

Oxymoron or Imperative? Academic Theology and the Anarchic Praxis of Refusing Power  
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A few weeks ago, a MDiv student requested time to talk with me. We met over a dish of ice cream not long after. It was our first meeting, and as one does, he told me about his past, his interests and goals, and his dreams. During college, he had thought he was headed in a policy and advocacy direction—probably by way of law school. And so, after college, he took time to work on the campaign against California’s Proposition 8 (*aside*: this proposition made same-sex marriage unconstitutional in the state of California. The campaigns for and against it essentially turned into a nationwide fight over same-sex marriage.). Yet—as he tells the story—working for this campaign had an unanticipated effect: simply stated, it convinced him that law divides. Law constrains our possibilities in order to safeguard a distribution of goods, money, and opportunity. Law limits or harms one person or community, for the protection or gain of another.

With our ice creams about half eaten, he pushed his slightly to the side, and shrank a bit into the booth. I felt a confession surfacing, and (I admit, just slightly reluctantly) I set aside my sundae to attend to his words fully. “I believe that it must be possible for us to live differently,” he said. “To live united for mutual possibility, rather than divided ‘for our well-being and protection’.” Pausing, he sat up a bit straighter and leaned in: “It isn’t that we need to transform the system that is – reworking laws, finding new governance, establishing social good cooperatives, or any of that. What I mean, what I seek, is to actually live differently. To do so

beyond the touch of law and state, because that touch harms us. This is why I am here studying theology. It promises a different view on our place together in this world. But I haven't found it yet. I can't see it. Liberation theologies envision something different, and I appreciate their ideas about what it will look like if we achieve the struggle. But this is not enough. I want to see that something different is possible. I want to see that *it is*. I want to understand and know *what it is* when it is." He closed with a question: "This is why I wanted to meet: Can theology help?"

It was fortuitous to meet this student as I prepared for today. He sharpened the material question of anarchic elements in academic theology. Oxymoron or imperative? As he insisted, this is not an abstract consideration. There are theologians who develop the resources *to see* what cannot be seen under the bright lights of law or state, and there are those that go beyond political demands, utopian imagination, or eschatological promises in order to gesture toward another world that does exist here, today, even if only fleetingly and in surprising places. These are moments of anarchism in theology, where we not only refuse to accept or abide the demands of power, but deny instantiations of power altogether. In my current research, I focus on one such theologian: Marcella Althaus-Reid. She insists that another world un beholden to the dominant structures of power is not only possible *and* necessary, *but here* – if heterotopically. Moreover, she argues that academic theology must come to recognize and know the transformations of this other space. In what follows, I begin with Foucault's concept of heterotopia as the groundwork for one of her experiments with creating a theology capable of moving into and witnessing these other spaces.

Foucault considered the strange places where life occurs differently than is ordinarily possible in his essay “Of Other Spaces.” He did not intend this manuscript for publication. It was written in preparation for a lecture that he delivered in 1967. Shortly before his death, however, the text entered the public domain as part of an exhibition in Berlin. A French journal published it in 1984, but the publication of the essay in 1986 by *Diacritics* that is usually cited.<sup>1</sup> In many ways, the manuscript appears as an *other space* of its own, standing in special relationship to his “central” texts. Like Foucault, I am concerned with the ordering and unordering of knowledge that enables or restrains our ability to know ourselves. These dynamics of knowledge become recognizable in architectural forms and the maps of space that we carry (or that perhaps that our phones now provide for us). I mark the textual history of Foucault’s essay because its placement in his corpus matters for the knowledge it potentiates. From this small slippery corner, Foucault articulates an idea that appears momentarily in texts such as *The Order of Things*, but that never becomes saturated by description, analysis, or application. The idea invites a way of thinking about space and therewith power, knowledge, and possibility. The idea, of course, is heterotopia.

Here is what Foucault writes: “We are in the epoch of juxtaposition, the epoch of the near and far, of the side-by-side, of the dispersed.” Spaces organize our experience through both the patterns of relation and the activities that comprise them. The distinction between a home and a train station as distinct spaces, for instance, manifests in the types of relations and activities that can occur *in* each and *between* the two. By organizing space, these relations become the structure of possibility for our experience and the horizon of our knowledge. Yet,

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<sup>1</sup> Michel Foucault, “Of Other Spaces” trans. by Jay Miskowiec, *Diacritics* 16, no. 1 (Spring, 1986): 22-27.

there are always those spaces that “*do exist* and that are formed in the very founding of society.” There are *real spaces* that are “like counter-sites...in which the real sites...that can be found within the culture, are simultaneously *represented, contested, and inverted.*”

Heterotopias, then, as counter-sites, are real spaces that represent, contest, and invert the ordinary sites that map the possibilities and knowledge of our lives.

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In this essay, Foucault considers six principles of heterotopias. Here, I name only the final: heterotopias transform knowledge of ordinary spaces. This happens in two ways. On the one hand, he tells us, heterotopias create spaces of illusion that expose the ordinary spaces of our lives as *still more illusory* than the illusion of the heterotopia. On the other hand, heterotopias create a space that is “as perfect, as meticulous, as well arranged as ours is messy, ill constructed, and jumbled.” In either case, heterotopias expose the lack, insufficiency, absence, or incompleteness of what we usually experience and see as possible for our lives. More, they do so as real spaces. Spaces that we—*all of us*—can and actually do experience.

In concept form, Foucault’s idea of heterotopia appears as a sort of epistemological promise—though admittedly the word ‘promise’ is likely to cause shudders for some readers of Foucault and perhaps Foucault himself. Let me explain what I mean: Heterotopias are real. We encounter the other spaces. We experience them and, when we do, our knowledge is called into question. Yet, to let Vattimo’s words echo, the otherness of other spaces occurs as what *happens*, not what is.<sup>2</sup> The occurrence of the concept heterotopia in Foucault’s texts appears from its small textual alcoves as a promise of other *other spaces* to be encountered.

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<sup>2</sup> Gianni Vattimo, *The Transparent Society* trans. by David Webb (Baltimore: Polity Press, 1992), 73.

Heterotopias cannot be captured in description or even language. Instead, the articulation of heterotopian spaces promises their effects. We ought not confuse the idea of heterotopia with the occurrence of heterotopias. They are different.

The student, with whom I met, expressed a heterotopian desire for theology. He wants to experience real spaces that expose the illusions in how we think about living together and how our frameworks of law and state interpellate our bodies, lives, and loves. He intuited – and now hopes – theology has something to do with this. From the religious dynamics of cemeteries to the sacred spaces of Persian gardens, Foucault’s examples of heterotopias hint that perhaps theologians have a unique role in the encounter of other spaces that represent, contest and invert the ordinary spaces. I add much more strongly: what do academic theologians do if not seek real sites from which to reconsider the insufficiency of our knowledge of the world and ourselves in light of Divine love? Yet, more often, theology (and especially academic theology) functions as a legal discourse for God, for the church, and most dishearteningly, for the servant institutions that are beholden to the power of harmful ideologies. Here, I think in particular of the good deal of theology that not only describes or explains “God himself,” neoliberal states, late capitalist economy, the heteronormative “family” and so on, but actively works to strengthen and defend them against what (I hope) will be their impending demise.

On the other hand, transformative theologies — feminist, liberationist, and so on — expose and refuse these deleterious loyalties and their effects through a praxis of political struggle. They seek to install the possibility of different patterns of power and law where all are included and none suffer (I should be clear, here: I count myself as both liberationist and feminist on these counts). Yet, these theologies do not often seek to escape the reach of power

and its instantiations as law altogether. Something more is desired — that is, something more is needed.

It is an anarchic praxis that I am after: theology that works to find other spaces in which even transformed, ostensibly liberative, laws can be represented, then contested and inverted. This praxis will *happen* heterotopically, if it happens at all.

What the student wants — actually, I'll include myself here, *what we want* — is something different, and I think something more. We want to recognize other sites where the structuring effects of instantiated power are represented, contested, and inverted. Far beyond Foucault, I want to seek knowledge of ourselves and of our world that becomes possible in the real experience of heterotopic spaces when they are illuminated by transfiguring Love. Few theologians work in this direction, but some do, and from them, I learn a great deal about the task and work of academic theology as a praxis of refusing power and seeing the alternatives that are always already *here*. In answer to the student, I offer by way of example Marcella Althaus-Reid, an Argentinean theologian who taught not far from here in Edinburgh.

Althaus-Reid argued that to write theology that articulates God's love in the world, theologians must actively resist and refuse political, economic, sexual, and epistemological structures of power. We need to find other spaces to those that ordinarily organize theology and theological knowledge. Once we find them, she continued, we need the courage to enter — no matter how dangerous or scandalous. It is there, Althaus-Reid insisted, that we wield the theoretical tools that render ideological illusions visible; that interrupt our interpellation to transform who we can be, and (indeed) that reveal another world that always already existed, exists and will exist in the embrace of God's love.

Althaus-Reid experimented with this task that she laid out for herself. –For instance - Rather than go to church, go walk the streets of Buenos Aires to learn about the destruction of the daughters of the Inca Empire from impoverished indigenous survivors who now sell lemons in the street. Remove the skirts of the overdressed Catholic Virgin Mary—reach under to touch her intimately. Or embrace a queer hell as “a radical option against the grace of the system” because “in hell God is not missed as an option.”<sup>3</sup> Here, I focus on one way she works to *catalyze the happening* of other spaces—the occurrence of heterotopias. “We are going to use Sartre’s concept of obscenity, although in reverse,” Althaus-Reid tells us with allusion to Baudrillard<sup>4</sup>

Sartre asked us to imagine a dancer without clothing. She dances nude. Yet, we do not see her flesh. In Sartre’s words: so long as the freedom of the dancer’s movements continue: “the nudity of the flesh is wholly present, but it cannot be seen.”<sup>5</sup> Because the dancer invokes with her movement the world to which she belongs and the world in which she acts, every twist, and every glide, clothe her limbs. The grace with which she dances transcends the givenness of her materiality. Her self-determination masks her flesh; it veils her nudity. The dancer, Sartre explains, is free. Alternatively, a dancer’s failure to transcend the naked of her flesh results in the obscene. In Sartre’s formulation: while grace hides the givenness of the flesh; obscenity exposes it. Rather than the dancer’s movement, we see a leg and the wiggle of a hip. Obscenity makes an object of a human. This makes Sartre’s skin crawl, because it renders the material world visible, all too visible.

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<sup>3</sup> Marcella Althaus-Reid, *The Queer God* (London: Routledge, 2003), 167.

<sup>4</sup> Marcella Althaus-Reid, *Indecent Theology* (London: Routledge, 2000), 110.

<sup>5</sup> Jean Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness* trans. by Hazel Barnes (New York: Washington Square Press, 1992), 400.

For Althaus-Reid, however, the visibility of the obscene holds its promise for the real fleshy bodies with whom she is concerned. She does not seek Sartre's concept. Rather, she *uses* it "in reverse." An unabashed encounter with materiality shatters illusions. Obscenity destroys grace, but it is through the obscene "dis-covering" (that is *un*-covering which leads to *discovering*) of grace that a way to transcendence again appears.

Baudrillard's reversibility is not a process of negation or opposition, nor does it entail turning away from illusion in order to invert or dissolve it. Rather, reversibility foments the symbolic excesses of irreconcilable elements when they are held together. By exposing the excess, Baudrillard suggests that one can gesture obliquely beyond the signifiable. A radical suggestion if ever there was one. Systems contain within themselves mechanisms of their own reversal and their own destruction, Baudrillard explains. When one finds the reversibility of the subject and object, "these terms disappear as such and one must find another mode.....there is something irreconcilable and at that moment the terms are not dialectical."<sup>6</sup> The task is to draw out the system's own dynamics, and in doing so "become the acceleration of this logic."<sup>7</sup>

"Baudrillard's discourse needs to be broad enough to include the technologies of subversion of the poor, that art of resisting dictatorial seductions," Althaus-Reid writes with respect to her application of his notions of simulation and hyper-reality.<sup>8</sup> The same applies here of reversability. When Althaus-Reid reverses Sartre's concept of obscenity, she does not intend an abstract excess. What is at stake is the recognition of real bodies and real relationships in excess of what is possible within the structures of ordinary space. Obscenity ruptures

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<sup>6</sup> Jean Baudrillard, "Revenge of the Crystal" in *Baudrillard Live: Selected Interviews* ed. by Mike Gane (London: Routledge, 1993), 58.

<sup>7</sup> Jean Baudrillard, "Why Theory" in *The Ecstasy of Communication* trans. by Bernard Schütze and Caroline Schütze (Los Angeles: Semiotext[e], 1998), 99.

<sup>8</sup> Althaus-Reid, *Indecent Theology*, 97.



ideological illusions and exposes the material realities that these illusions mask. Yet, she recognizes that the formulation of obscenity also leaves the body available for other or persisting citations. Materiality leads back to illusion. In theological terms: Obscenity destroys grace, but it is through an obscene “dis-covering” of grace that a way to transcendence appears.<sup>9</sup>

Althaus-Reid’s reversal of grace and obscenity unleashes a theological symbolic excess. It draws out the potential of real bodies and communities beyond the prescriptions of inescapable instantiations of power in today’s world. It speaks what cannot be said by letting it happen. More, it does so with recognition that this *occurrence* is what has theological significance, not the ideas themselves. Another way to say this is that Althaus-Reid’s acceleration of the logic of obscenity establishes a conceptual counter-space that formed in Sartre’s founding formulation of the idea. The reversal represents, contests, and inverts the ordinary conception of obscenity. If I had more time, we could explore the number of “obscenities” that Althaus-Reid that offers in *Indecent Theology* to create spaces of illusion that she uses to expose the *still more illusory* space of ordinary – or what she calls “Totalitarian” theology. Which, to make explicit, is a direct return to Foucault’s heterotopia.

For now, though, returning to the ice cream parlor bench, I want to respond to the student without hesitation a certain yes. Theology, and academic theology in particular, does help us to see that something different is possible. To see that it *is*. And to understand and know *what it is* when it is. The challenge in front of us is to continue to move into the other spaces where that will *happen*.

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<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 111.