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Overcoming Onto-theology: George Grant and Religion without Religion

—Peg Peters

Religion has come to an end but people are still hungry for spirituality. George Grant believes that western Christianity has contributed to its own demise, allowing religion to be an agent of the will to power that flourishes as modern technology. God too often has been something that we have tried to explain and control. Religion, which is a human practice, is always deconstructible in the light of the love of God, which is not deconstructible. Using Grant as a guide, I will try to suggest a way forward for religion in a pluralist society.

To talk about religion today is risky. The topic is so diverse and potentially alienating that most don't even attempt to enter the waters. From discussions of personal spirituality to incidences of violence perpetrated by religious believers, the air is charged with tension. George Grant is a Canadian prophet who warns and guides those who would embrace the mystery of the divine. Drawing from his reading of Martin Heidegger, Grant saw that much of modern religion was becoming a dangerous hybrid of philosophy and theology which was destructive to faith. This hybrid Heidegger called 'onto-theology.' What is wrong with onto-theology in Grant's view? Three things. First, it deprives the world of its mystery. Second, it makes God into a controllable being, and therefore not worthy of worship. Grant often referred

to a famous passage from Heidegger where he complains that before the *causa sui* (a name for the God of onto-theology that emphasizes the need for an explainer that doesn't need to be explained) no one would be tempted to pray or to sacrifice and that this God evokes neither awe nor music and dance. Onto-theology is hostile to piety. Third, having deprived the world of both its mystery and of a God worthy of worship, onto-theology opens the way for the unfettered self-assertion of the will to power in the form of modernity, namely the quest of science and technology to have everything at human disposal.

In response to onto-theology, Grant offered three correctives for religion: faith, hope and love. For Grant, faith was in contrast to onto-theology and the religion of control and power; hope was in contrast to the will to power that resulted in religious violence; and love was in contrast to the propensity towards individualized and private faith that is not concerned with justice and the sense of the other.

George Grant, considered one of Canada's foremost political philosophers, believed that the modern paradigm of knowledge in its silencing of anything transcendent left people empty and confused. Through his teaching at Dalhousie and McMaster from 1950-1988, he argued that faith and religion were different and that western Christianity as a religion needed to come to an end because of its associations with a certain way of thinking that Martin Heidegger called 'metaphysics.' Heidegger in his essay called "*What is Metaphysics*", wrote that the term "metaphysics derives from the Greek which means to inquire in a way that extends out 'over' beings as such.

Metaphysics is inquiry beyond or over beings, which aims to recover them as such and as a whole for our grasp." (1) For Heidegger, metaphysics stands for a way of thinking that seeks to 'grasp' and stand 'over' and it is this way of thinking that has developed into modern scientific rationality or what Heidegger calls 'calculative thinking'. Grant agreed with Heidegger that modern science reduced all thinking to calculative thought. Calculative thought is a way of thinking that construes reality as material for human control. As such, reality becomes value-free material. We have purposes to impose on it, but it imposes no purposes on us. Grant agreed with Nietzsche and Heidegger that there was a controlling motive behind all of our attempts to know the world.

The calculative thinking which characterizes modern science is itself only possible on the basis of having a subject that can calculate and a “world” or object which is “placed before” it, a world that is easily manipulated, controlled and contained. Heidegger called this world technology. For Grant, metaphysics, calculative thought, and technology were all words and concepts to describe the modern paradigm of knowing which assumes that the subject (myself) is able to see everything as an object for consumption and control. (2)

For Heidegger calculative thinking is the *how* of onto-theology rather than the *what*. Onto-theology is the outworking of religion as technology in the modern world. The goal of technology is to have the world at our disposal. Grant believed that Heidegger’s fullest account of calculative thinking as placing the world at our disposal was his book on Leibniz called *The Principle of Reason*. (3) Calculative thinking begins as the demand for reasons and completeness. Since an unexplained explainer (i.e. God) leaves things ultimately unexplained, the principle of reason becomes an appeal to God as *ultima ratio*, the ultimate reason. God exists so that human reason can give ultimate explanations or so that God can be seen as the final explanation. Heidegger believed that the language of onto-theology had actually allowed the human subject to surpass God as the supreme authority and final arbiter of truth. Heidegger interpreted Nietzsche’s notion of the will to power as the final stage of onto-theology. The metaphysical attempt to control and ground everything, albeit not in God but in the will of the subject, is the final stage of religion as onto-theology. Heidegger, in lectures on Nietzsche, wrote:

As an ontology, even Nietzsche’s metaphysics is at the same time theology, although it seems far removed from scholastic

metaphysics. The ontology of beings as such thinks *essentia* as will to power. Such metaphysical theology is of course a negative theology of a peculiar kind. Its negativity is revealed in the expression ‘God is dead’? This is an expression not of atheism, but of onto-theology, in just that metaphysics in which nihilism proper is fulfilled. (4)

The final result of religion as onto-theology is a religion where the other is silenced and neglected. Religion becomes privatized, individualistic and ethical responsibility is denied. Justice for the oppressed is overlooked amidst individualistic passion for spirituality. Onto-theology is first about *me*, and my desires. It is a way of thinking that shuts down the other’s infinite demand on me... All radical otherness ceases to exist under the religion of onto-theology.

If technology is a paradigm of control, then onto-theology is the name given to that system when it enters religion. It is religion as technology. Religion where the subject is in control through the assertion of the will always results in violence being done to the ‘other’ or that which is outside the subject. Grant, again drawing from Heidegger, warns that religion can often become violent because of its notion of truth as

correctness. Religious people often fall victim to the onto-theological tendency to confuse themselves with God and so to threaten the civil liberties and sometimes the lives of anyone who disagrees with them, which is taken to be the equivalent of disagreeing with God. Some of the worst acts of violence in recent history were committed in the name of religion. Grant condemns these kinds of acts as onto-theological pursuits of power through correctness. This only arises with an understanding of knowing that claims certainty. This onto-theological pursuit of power and control is often seen in forms of religious fundamentalism.

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In light of these three critiques of onto-theology, many have come to believe that God is dead, and that religion is finished as a dispenser of meaning. But Grant asserts that it is indeed possible to speak of God meaningfully after taking the Heideggerian critique seriously. Grant believes that Heidegger was attacking the ‘how’ rather than the ‘what’ of religion. Heidegger was not out to disprove God or displace Christianity with nihilistic atheism; rather, Grant suggests that he is warning us about the



language that we adapt when we speak of God. (5) The *how* under attack is religion as technology, the man-made philosophical system that attempts to control and explain the mystery of the divine. Grant often quotes from Heidegger's 'Letter on Humanism', where Heidegger writes: "With the existential determination of the essence of man, therefore, nothing is decided about the 'existence of God' or his 'non-being'... Thus it is not only rash but also an error in procedure to maintain that the interpretation of the essence of man from the relation of his essence to the truth of Being is atheism." (6)

In contrast to religion as technology, Grant points to the openness in the mystery that occurs in lived faith. Grant distinguishes faith from onto-theology or metaphysics. Often faith has been talked about in technological terms by reducing faith to 'correctness of belief' which is based on a set of propositions. Although Grant admits that much of religion is guilty of the errors of onto-theology, he nonetheless believes that there is still a way to speak about faith that does not degenerate into 'metaphysics'. Nietzsche reminds us that humans are always embedded within a particular perspective—we are finite—and thus we cannot achieve the kind of knowledge that exists outside of a specific place or time. Theologians need to be reminded of this, according to Grant, for theology is tempted by the fallacious assumption that since it speaks of the Absolute it must speak

absolutely. The ultimate implication of this hermeneutical practice is that theologians are to speak with humility, avoiding the conceit that when they speak of God, they are thereby adequately explaining the world. In one of Grant's final essays he alludes to what he gained from Nietzsche.

One of Nietzsche's superb accounts of modern history was that Christianity had produced its own gravediggers. Christianity had prepared the soil of rationalism from which modern science came, and its discoveries showed that the Christian God was dead. That formula gets close to the truth of western history, but is nevertheless not true. The

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web of necessity which the modern paradigm of knowledge lays before us does not tell us God is dead, but reminds us of what western Christianity seemed to forget in its moment of pride: how powerful is the necessity which love must cross. *Christianity did not provide its own gravedigger, but the means to its own purification.* (7)

Detailing what this purification might look like for faith was one of Grant's final challenges. Part of the purification process is to develop ways of speaking about God that are shielded from the

criticism of onto-theology. Part of this requires an understanding of human finitude in our approaches to knowledge. Grant, drawing from Heidegger, speaks of faith in a way that distances it from calculative thinking. He speaks of faith in terms of 'tradition,' as something to which I am first delivered, am proper to, as that to which I am connected by way of relationship. Faith, in this sense, has to do with the 'how' as well as the 'what' of me being a believer. Religion in this sense ceases to be 'assertion'—what I assert is true—but instead is understood as prayer or as relationship.

Grant sees that the violence emanating from religion stems from a western metaphysical notion of the will. Grant, like Heidegger, believes that most western religions have incorporated into their thinking the Cartesian subject-object paradigm where the subject stands over the object and compels it to give up its reasons. This paradigm led to the Nietzschean notion of the will to power where the subject became the final ground for all meaning and therefore the one who creates values through the assertion of the will. While many religious people are likely unaware of the ideas of Nietzsche, Grant believes that the concepts have nonetheless been pervasive in most modern expressions of religion. In contrast, Grant sees in Simone Weil's notion of 'attention' a way to think about faith and God that does not result in violence. In his personal journal on Simone Weil he writes:

Within the general philosophic tradition the place where I find writings very close to what she means by attention is in the late writings of Heidegger... When he says that meditative thinking is the "letting it lie before you and taking it to heart, the 'to be' of beings"... whatever that may mean, it seems to me to take one closer to what Simone Weil means by attention. Or in Heidegger's writing about

Gelassenheit, [releasement] when he points to a thinking without willing, one is close again to Weil. (8)

In contrast to religion as will and violence, Grant argues that faith is about loving rather than willing. Grant writes, “belief or unbelief is never a matter of choice or commitment, but of intellect and attention. As the West has been without faith, faith has often been interpreted by men of faith who wished to get on with understanding as if it finally came down to an act of committal by the will.” He goes on to say that “religion is talked about in the West as if it were some kind of choice or opting, despite or even against the evidence.” (Introduction to Simone Weil” in *Reader*, 251) For Grant, following Weil, a person of faith is called to live with *attention*. True attention means an emptying of the self, a letting go of the self, whereby the other appears in the truth of its beauty.

To pay attention truly is not to contract muscles etc.—but to leave oneself empty, disposable, open to that which we wait upon...Attention is finally attention to the void...It is a waiting for something to appear, to manifest itself, to reveal itself. In contemplating a picture...the beauty of the picture only appears to us when we have surrendered to something external and real—one has to open oneself to the void so that one can let something appear as itself. (9)

If modern religious violence stems from disagreements about claims to absolute certainty, Weil’s concept of attention begins from a place of uncertainty. Attention is about listening and recognizing that the other is before you. Having faith means testifying to the love of God, which for Weil must translate into justice for the other. We do not live in isolation as individuals; rather, we are

called upon to be attentive to the other, first and foremost.

Weil’s concept of attention as a corrective to violence pushed Grant to realize that the modern understanding of religion was very individualistic and therefore tended to silence the voice of the other. If faith is a corrective for a religion of onto-theology and power, and hope is a corrective to a religion of violence, then love is a corrective to a religion of individualism. Love requires an acceptance or consent to the fact that there is authentic otherness. This ‘authentic otherness’ is that part of anything that cannot be reduced to scientific data. Without love, knowledge is condemned to a scientific mode of knowing alone. Grant writes that “Plato

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proclaims the dependence of intelligence upon love in a much clearer way than Aristotle...the modern apprehension of will ...implies that we stand over against love.” (10) Grant believes that the only response to the hegemony of calculative thinking is to revive the older understanding of ‘knowing in love.’ Only love, Grant maintains, can counter the objectifying effects of modern rationality. The ancient biblical term of ‘knowing’ (11) has this deeper connotation. Grant believes that we encounter otherness whether through sexual love or spiritual longing—we experience it as something ultimately beyond our capacity to manipulate or transform. (12) According to Grant, the chief defining



character of religion is its view of justice. If love is defined as consent to otherness, then the other demands something of me. Grant speaks of the idea of ‘owingness.’ Others demand something of me even if they are silent. To speak of justice is to speak of what one ‘ought’ to do and any sense of ‘ought’ implies a sense that one ‘owes’ others the dignity of justice. Grant says that in the modern world, “Goodness is now apprehended as a way which excludes from it all ‘owingness.’” What is true of the modern conception of goodness is that it does not include the assertion of an owed claim which is intrinsic to our desiring. Grant’s concept of ‘owingness’ is connected to his understanding of faith, which posits an order of justice beyond human desire.

To ‘owe’ something or someone means that you are not in control of them. You are not standing over an object summoning forth its reasons; instead, you see in that *other* something of the Good that demands your response or obedience. Grant maintains that the idea of obedience does not close down openness when it is in response to that which you appreciate and love. To consent to otherness is to agree that you owe something to everyone you encounter. It is here that Grant points

to some weaknesses in Heidegger's meditative thinking. For Heidegger there was no Good beyond Being and therefore nothing to be obedient to. Grant says that this is precisely what is missing in Heidegger: "the greatest writer on what technique is turns his back on obedience." (13) J.S. Porter in his brilliant chapter on Grant asks, "Can you think of anything more bizarre to write about in our time than obedience? To what or to whom would we be obedient? What or whom do we reverence enough, stand in awe of enough, to proffer obedience? What could be more anti-historical, ahistorical, than obedience?" (14) It is only the life of faith, hope and love that can give content to justice.

Grant pushes the idea of justice a little further when he speaks of forgiveness. If justice is giving someone their due, what they are owed as a human being, what do you do when what is owed is punishment? Echoing Hannah Arendt, Grant argues that punishment, which is the opposite of forgiveness, pulls the strings of the social order tighter and tighter, locking us into narrower and narrower constraints and blocking freedom so that we are caught up in a vicious cycle. The desire for retaliation and vengeance often fuels violence committed in the name of religion. Forgiveness is the way to cut those bonds, to release us and free us and open up new possibilities. Forgiveness opens up or frees the past so that the past can be altered. Grant argues that sometimes what is owed a person is forgiveness and to withhold it is actually a form of violence that continues the cycle of hate. Grant often quotes from the Gospel of Matthew when Jesus says

from the cross to his punishers, "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do." This was one of the highest expressions of forgiveness from an innocent victim, showing a new way of responding to violence. The religious expression of love has the power to confront our modern tendency to privatized and individualized faith and to root us in the other through justice and grace.

I have argued that Grant, drawing from Heidegger's critique of western metaphysics, gives three correctives to the practice of religion in our modern or post-modern era. By moving away from onto-theological expressions of power, and avoiding Nietzschean religions of violence and will, Grant arrives at a religion which is guided by a love that expresses itself in justice. It is through the living out of these three correctives that Grant seeks to create the space for a language and understanding of the 'Other'. His use of words like *attention*, *owingness*, and *obedience* are his attempt to find a language that is not grounded in western metaphysical notions of control and objectification. It is in this overcoming of western metaphysics or onto-theology that Grant sees a renewed place for ethics, God and the Good. By rooting his thinking in love, Grant is able to ward off the calculative reductionism of modern science and the morally neutral responses that leaves no place

for justice. Justice, as understood by Grant, leads one to obedience, but this is not an obedience that is blind and destructive to individual freedom. Instead it is obedience to that which is lovable. This understanding of justice consents to otherness because it sees the other as lovable. Grant writes that "for Plato the opposite of knowledge is not ignorance, but madness, and the nearest he can come to an example of complete madness is the tyrant, because in that case otherness has disappeared as much as can be imagined." (15) The religious tyrant is the embodiment of onto-theological systems of power and control, a religion of violence, and a self-serving religion that fails to see otherness and practice justice. For Grant, the best defense against the religious madness of onto-theology is faith, hope and love.

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