

The Sinful Truth of Christianity

Keegan Osinski puts Pyrotheology into conversation with liberal theology, drawing out certain similarities, differences and opportunities for mutual enrichment. While such a dialogue is useful, here I tease out what I take to be their fundamental and irreconcilable difference.

Friedrich Schleiermacher, who is generally considered the founder of modern liberal theology, was keen to reject both the particularity of concrete religions and the universality sought by advocates of natural religion – the former being expressed in confessional faiths and the latter in Kantian thought. For Schleiermacher, both ended up treating religion in conceptual terms and thus missed the way faith was concerned with an experience of immediate reality described as a fundamental awareness or intuition. Any articulation of religion in terms of a system or act of decision ultimately, for Schleiermacher, lead people away from the truth of religious experience because they pulled the individual out of a more immediate, primordial feeling, presupposing a separation in which we, the subject, grasp religion as an object to reflect upon or act on. In contrast, Schleiermacher understood religion as a type of immediate, immersive experience that prefigures any separation of the world into a subject/object binary. Faith is not some conceptual position or prize that can be gained through striving. Rather, it is an experience arising from immediate self-consciousness that prefigures any separation of self and world.

Such a sense of absolute dependence stands at odds with the fundamental ontology of Pyrotheology. In liberal theology, the truth of Christianity is expressed in the idea of an underlying harmony and wholeness that preexists the chaos of original sin. Religion is concerned with bringing us momentarily back to an experience in which we participate in a form of ontological life that pre-dates the Fall of the world into a subject/object binary. In contrast, Pyrotheology as I have articulated it in books like *The Divine Magician*, works with the idea that the insight of Christianity is found in the opposite direction; namely, in the ontological priority of a fall, loss or, rather, lack. In other words, while liberal theology locates the truth of Christianity in the experience of an absolute dependence, Pyrotheology locates this truth in an experience of having *lost* this dependence (2015, pp. 9-24). It is here that Pyrotheology sails closer to theological conservatism than liberalism in

its embrace of an ontological alienation. Where Pyrotheology departs from both, however, is in their claim that any sense of original loss is something negative and that there is some way to return to a primordial unity.

Jean-Paul Sartre (2001) describes this situation well. What he calls *the in-itself* refers to any being that does not experience a sense of alienation. The universe is filled with things that are in-itself. For example, a stone is not alienated because it is not a question unto itself; indeed, in traditional theology even God is in-itself, inasmuch as God is not self-alienated. In contrast, *the for-itself* refers to that which experiences alienation, that which feels separate from other things, and that which is self-conscious, since self-consciousness involves the experience of distance. If I look across the street at a car, for example, there is a distance (a nothingness) that I experience between myself and the car. If this nothingness wasn't grounding my perception of the car then I wouldn't be able to experience myself as separate from the car. But not only do I feel separate from the car across the road, I also feel separate from my own body and sense of self. Self-consciousness *is* the experience of distance, of alienation, of loss, of nothingness. To be in-itself is to be lacking the lack, while to be for-itself is to be constituted by it. But to become a self involves moving from being in-itself to being for-itself, an event that leaves us with the enduring sense of a loss. But this loss is *not a loss of something*. In the vocabulary of existentialism, we actually *gain nothing* – a nothing that gifts us with our subjectivity. It is a productive loss, a loss that results in our emergence into the world. Pyrotheology thus understands sin as an ontological rather than moral category; it is the lack that is constitutive of subjectivity.

So Schleiermacher locates the truth of religion in the wrong place and, in so doing, he falls into the same trap as most theologies before him and after him. He views the deep truth of faith as an experience of overcoming the sense of lack at the core of our being, whereas this lack is the ground of our being. This is where it becomes most clear that Pyrotheology and liberal theology tread different paths. Christianity at its most radical doesn't offer the promise of overcoming this gap, or dissolving the gap, but helps us turn it into something liberating and productive. For Schleiermacher and the tradition of liberal theology that follows from him, the point is to cover over the sense of separation that

haunts us, to get rid of it, to feel a blessed unity beneath it, to discover green pastures where everything is one and the finite is enveloped in the Infinite. For Pyrotheology, the truth of Christianity is about saying, ‘Oh lack, where is thy sting?’ Ultimately, it is about tarrying with this lack, making peace with it and discovering the extent to which it is really a gift.