

³¹Erickson, *The Word Became Flesh*, p. 317.

³²*Ibid.*, p. 327.

³³ This idea is nothing new of course. (We may think of the notion of perpetual progress “from glory to glory” as advocated by St. Gregory of Nyssa, et al.).

some sort of “blessing” (as Taylor would construe it), but a burden we must endure (Eccles. 3:10).³⁴

Although Qohelet also affirms that God “has made everything beautiful in its time,” the mystery and wandering may not always be joy-filled. But as Christians, we can have confidence in God to bring all things to completion for the greatest good. It is this confidence, in the midst of the enigma of life, which motivates us to keep pushing forward.

C. The Closed Book with an Open Story

If re-worked, Taylor’s notion of the closed book may stimulate some constructive theological thinking. When we look at the development of Christianity in the book of Acts, for example, we find an end to the book. The written narrative upon which the Christian movement was based, discontinues with Paul under Roman guard. It is an end to the book, but an “open-ended” end. The Acts narrative stops, but the story of Christianity continues – and we indwell *that* story. From this “closed book” forward, the Acts narrative must be lived out, not only put into succinct doctrinal propositions. Of course, Taylor is not saying this at all. We are simply listening and interacting “apologetically” to Taylor’s challenges, concerns, notions, and reactions to Enlightenment excesses and “re-baptizing” them for our context. In this regard, Taylor’s *concerns* stimulate us and remind us that in some senses, the book is closed and now is the time to live out its truths as an open story in the context of Christian community. Often, when Christian theology is *only* propositionally emphasized, doctrines become dry, stale truths, with stated “objective” content. We are not denying the value of the notion of “objectivity” in the context of soft or modest foundationalism, but we are emphasizing that we are the responsible stewards to continue to live out the Christian narrative as our personal story.

D. Image of God

We would most certainly not affirm nor warmly embrace the death of God as Taylor would plead. However, he does help us understand how the death of God would necessitate the death of the self. In Christian theology we would affirm the *imago dei* in its broadest sense (*imago essentialis*), as the defining characteristic of humanity both in terms of *homo creatus* and *homo peccator*.³⁵ As such, the essence of humanity is

³⁴ See Gerhard Von Rad, *Wisdom In Israel* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1972), p. 234.

³⁵ See G.C. Berkhouwer, *Man: The Image of God*, trans. Dirk W. Jellema, Studies in Dogmatics (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 1962), pp. 37-66, 119. We are only drawing a general observation here. Due to space and the limitations of our study, we are simply expressing the need for continued work on the theology of the *imago*

defined in terms of its relationship to and dependence upon God. If God is dead, then so is humanity. If God is no longer a part of the “picture,” the image of God “fades away, leaving behind an unidentified, and perhaps unidentifiable, ‘humanity.’”³⁶

In this regard, Taylor awakens us to the great importance of the *imago dei* in theological thought. With both Foucault’s and Taylor’s deconstructive assault on the notion of man – we are challenged with the importance of developing a rigorous theological anthropology. Certainly, Taylor’s “death of self” reminds us of the crucial importance of fresh theological research on the *imago dei*. How is the *imago dei* related to the cultural mandate of dominion? What sense can we make of the notion of “dominion” in a postmodern theological context? What is the significance of “likeness” and “image” in relation to Christology and sanctification? What is the relationship between “body” and the *imago dei*? These questions, among others, are questions which may surface due to Taylor’s challenges. Although such questions will remain rhetorical in this paper due to its limitations and focus, they may help point us forward to further inquiry.

IV. Significant Problems

In spite of these mildly promising notions, there are noticeably significant problems with Taylor’s postmodern deconstructive a/theology. Charles E. Winquist submits that “[t]he task that Taylor has defined is to think and live the disaster of nothing.”³⁷ But is it even possible to “live” such a “disaster”? Terrance Tilley expresses his doubt: “The real question ... is whether Taylor succeeds in turning the loss of modern foundations -- God, Self, History, and Book -- into a gain, even a ‘marginal’ one.” Is Taylor’s a/theological deconstruction really an affirmation, as he claims it is? Or, does he end up denying some things that are undeniable? Can he escape complete skepticism? Is there any world remaining when Taylor has finished his program of deconstruction where it is even possible to “err”?³⁸ Let us address a few of these concerns more specifically.

A. Where’s the Grief?

Kevin J. Vanhoozer suggests that Taylor’s work is “permeated with a manic-depressive tension between grief and relief at the deaths of God, the author, and

dei in terms of *dominium*, *analogia relationis*, *theosis*, and other related aspects. See Berkhouwer, *Man: The Image of God*, pp. 67-75ff.

³⁶ Martin Henry, “God in Postmodernity,” *Irish Theological Quarterly* 63, no. 1 (1998), p. 20.

³⁷ Winquist, *Desiring Theology*, p. 122.

³⁸ Tilley, *Postmodern Theologies*, pp. 59; 69; 68. Of course, Taylor may say that his deconstructive program is never finished, and he may also deny the use of the word “program” for his agenda.

meaning.” Taylor is like Nietzsche in that he attempts “to turn the loss of meaning into a net gain for humanity. For it is only when we abandon the hope of a higher life and of recovering the hidden meaning of life that we can abandon ourselves to this life.”³⁹ Taylor claims that the postmodern person must not accept nihilism passively, but *actively* -- and must willingly embrace it.⁴⁰ But we should rightly ask, as Vanhoozer has done: Is nihilism truly freedom or is Taylor's celebration premature? Is it really possible to have joy and freedom following the death of God?⁴¹ Taylor's a/theology has not adequately handled the human condition of despair if he pulls out all the plugs.

Taylor does not seem to acknowledge the deep, emotional, grief that should characterize the loss he is advocating. He is speaking no less than eliminating the entire base of beliefs by which all who usually consider themselves “Christian” are building their emotional, religious, and family identity upon. Although he refers many times to the sense of loss and awareness of death that one embraces in postmodern thought, his “theology” lacks the practical wisdom to help one work through such emotional grief as human beings. Instead, Taylor abruptly moves forward with an abstruse intellectualism seemingly unaware of the desperate human condition he is placing others in.⁴²

B. The Violence of Despair

If we are indeed trapped in a maze of endless wandering and “erring” all of our days without any hope of escape or finality, then we are “placed not in joyous disempowerment but in panoptic dominion.”⁴³ Gillian Rose submits that “[v]iolence lurks” in Taylor's “labyrinth.”⁴⁴ This is a criticism worthy of consideration. She contends that there is violence in nihilism itself. One may not warmly embrace nihilism when it violates all that we understand to be true. One must consider the “violence” of essentially destroying all historical Christian understanding committed by Taylor's a/theological proposal. Humans need some understanding of history and destiny. Landmarks are simply a device people use to measure their lives in order to live their lives to the fullest on a daily basis. Such an a/theology seems to be ultimately self-destructive and unworkable in real life.

³⁹Kevin J. Vanhoozer, *Is There a Meaning in this Text?* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1998), pp. 72, 73.

⁴⁰See Taylor, *Erring*, p. 140.

⁴¹Vanhoozer, *Is There a Meaning in this Text?*, p. 73.

⁴²See Erickson, *The Word Became Flesh*, p. 325. Don Cupitt, although not specifically referring to Mark C. Taylor, also submits, that such a departure from past traditional notions, will be extremely difficult for theology. Cupitt states: “A religious tradition finds it even more difficult to admit that it is in terminal crisis and needs to make a break with the past than does a philosophical. And would not a *complete* break require an entirely new language, which nobody would be able to understand?” Don Cupitt, *The Long-legged Fly* (London: SCM Press Ltd., 1987), p. 120.

⁴³Gillian Rose, “New Jerusalem, Old Athens From *The Broken Middle*,” in *The Postmodern God: A Theological Reader*, ed. Graham Ward (Oxford: Blackwell, 1997), p. 329. p. 318-339.

⁴⁴Rose, “New Jerusalem, Old Athens,” p. 329.

Ironically, we may also ask: Is Taylor's a/theology radical enough? Taylor's nihilism still operates in the shadow of the purported non-existent God of Christian theology. In this sense, such nihilism is "intrinsically, even if parasitically" a "Judeo-Christian religious concept."⁴⁵ Taylor's notions are derived within the context of the denial of the monotheism of Christian theology. That is, he assumes the negation of the "Christian" God. If Taylor truly wants to emphasize the death of God, then should he not be more complete in his nihilism by eliminating "God" in a pantheistic context as well?

John D. Caputo makes a similar assessment of Taylor's extreme reading and application of Derrida. The slash (/) of Taylor's a/theology is presumed to dance on the edge of undecidability. However this is not, in effect, what happens in Caputo's estimation. Caputo submits that Taylor's *Erring*

makes a reductionistic decision *against* God, thereby reducing the ambiguity of a genuine a/theology and turning *différance* against God. But that version of deconstruction is undone by deconstruction itself, which refuses such closure, such exclusions and such clean sweeps.⁴⁶

As Rose points us to the inherent violence in Taylor's nihilistic wanderings and lack of teleological concern; Caputo points us to the decisive violence of Taylor's a/theology against God. We would affirm, with Caputo, that such a notion is ultimately self-defeating, as we will continue to see in our final observation.

C. Where's the Ethic?

Taylor's A/theology seems to be lacking any serious, practical ethical concerns other than freedom from oppressive, transcendent religious structures which people have put upon themselves. But a true theology, as Millard Erickson has wisely noted, needs to address the practical, religious, ethical concerns of people.⁴⁷ We must ask ourselves what Taylor is essentially arguing for in his works. If he is not attempting himself to make any significant claims to truth, how can we accept or reject what he is purporting? With all of Taylor's linguistic word plays how are we to decide what is right and what is wrong? Is it truly possible to have an effective exchange of communication and make

⁴⁵ Henry, "God in Postmodernity," p. 20.

⁴⁶ John D. Caputo, *The Prayers and Tears of Jacques Derrida: Religion without Religion* (Bloomington & Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1997), p. 14.

⁴⁷ Again, see Erickson, *The Word Became Flesh*, pp. 329, 330.

evaluative judgments with Taylor's suppositions?⁴⁸ Taylor's deconstructive a/theological perspectives deny our most basic commonsense notions for living our lives.⁴⁹

Conclusion

We may ask ourselves: “Why does Taylor hold such views?” Is he purposely using exaggeration to make a point? It is difficult to say for sure. Perhaps if it were possible to summarize a major concern which emerges from Taylor's theological positions, it would come from no better than Taylor himself when he offers the following:

The deconstruction of the Western theological network discloses the recurrent effort of human beings to achieve a position of domination. This struggle appears to grow out of the conviction that mastery results from the ability to secure presence and establish identity by overcoming absence and repressing difference. The battle for mastery, however, is always self-defeating.⁵⁰

It is proper for us to address these postmodern concerns, but it cannot be done by Taylor's a/theological nihilism. After evaluating Taylor's views and examining critiques of his approach from a variety of sources, from our perspective we see absolutely no compelling reason to abandon the fundamental truths so basic to evangelical Christianity. Instead, we see compelling reasons to hold dear to these truths which not only appeal to the concerns of man as an entire person -- emotionally and historically, but also to common principles of logic which form the basis of everyday conversation and human development.

Nevertheless, I believe Kevin Vanhoozer provides an excellent caution to those who keep the Scripture close to their heart for faith and practice as God's word:

Readers who take pride in their readings seek to “master” the text and so risk elevating their commentary over the text in importance. Pride neglects the voice of the other in favor of its own. It may therefore be the preeminent temptation of the fundamentalist, insofar as he or she craves certainty.⁵¹

May the Truth always overshadow our pride, and may our quest for certainty never be a substitute for the Truth.

⁴⁸Erickson, *The Word Became Flesh*, pp. 327-328ff.

⁴⁹These may be what postmodern theologian David Ray Griffin calls, “hard-core commonsense notions.” See Griffin, “Postmodern Theology and A/theology,” p. 35, 36: There are four “hard-core commonsense notions” which Griffin claims are common to all persons which cannot be denied. These are: 1) the freedom of power of self-determination; 2) the fact that an actual world exists independently of one's perception of it; 3) one's interpretative ideas are true if they correspond with that independent existing world (correspondence theory of truth) and, 4) a distinction is possible, for some events, between what actually happened and what could have happened for either better or worse.

⁵⁰Taylor, *Erring*, p. 15.

⁵¹Vanhoozer, *Is There a Meaning in this Text?*, p. 463.