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Colby Dickinson

Loyola University Chicago, [cdickinson1@luc.edu](mailto:cdickinson1@luc.edu)

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Article

# Fragmented, Messianic, Paradoxical, Antinomian, Revolutionary, Secular: The Hermeneutics of Eschatology

Colby Dickinson

Department of Theology, Loyola University Chicago, Chicago, IL 60660, USA; cdickinson1@luc.edu

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**Abstract:** Multiple philosophical-theological efforts in the last century, from W. Benjamin to J. Caputo, have been centered on a messianic opposition to normative structures, a challenge that invokes a long history in the West of breaking down the codes of ordered, civilized and religious society. That such an apocalyptic fervor is nothing new to the history of theology should not surprise us. What should surprise us, however, is how infrequently we are able to see the larger pattern behind these particular movements. Taking up the recent emergence of ‘queer theology’ as the current manifestation of such a trend, I want to isolate and clarify the theological implications of comprehending the existence of humanity as a state of constantly ‘being between’. What I argue is that developing a hermeneutics of eschatology that takes such tensions as foundational rather than merely heterodox indicates that the opposition of grace and law is to be understood not as a dualism to be overcome but as the structure of history itself. The question I am posing is this: to what degree does the queering or subversion of theological normativity, or the development of a ‘theology against itself’, allow us to subvert identitarian politics and to challenge the social and religious institutions that we are a part of? It is through the lens of ‘queer theology’ and its questioning of the existence of normativity itself that we are simultaneously returned to the basic structures that guide human life, while, at the same time, propelled forward into new configurations of resistance to just such structures. By firmly placing ourselves within this ‘queer critique’ we see the ‘already-not yet’ tension of eschatological thought not simply in religious terms, but in ones that reorient our relationship to the political and social orders of this world, calling for a permanent re-envisioning of norms as the individual—and the church—are found to be perpetually—and edifyingly—‘against themselves’.

**Keywords:** queer theology; feminist eschatology; ecclesial dichotomy; antinomianism; transformative critique; divine grace; Pauline theology; hypernomianism; nihilism; micro-politics

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So many philosophical-theological efforts in the last century, from Walter Benjamin to John Caputo, have been centered on a messianic suspension of normative structures, a challenge that invokes a long history in the West of breaking down the codes of ordered, civilized and religious society. Phenomena as diverse as postmodernism, antinomianism and secularization all seem to share at least this much in common as a ‘family resemblance’: the almost permanent subversion of normative boundaries. These are equally the traits that draw so much ire from those wishing to give a passionate and reasoned defense of particular, established traditions. That such an apocalyptic fervor, as I would term these diverse phenomena (and so, conflating them somewhat in order to grasp what is at stake in their frequent contemporary, philosophical usage), is nothing new to the history of theology should not surprise us. What *should* perhaps surprise us, however, is how infrequently we are able to see the larger pattern behind these critical movements and so embrace them for what they might really be: moments of representational re-alignment in service to the continuance of normative traditions and so a challenge offered for more justice to enter our world.

Taking up a wide variety of continental thinkers who are often misread as antinomian (e.g., J. Derrida, J. Caputo, G. Agamben, G. Deleuze), I wager in what follows that the resonance between such philosophical interventions and a number of commentators on the nature of ecclesial structures (R. R. Ruether, Y. Congar) is no mere coincidence; rather, there is an alignment of these various contestations of normativity that has been, and must continue to be, advanced. To further solidify the main argument of this all-too-brief genealogical sketch of various resistances to normativity, I address how these strands of contestation coalesce in the recent emergence of 'queer theology' as another possible manifestation of such a trend within the field of theology specifically. In demonstrating this link, I want to isolate and clarify the theological implications of comprehending the existence of politics, legal normativity and theological discourse, among others, as states of constantly 'being between' these varied representational polarities. What I argue is that developing a hermeneutics of eschatology that takes such tensions as foundational rather than merely heterodox—hence not willing to do away with the traditional structure of existence, but merely to find a space from which to issue transformative critique—indicates that the opposition of (antinomian or apocalyptic) grace and (normative) law as perhaps *the* preeminent dialectic operative within western theology is to be understood not as a dualism waiting to be overcome, but as the structure of institutionalized history (i.e., tradition) itself, the theological implications of which we have yet to more fully comprehend.

A first inspection of the short history of contestations of power in the church might begin with the foundations of criticism located in the transition from ecclesiological to feminist critique as embodied in the work of Rosemary Radford Ruether. Her first book, *The Church against Itself: An Inquiry into the Conditions of Historical Existence for the Eschatological Community* (1967) points directly toward the radical constitution of the church as a human structure forever critical of itself in order to exist as church in the first place. Christians, she posits, due to the impossibility of ever fully capturing God's image in a fixed representation of some sort, must be permanently engaged in an iconoclastic project that refuses to 'alienate the reality to which it points' ([1], p. 220), thus ever expanding its sense of responsibility to more accurately describe its own failure to adequately describe God's possible activity and being in this world. Making connections between the grace offered to the church through the demise of its once dominant 'religious culture' in the West and the need to develop self-critical and self-transformative ecclesial models in order to ensure that the church might find its path in times of cultural revolution such as the late 1960s represented, Ruether conjectures how secularism in the modern West presents the post-Vatican II Catholic Church, in particular, with an opportunity to respond to popular culture and (dis)belief in a way that it failed to during the Reformation ([1], p. 223). What her focus is squarely upon, however, is not just contemporary ecclesial forms, but the dynamic that undergirds the Catholic Church's sense of self, as much during the Reformation as at its inception two thousand years ago. At the same time, she aims to detail a latent dynamic inherent to ecclesial structures that undergirds much more than simply the Catholic Church. She aims for a clearer understanding of how all structures and traditions, including the generic 'church', regard their own sense of normativity, as well as how such structures are frequently contested.

Making clear that God's final judgment is reserved until the end of history, and not within history as we experience it, Ruether is quick to depict a Catholic Church wherein there is as much room for growth and maturity, the development of doctrine and the reforming of structures as we might generously apply to current and future contexts as well. Such a disclosure is not, however, cause to permanently upend all normative measures. In fact, she is clear that the 'left-wing tendency of normless subjectivism' is not the route to take, as it is all-too-quick at times to discard the 'good, reliable, and trustworthy norms' that have been passed down from generation to generation within the Catholic Church ([1], p. 227). As she rather argues, a hermeneutical tension must be maintained between the tradition and any challenge to it, but not one that is delivered at the hands of an external critique alone. The challenge most squarely to be faced is rather one from *within*, the 'church against itself', as difficult and tenuous as such a position might be to institutionally embody. Hence, to configure things as such, theologians might begin to speak about differences only in 'modalities of thought' and not

simply in polarized, dualistic and easily politicized ideologies ([1], p. 231). In the radical discontinuity that is capable of overcoming traditions when they have become ‘a barrier to the Church’s future’, there is yet too, Ruether reminds us, the chance to reread the sources of the tradition in order to stress a remarkable sense of continuity at the same time—a genuine and ongoing *resourcement* ([1], p. 228). Though such a reading undoubtedly has the potential to affirm the status quo, it is the development of self-sustaining, critical models of thought that accompany such structures that Ruether is hoping to emphasize in ways previously neglected. Hence, she tries to emphasize the inherent instability of institutional order while admitting the need for its preservation.

Her interpretation of these oldest of religious and political dynamics (indeed they are squarely at the heart of Christianity’s iconoclastic impulses vis-à-vis Judaism, and though she does not take up this division as being more fundamental), allows Ruether to develop a self-critical model of ecclesiology that benefits the church even as it seems on the surface of things to divide it. As she will conclude, the church is ‘against itself’ in two senses, then: ‘The objective historical spirit of the church constantly wars against the Holy Spirit because its innate tendency as a fallen, objective being is to banish the gospel and make the endless perpetuation of its own material culture its primary commitment’ ([1], p. 237). This is in many ways the surest sign of the church’s existence as a *corpus permixtum* in addition to the fact that the church will inevitably be tempted at times to prohibit a genuine movement of the Spirit (of *reform* then too) in order to protect its ‘material’ existence as a worldly institution. Perceiving the church as being ‘the eschatological community of the saints’ is thereby an ecclesial image permanently at ‘war against the historical church as the *communio peccatorum*’. As she will elaborate on this second sense, ‘[t]he eschatological community is reborn in history and perpetuates itself only through this death struggle with its fallen self’ ([1], p. 237). The tension between the historical, material institution of the church and this ‘eschatological community of the saints’ is unending, and yet this is how things should be: ‘To be itself, the church must constantly repent of itself, so that it can ever again find itself as God’s good creation’ ([1], p. 237).

It is the recognition of this unending ‘war’ of the church with itself that allows Ruether to embrace, in this early study as in her later work, the radicality of contextual theological positions from within the church’s oppressed minority groupings who are still awaiting an eschatological moment of judgment and justice at the hands of God. There are a good many persons marginalized within ecclesial structures crying out for their voices to be heard, but all-too-often failing to be recognized or received by those in positions of power capable of granting them such recognition. Immersed centrally within such ongoing struggles is the eschatological hope of the church to strive for, though admittedly to never historically exist as, the Kingdom of God. A genuine recognition of this in-built tension is where the church must seize its foundational impulses and voices for reform, enter into dialogue with such tensions and often marginalized persons directly and not alienate them further through a defense of pretending they do not exist or, worse, that they are to be wholly rejected. It is not surprising in the least then that Ruether’s later movement toward deepening these initial, structural intuitions concerning the nature of the church was what eventually led to her becoming a prominent exponent of feminist and ecofeminist theologies [2,3]. These permanently existing tensions within the church, much as Yves Congar had foreseen in his influential study of *True and False Reform in the Church* (1950), are what should shape and guide its structure, not be resisted in a show of force that, in the end, denies the eschatological horizon of justice that the followers of God continuously clamor for [4].<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> See also Congar’s practical suggestions for Christian reunion, which are relevant here insofar as they speak also to the divisions within the Church too, in Yves Congar, *Divided Christendom: A Catholic Study of the Problem of Reunion* [5]. There is no doubt, of course, that Ruether’s proposed consideration of secularism as a moment of potential insight for the Church runs afoul of other readings of secularization as a threat to true reform in the Church. See, for example [6] Avery Cardinal Dulles, ‘True and False Reform’, *First Things* (2003). What Dulles does not consider, as many opponents of secularism do not, however, is the thesis that secularism is somehow yet a ‘gift’ to Christianity that arises from within the Christian tradition itself. See, among others [7] Larry Siedentop, *Inventing the Individual: The Origins of Western Liberalism*.

What Ruether brings to our attention is an unending tension between the historical church and an 'eschatological community of the saints' that allows us to perhaps comprehend anew why there is a reason that antinomianism recurs historically again and again as an attempt to be free of all normative, legalistic dimensions of social, political and religious life, but also why it inevitably always fails to achieve its goals. There is indeed a specific quality about the desire to break through the confines of a reductionistic moral or legal code undergirding a given tradition or institutional structure that prompts people to perceive grace as operative entirely *beyond* all law (and with law here referring in general to any normative structure, from Torah to contemporary legal frameworks). This is no less true at the base of Christianity's stress placed on the experience of grace over Judaic Law as it is within various smaller movements championing grace alone (and so *apart* from all law) that appear repeatedly throughout history. Indeed, this fundamental tension between L/law and grace, love or Gospel, has motivated a good many Christian efforts to subsist beyond any worldly or even ecclesial representation. We could easily consider the Reformation itself, and Luther's being mistaken as himself an antinomian, as signs of such trends [8].

For some, however, the path of permanent critique such as Ruether raised only grows more intense over time: Does this grace move beyond or outside of history or is it internal to the dialectics of historical representation? Moreover, and insofar as it illuminates our understanding of eschatology in general, is an eschatological dimension of history nothing more than a longing for such a grace to be permanently present, a state that cannot exist as long as human beings continue to uphold the normative order of this world? With Ruether's analysis of how the church, in order to be faithful to itself, must always yet exist in a manner that is also 'against itself', we are perhaps poised to respond somewhat differently, less polemically, to these questions. In short, we might be able to discern a vision of eschatology that is capable of bringing our hopes for grace and for justice into the here and now, into the desires for reform that accompany any institutional, traditional or legal sense of normativity. In this sense, eschatology might become more visibly what it has always been: not merely a discourse about 'final things', but an impulse for the reform of presently existing structures.

To see this possibility unfold would be in some sense to agree with David Tracy's critique of utopian, eschatological and apocalyptic visions. Tracy, in his commentary on the philosophy of Ernst Bloch in particular (and though expanding far beyond Bloch to encompass general theological trends), recognizes how the revolutionary spirit for utopian ideals '[...] does demonstrate the power of eschatological and Utopian symbols to negate present oppression and to disclose alternative and more humanly authentic societal possibilities' ([9], p. 246). This is the positive power of revolutionary expectations. It is also the potential power latent behind antinomian positions, or purely negative models of thought (nihilism) that would seem to advocate the destruction of all structures. It is also, for that matter, potentially a state of grace lived beyond all normative, even legal, measures. But, as Tracy neatly discerns, it also expresses a certain 'Marxist Romanticism' that fails to address existing 'infra-structural and super-structural realities'. Such a radical outlook, much as with the radical 'death of God' theologians of the 1960s, does not account for the internal and external structural dimensions of what must remain in place after such radical thinking has been exercised. The ground may have been cleared, but what remains is uncertain at best once the traditional symbolic networks are discarded.<sup>2</sup> Tracy's adherence to the Catholic theological tradition and its ability to accompany while also challenging the traditional network of symbols and meaning thereby becomes a very realistic depiction of how a revolutionary hope must be maintained *alongside* traditional institutions, as Ruether's study had already indicated.

In some ways, this line of critical inquiry is reminiscent of Charles Taylor's challenge to modern atheism, which, he concludes, may have something important to say to humanity in our day, but

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<sup>2</sup> See the critique levied against such radical theologies in Tracy ([9], p. 32). In another Catholic context, something too of this critique can also be found in Joseph Ratzinger's concern surrounding the Marxist messianic hollowing out of Christian eschatological claims in the modern era. See Joseph Ratzinger ([10], pp. 4-15).

which has not had the time to construct a meaningful symbolic structure which might give human beings a sense of purpose or identity [11]. From this point of view, if a radical cry to be free of all (onto-theological) structure is to be clearly understood as akin to some form of Marxist Romanticism, theologians might learn to take seriously those ecclesial efforts to take the ‘death of God’ very seriously and yet to do away entirely neither with the structures of the church nor its symbolizations of God.<sup>3</sup> What an authentically ecclesial theology must learn to recognize is the inherently in-built nature of these radical theologies that will never go away because they are internal dimensions of the church ‘against itself’. The church will always have accompanying it a number of messianic, even apocalyptic, impulses that champion an eschatological horizon seemingly forever ‘to come’ that yet contains simultaneously within itself the potential for critically realigning ecclesial representations. This is simply the nature of how justice enters into our world.

Continuing this line of thought in a contemporary context, one might make mention here of the work of John Caputo, for example, who follows a certain Kierkegaardian critique of the church through a Derridean deconstructivist lens in order to speak prophetically about the loosening of ecclesial-institutional ways of being in the world. What he is after, it seems, is an ecclesial recognition of the almost permanent subversion of the church’s normative boundaries, something that fits squarely within the conferences he organized devoted to ‘subverting the norm’ within an ecclesial setting.<sup>4</sup> Caputo’s religion, as he described it in a series of recent writings, is a religion of the ‘perhaps’, one that attempts to elucidate ‘a certain *anarchie* that issues not in a street-corner anarchism or violent lawlessness, but in a radical, creative, and even sacred anarchy’ ([14], p. 261). It is a ‘nihilism of grace’ in that it disconnects any particularly sought-after goal from its own internally generated critique of itself in order that an apparent purposelessness—arrived at via positing a self-critique without a determinate goal in mind—might actually be a chance for faith, or the divine even, to enter into the lives of the faithful ([14], p. 238). His viewpoint is one aimed at upending normative boundaries, while also respecting the reality of religious traditions that must continue to exist in some form if religious desire itself is to survive [15]. He develops, accordingly and in the wake of Derrida, a non-teleological eschatology that strives for more justice to enter our world. In this sense, an eschatological vision exists as non-teleological in order to highlight its nature as an internal mechanism for reform, not as generated with an explicit historical form or goal in mind. For Caputo, as for Derrida, there is no determinate historical form that such an eschatological striving for justice *must* take, though Caputo acknowledges that it must, in the end, be embodied by *some* historical, material tradition or institution [16]. The question that could often be put to Caputo’s ‘nihilism of grace’ is therefore whether or not he sees an immediate benefit in proffering what appears to be a ‘loose’ form of antinomianism that is permanently uneasy with institutionalized religion, a dispersal of religious traditions and institutions that would leave religion perhaps somewhat shorn of its content. These charges, of course, are nothing new to the history of theological thought, which seemingly trades on such tensions in order to sustain itself as a discourse—a theology ‘against itself’ structurally parallel to Ruether’s church ‘against itself’, as it were.

Caputo’s sensibilities seem to share, moreover, in another philosophical trend worth highlighting. For some time now, the legacy of the work of Giorgio Agamben has been debated too as yet another potential antinomian project, one that refuses to concede the worth of traditional or institutional religious forms, specifically the Christian (Catholic) church, but which steadfastly, albeit subtly, adheres to a dialectical (hermeneutical) tension between a normative structure (whether in the form of law or state, for example) and its messianic undoing—which he interestingly conjectures might be what ‘church’ in our world should be [17,18]. What Agamben is certainly hinting toward, at least, is a way

<sup>3</sup> More recently, Ward Blanton, Clayton Crockett, Jeffrey Robbins and Noëlle Vahanian have attempted to extend the radical theology left behind by the death of God theologians in order to think the ‘death of the death of God’ movement and to affirm a politics as radical as the theology they wish to assert [12].

<sup>4</sup> The most recent iteration of this conference, ‘Subverting the Norm III’ was held at Drury University, 5–7 November 2015 [13].

of reading history, not from the standpoint of a traditional end of time scenario when all things are finally 'set aright', but rather an apocalyptic, eschatological principle that is capable of transforming normative measures and the way they appear to function for us *in* the present moment (akin to Walter Benjamin's notion of *Jetztzeit* or the 'now-time') [19].

Charles Taylor's analysis of the general uncertainty and personal anxiety in the 'age of authenticity' that roughly characterizes the quest for self-understanding in the mid-Twentieth Century centralizes issues surrounding gendered and sexual identity as fundamental to the formation of normative subjectivities and might thereby help us to understand better the repeated deadlock we continue to face regarding this failure to comprehend how we embody these unending representational tensions. In other words, we might turn to gender and sexuality as prime exemplars in the late modern period of where these conversations about normativity and its disruption I have been following have become privileged sites of contestation. This is the case in many ways because our gendered and sexual selves are permanently caught between being locations of nature acting upon us and malleable partners in the self-construction of personal identity. Any potential distinction between 'natural' and 'unnatural' identities, as much as between sexual acts, has become the pivot upon which particular cultural and religious battles have revolved, and it is very much the pivot upon which they still do ([11], pp. 473–504). By focusing on this terrain in particular, we might be able to gain another vantage point from which to detect the tension between normative traditions and their resistance.

Taylor's insight certainly follows closely on the heels of Michel Foucault's depiction of the burrowing of a thoroughly modern sovereign power within the very bodies we inhabit, perhaps *the* reason we have become overtly (and possibly *overly*) focused on issues surrounding gender and sexuality [20]. What Taylor uniquely brings to the fore is a profound meditation, not just on the centrality of sexuality and gender to modern discourses that struggle to locate how they are embodied, but also to those theological hopes of possibly going beyond the grace/nature divide, and toward something like an access to our being that undoes the division itself, somehow bringing grace into nature and nature into grace. Taylor's sense of things is that, just as gender and sexuality have been destabilized in modern times, so too has our understanding of the division that holds nature from grace, prompting theologians to reconsider a number of normative boundaries as perhaps more permeable than they had previously been taken to be.

In the history of theological commentary on this division, according to Agamben who parallels Taylor on this point precisely, humanity is often depicted as wearing grace like a garment, whereas our nudity reveals the shamefulness rooted in our nature, prompting us to look for the 'thing itself' (the naked body) beneath the layers of clothing we feel we cannot shed (the significance of representation). I believe that Taylor, read in this light, is suggesting that gender and sexuality in the modern era are a privileged site for discussing the evolution of theological categories throughout history, even if we are mainly unaware of such reconfigurations, but also that our changing views on the theological (and the secular) have altered our views on the body in particular, making the distinction between nature and grace that much more difficult to ascertain.

Rendering our private, sexual lives as transparent in this 'age of authenticity' wherein the theological no longer holds sway and no longer covers the displays of sexuality that had previously shamed us, is precisely what appears to those who are religious among us as a blow struck against a theological way of being in the world, what Agamben calls the 'theological signature' that still guides humankind. What Agamben is trying to steer humanity as a whole toward, however, is a place wherein we might be capable of perceiving our nudity, shorn of its theological signature, neither as something sinful or shameful, nor as something inherently part of a sexualized network of symbols, but rather as the 'thing itself' that we have trouble getting ahold of in our world. The frail, vulnerable and exposed body of the other standing before us is somehow the very thing we are searching for (the thing 'in itself'), but which we have such difficulty accessing directly. Such a thing is as difficult to access as a person without their clothes on walking down a public sidewalk (since the police generally prohibit such activity). And yet such exposed, precarious bodies *do* exist around us all

the time, concealed but present nonetheless—the foundation upon which grace (as one’s clothing) is conferred ([21], pp. 55–90).<sup>5</sup>

Following the lead of both Agamben and Taylor on this issue, I want to suggest that pinpointing the role of sexuality and gender in theological terms today is not simply the exercise of ‘yet another’ contextual theology (e.g., feminist and queer theologies); rather it is a locus which reveals the political stakes of the theological within the contemporary world.

Perhaps the political is revealed in our theological discussions of the body, its possibility for a gendered existence and its varied sexual orientations, because there is a particularly equivocal nature to human sexuality, a point that we seem only recently able to discuss in somewhat forthright terms. Its equivocal character is perhaps sexuality’s most determinate characteristic. In other words, human sexuality often does not fit neatly into one category or practice, though, for reasons of social and political representation, we routinely comprehend it to be much more ‘straight-forward’ than it really is. Normative representations of sexuality are what we depend on, culturally, socially, politically and even religiously. Yet the sheer complexity and fluidity of our sexual being actually denies such simplistic, and reductionistic, categorization. James Alison, for one, has given us a concise formulation of what such a positioning on the messiness of sexual orientation and his preference to not define it might look like when he states that

[...] I’m not sure that it is appropriate to spend much time discussing human sexuality. For to do so is to go round and round forever discussing a very malleable, rather fluid set of symptoms, rather than engaging in the real discussion about their prior socialization. The real discussion involves, therefore, our looking at how we talk about things, which is a very large part of how they are humanised and lived ([22], p. 161).

What Alison discerns at work in the domain of sexuality specifically is how the socialization involved in our collective talk about queer persons and queer theologies is also inherently a political discussion, of how we treat persons who ‘defy’ normative categorizations and cultural institutions. He also senses how what we are after when we talk of our sexual being in theological terms is often something quite different than what many take it to be. We want to access the human person who is a gift of the divine in whatever form of being a human person takes—as Agamben had put it, in their nudity. But we are so overcoded by particular theological signatures that we have trouble seeing the vulnerable body underneath the garments both society and the church, among others, have placed upon it.

Any talk of human sexual being then is a discussion that quickly overlaps with a number of contextual efforts to identify and resist the exclusionary tactics that routinely define whatever mainstream discourse dominates a given field of conversation, and so overflowing the contexts of gender and sexuality and turning toward any contestation of normative identities. We begin to see in this analysis too how apparent revolutionary, apocalyptic and antinomian gestures might contain signs pointing toward a much more hermeneutical approach when we consider their lived, material conditions—that is, their embodiment. It is in no way surprising, as I will take up shortly, that the newly burgeoning field of queer theology has had trouble identifying whether or not it is an antinomian undertaking, or whether queer theology would be truest to itself by rejecting any attempts to render it as a discernable field within theological study. To ‘domesticate’ queer theology by giving it normative boundaries and guides would be, according to those who grasp exactly what is at stake here (especially politically), a betrayal of its emancipatory force and a co-opting of its political identity by forces bent on restraining its liberatory praxis [23].

Taking a step back from any attempt to discern the ‘true’ nature of one’s sexual and gendered being can be, somewhat paradoxically, the most direct and practical way to engage the social and political

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<sup>5</sup> What might be the most fitting symbol of such a struggle to behold the human person in their nudity is frequently captured in the crucifixes that chose to cover Jesus’ nudity with a loincloth of some sort instead of depicting the radical gesture of his naked form being exposed in a position of complete vulnerability.

terrain upon which the rights and privileges of ‘queer’ persons, for example, are contested. This would be to suggest at the same time that we would be better served in not necessarily, or primarily, discussing normative sexual models and their ‘deviations’, but rather in analyzing how sexuality is politically active, socially contested and what the stakes and implications of such postures are in lived, everyday reality. And yet the problem in taking one’s sexual orientation as a ‘very malleable, rather fluid set of symptoms’, for many, especially those vested in fighting for the political rights of queer persons, is that such a recognition risks de-legitimizing the grounds upon which one’s rights might otherwise be guaranteed—any supposed ‘natural’ orientation that often grounds the claim to guarantee one’s rights (as in ‘natural law’ theories). To claim that sexuality is ‘malleable’, so the fear often goes, might de-legitimize its ‘natural’ qualities and thereby open the door to more traditional or conservative arguments that sexuality is merely a ‘choice’ that one makes concerning their sexual orientation, a choice that could (or *should*, many would perhaps add) be made in line with a heteronormative matrix of representations.

The problematic we are faced with here is one of ‘naturalizing’ what was previously seen as deviant from a given normative understanding of sexual orientation, and thereby revealing to us the real issue latent behind most political configurations of normativity: the frequency of their being mistaken as natural and therefore inherently justified in their hegemonic existence. As Dawne Moon has shown in her sociological study of the reactions to homosexuality among the ‘ordinary’ church-goer, the naturalization of one’s sexuality—whether from a heterosexual or queer point of view—is instrumental in the politicization of sexuality [24]. Claiming that one’s sexuality is ‘natural’ is often, and quite significantly, the first step toward the legitimation and recognition of one’s sexual orientation. For many marginalized persons living under the label of ‘queer’ (among other labels), until their orientation is socially, culturally or legally, let alone, religiously, recognized, they fall under such labels as ‘perverse’ or ‘deviant’—what Foucault once brilliantly categorized under the heading of socially ‘abnormal’ [25]—and so their right to a certain ‘fullness’ of life is inherently restricted. The problem with such a ‘naturalization’ of one’s sexuality, however, and this is the case despite its seeming necessity in today’s political culture that seeks to forever expand the rights of recognition, is that such a process does not necessarily dictate that this act either fully encompasses the reality of sexual orientation, or that it can ever adequately speak for the fullness and diversity of our sexual and gendered being. This seemingly equivocal nature of our gendered and sexual selves comes back, as such, to haunt any normative representation we might give of their existence, highlighting once again the complicated but ever-present reality of the tensions that exist between pre-existing normative measures and their eventual deconstruction.

Judith Butler has recently commented on the element of choice in one’s sexuality in a way that might aid our discussion and help us contextualize a variety of debates between normativity and its resistance. For Butler, such a ‘choice’ in terms of sexual orientation does not negate the ‘natural’ aspects of one’s sexuality, but rather plays a significant role in affixing *identity* to sexual orientation as inadequate then as *any* identity can be (a point no less familiar to Saint Paul than it is to Butler<sup>6</sup>). As she describes the political complexity of such identity configurations: ‘I remember being told years ago that in public I had to say that homosexuality is not a choice. In fact, I think the issue of “choice” is very complicated when it comes to what we call “sexual orientation”’ ([26], p. 47). Referring to the work of Leticia Sabsay, Butler goes on to express a good deal of suspicion about our ‘radically arelational’ categorizations of sexual orientation as they are typically understood (i.e., as seemingly autonomous categorizations) [27]. Processes of ‘coming out’ in the West, for example, and as she notes, are tied to particular ideas of ‘free expression’ that can become ‘[...] a way of exporting and imposing certain first-world conceptions of freedom’s contours’ ([26], p. 48). Rather than simply rejoice in the ‘naturalization’ of queer sexualities, Butler, in a sense, raises her head above the western political fracas

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<sup>6</sup> See Galatians 3:28, among other passages, and the commentary provided in Agamben, *The Time that Remains* [19].

that routinely follows the politics of disclosing and living one's sexual identity in order to ponder aloud what future perspectives might yet hold true for the recognition of marginalized sexualities: 'At such moments, we have to wonder what forms of cultural narrowness keep us from asking how norms that sometimes function in the name of freedom can also become vehicles of cultural imperialism and unfreedom' ([26], p. 48). Such dialectical tensions between life-affirming and life-negating normative representations are nothing new to her cultural analysis, though the relevance to a person's way of being in the world today could not be more significant or timely.<sup>7</sup>

What Butler's recent theoretical and political interests have been more inclined to focus upon is actually the crucial issue I am trying to highlight here: the permanent tension that resides within any given identity and which leaves us somehow without the very identities that we have. In her preferred terminology, there are only well-placed and open-ended descriptors that defy any sense of a fixed identity, such as *diaspora* and dispossession. These are formulations she works out elsewhere in the context of a long discourse on Judaic ethical traditions, the contested claims of 'Jewishness' and the politicization of being Jewish vis-à-vis debates on the policies of contemporary Israel [29]. It is accordingly very interesting to take a look at her more recent reflections on dispossession as another way in which to think through issues such as personal identity, sexual orientation and the performance of gender. It is most intriguing, in fact, to posit an analogy between the ways in which humans tend to render sexuality as either normative or 'natural' and her critique of the illegality of particular political representations (e.g., nation-states, but one can easily imagine too her contestations of culturally constructed fixed identities, such as with gender) that are ideologically configured upon an 'origin' for the purposes of 'self-reproduction' ([29], p. 206). As I wish here to note, this language not only lends itself toward fathoming the precariousness of human sexuality in general, but it also provides a viable model by which to link the failure of such representations to present theological considerations. The way in which such analogous struggles with the configuration of identity today merge with the dynamics of a church permanently 'against itself' signals, to my mind, an opening up of the conversation that much wider toward embodied issues such as sexuality, and so not as taking place apart from issues surrounding history and its end, but as another way—an 'enfleshed' or incarnated one, so to speak—to comprehend the stakes of historical representation within an ecclesial setting and its limits.

Butler's pressing concerns with politics and the 'naturalization' of sexuality prompt me furthermore to ask in-depth questions that are no less theological than they are political, and which are central to the overall line of argumentation regarding normativity that I am pursuing, such as: In what ways are human beings and institutional structures alike forever dispossessed of their identities and barred from certain acts of normative representation that might otherwise be stubbornly clung to and eagerly defended? How might such a prohibition of any normative claims, though failing to legitimate one's political rights, nonetheless be able to register itself as a general protest to reductive political formulations that rely all-too-easily upon their 'natural' legitimation? And, directly to the point I am here trying to formulate, might there be gains to be made that resonate very deeply with a political-theological discourse that recognizes too the merits of 'another' form of committed political action which seeks to deconstruct the normative representation while recognizing its necessity at the same time?

In light of these questions and Butler's suggestive comments, I am wagering that 'queer theology'—whatever such a thing may or may not be, precisely then allowing for its ambiguity and (*almost* antinomian) undefinability to be its greatest strength—is just such a form of this political-theological thought that might yet provide an alternative way of looking at those theological practices most needed now as central to theological discourse: that is, how ecclesial structures might maintain a critical stance that accepts the reality of dwelling as a church forever 'against itself', in exile

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<sup>7</sup> See also the commentary offered in [28].

and dispossessed of its identity in some sense while yet retaining it at the same time. In other words, I want to understand better the dynamics that allow us to contemplate ‘queer theology’ as, to alter Ruether’s formulation somewhat, a form of theology ‘against itself’.

What queer theology embodies at the moment is in many ways an eschatological, messianic theology that presents its radical challenge to the church as a marginalized voice (or, rather, as a loose collective of marginalized *voices*) needing desperately to be heard. Exploring the political consequences of a queer theology means first asking about its very existence, interrogating its foundations and determining what shape such a thing has taken already and what course it might take in the future. In order to perform something like a ‘queering’ of theology, one must first inquire as well if it is possible to construct a ‘queer theology’ in the singular or multiple ‘queer theologies’? The distinction, which is often drawn up as a contest between a monolithic, oppressive unity of ‘guild’ Theology and the myriad, politically-aware, contesting and contested theologies in the plural, each established in order to challenge such a structural formation [30], yet reveals a fundamental structural element within the heart of any messianic, eschatological theology that reconsiders the nature of binary oppositions and their inherently hierarchical matrix of power relations. Queer theologies, much as with other contextual theologies, thereby seek to ‘queer’ any theology that not only fails to account for the role of sexuality and sexual orientation in underlying (fundamental) theological premises, but also any theology that succumbs to binary structural forms of oppression. In this it certainly shares with other contextual theologies—black, latino/a, feminist, postcolonial, liberation, *mujerista* theologies—but it also recognizes how each of these various theologies can themselves all be further ‘queered’ in some way, so to speak.

On the one hand, then, there is something called ‘theology’ that can be ‘queered’ (or whose normativity is subverted), even if there is no such monolithic entity called ‘Theology’ that could be said, historically or conceptually, to be a unified, definable essence. On the other hand, such challenges to the structural normativity of theological discourses draw attention to a deeper, theoretical issue, even to the nature of the *theoretical* itself within the *theological*. That is, I want to ask, what is this act of ‘queering’—or to borrow Caputo’s phrasing, of ‘subverting the norm’—if not a fundamental political act that undoes every binary, reductive and ultimately oppressive structure and which thereby reveals the theoretical foundations of a contextual approach to begin with? What is this act if not a general (appearing as) ‘antinomian’ or even nihilistic praxis that destabilizes a given structure and liberates persons within it so that they might envision ‘other’, alternative ways of being in the world, politically, socially, culturally, economically and religiously?<sup>8</sup>

From Jacques Derrida to Slavoj Žižek and Giorgio Agamben, contemporary continental theorists on the nature of the political have sought a place outside of the everyday operations of the political through the establishment of a messianic politics *so that* they might find ways to critique politics ‘as usual’. This is, in many ways, *the* question lurking behind contemporary political theories that would press the boundaries of just what constitutes the political in the first place, and what causes them to draw the criticism that they are dabbling in antinomian thought. Through their reflections on such a precarious site—what Žižek has called the ‘absent center of political ontology’ [32]—they are often heavily derided as being at times overly antinomian, neglecting the discourse of true politics, of being either idealistic or utopian, *and yet* such work on politics continues to draw significant attention from those who really are curious as to whether a space apart from or outside of the domain of politics can be reached precisely in order to critique the political order and to establish just what kind of a significance such a site holds for the domain of politics proper [33].

The question is particularly heightened, I would add, when one stops to consider from a theological perspective how the very foundations of the Christian tradition were based upon a position that sought, not to do away with law, but to fulfill it: to find a place outside of it that yet

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<sup>8</sup> Gianni Vattimo refers frequently to such a force as a form of nihilism, as does Caputo with his ‘nihilism of grace’ [31].

respects the existence of law and does not discard it altogether—what Elliot Wolfson has referred to as a sort of ‘hypernomianism’.<sup>9</sup> Politics, as the constitutive domain of law, its rule and its governance, would likewise be directly implicated in such discussions. It is, of course, no surprise, but also of great interest, that these very same philosophers speculating on the nature of a realm outside of, but not wholly removed from, the political have also been fascinated with the theological dimensions of the discussion, especially in its Pauline form.

Most directly, the question I am presently posing is this: to what degree is the queering or subversion of theological normativity, or the development of a ‘theology against itself’, a project analogous to this philosophical quest to stand outside of politics, but also then to critique politics, to find a platform from which to call the entire edifice of the political and its normative representations into question, but then also to reroute its most basic coordinates and norms? And, furthermore, to what degree is such a quest the nature of one’s rootedness in language itself; that which confines humanity, but which also allows humans to speak if we are ever to be intelligible to one another [35]? It is with such questions regarding the existence of normativity itself that we are simultaneously returned to the basic structures that guide human life, while, at the same time, propelled forward into new configurations of resistance to just such structures.

I find in Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari’s conceptualization of ‘becoming-minoritarian’ a perhaps suitable partner in this conversation, in no small measure because it offers us a model through which to think the ways in which being a minority group within a larger (major) matrix of (often oppressive) representations is not something one seeks inherently to ‘overcome’ and do away with. Rather, the task of a ‘minor’ discourse—what Deleuze and Guattari will call, in the context of Kafka’s literary production, a ‘minor literature’—is to find ways to ‘unblock’ the static and cemented flows within a ‘major’ discourse or society. In the context of Kafka’s writing, which inspires their political theorizing, we can see how even Kafka’s efforts to deal with his oppressive father, the analogy of power relations they take up, for example, lend themselves to pronouncing an unqualified political praxis in relation to all normative structures. In their words, ‘The question of the father isn’t how to become free in relation to him (an Oedipal question) but how to find a path there where he didn’t find any’ ([36], p. 10). In ways that will resonate a good deal with queer thought in general, as well as the church ‘against itself’, they look to Kafka’s theoretical substructure in order to see how ‘minor’ discourses might make ‘a paranoid and perverse use’ of what was imposed upon them in order ‘[...] to escape from submission, to lift one’s head up, and see passing above the shoulders of the father what had really been the question all along: an entire micropolitics of desire, of impasses and escapes, of submissions and rectifications’ ([36], p. 10). There is no eschatology premised on abandoning normative structure altogether, then, but rather of positing an apparent quest for ‘Opening the impasse, unblocking it’ ([36], p. 10). Though such a process of ‘unblocking’ may in fact sound remarkably distant from antinomian, eschatological, apocalyptic or queer thoughts in general, it is to be understood here as a radical departure from the dualistic frameworks that govern normative representations. The ‘unblocking’ brought into our field of view is one that undoes, or de-territorializes, the coordinates of the dominant representation.

From this angle, such acts are entirely situated within the politics of normative structures, such as history; they are, in fact, parasitic upon them, established in relation to them and aimed at altering their coordinates through precisely such an (also eschatological) ‘unblocking’ of the desires that had been halted within the ‘major’ discourse. To see things this way is to confirm, as Ahmed has in her *Queer Phenomenology*, that the act of ‘queering’ only takes place in relation to established ‘straight’ lines [37]. This is the true ‘nature’ of the act of ‘queering’. In Deleuze and Guattari’s language, the same principle is more or less manifest: ‘A minor literature doesn’t come from a minor language; it is rather

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<sup>9</sup> It is not surprising, therefore, that these philosophical interventions have often shared in discussions concerning the relevance of Pauline thought on the law and its philosophical implications [19,34].

that which a minority constructs within a major language' ([36], p. 16). The tools for liberation, in whatever 'minor' context we are given, are those that are found within the 'major' language, the 'master's' language even—a point that has not been unfamiliar to those poets who have worked as Kafka did, in a language that simultaneously oppressed them while also promising them the key to their own freedom.

The chosen phrasing of Deleuze and Guattari for this process of reclaiming the language of the 'master' is de-territorialization, a word that at once indicates its intimate relationship to an originary 'territory', but also its defiant gesture of stripping such a territory of its primary (and political) identity. The act of de-territorializing is an inherently political act too in that it renders the 'major' discourse vulnerable, prepared for re-territorializing, while also allowing the minority grouping a collective voice it had previously been unable to utilize publicly. They enumerate the effect of such action in the following manner:

The three characteristics of minor literature are the deterritorialization of language, the connection of the individual to a political immediacy, and the collective assemblage of enunciation. We might as well say that minor no longer designates specific literatures but the revolutionary conditions for every literature within the heart of what is called great (or established) literature ([36], p. 18).

Exhibiting a deep resonance with the theological quest to locate an identity outside of the normal state of things, that is, in *exilic* form, Deleuze and Guattari pose the main problem for minority groupings as such: 'how to tear a minor literature away from its own language, allowing it to challenge the language and making it follow a sober revolutionary path? How to become a nomad and an immigrant and a gypsy in relation to one's own language' ([36], p. 19)? The language of exile is chosen as the identity that is really a flight from identity, a permanent act of de-territorialization that takes from the 'master' what once belonged to them, but which, now, is being carried elsewhere by those on the margins. The nomad is the one who is permanently tempted to re-territorialize their identity, but who resists such a gesture in order to continuously 'unblock' the flows that have ceased to be productive. Deleuze and Guattari remind us of the precariousness of a genuine response: 'Kafka answers: steal the baby from its crib, walk the tightrope' ([36], p. 19).

Both Paul Celan and Adrienne Rich, arguably two of the most prominent poets of the last century, confirmed through their oeuvres that, as members of specific minority groups, they too spoke the oppressor's language, but also indicated, at times, that they had to push this language to its boundaries in order to find a space for themselves and their poetry [38,39]. For this very reason, Celan's poetry appears to many as 'hermetic' and Rich's poems search in the 'wreck' of language for the 'thing itself' beyond all forms of representation [40]. What both poets identified, I believe, was how, as Deleuze and Guattari frame it in the context of Kafka's writing: 'Language stops being representative in order to now move toward its extremities or its limits' ([36], p. 23). As we see in the poetry of Celan and Rich as well, the movement humans make through linguistic representation is one that moves outward, attempting to go beyond representation, not simply through metaphor per se, but through the de-territorialization of ourselves (whoever we are), the other who eludes our framing of them, our own words, and so forth. To borrow from Celan, Rich and from Butler as well, humanity is thrust into an exile that can only take place *within* the confines of language. This too, according to Deleuze and Guattari, was likewise Kafka's dream: 'To be a sort of stranger *within* his own language [...]' ([36], p. 26).

There is no doubt that a significant lingering question remains: what exactly would the status of something like 'becoming-queer' or 'becoming-antinomian' mean within the context, not only of Deleuze and Guattari's work, but also socially, politically, and, most pressing in the present context, theologically? In what ways would 'queer' theology eschatologically haunt the hallowed halls of 'Theology', forever disruptive to its attempts to suture its fractures and pretend that it is a monolithic entity? It is certainly possible, from this point of view, that any attempt to think a 'queer' or 'indecent' theology that is not dependent upon a heteronormative field of representations would spell out the

eradication of 'being queer' altogether, a dream perhaps as difficult to realize as removing the categories that fall under the heading of 'abnormal' entirely (something most likely impossible to do altogether, despite its idealistic appeal) [41]. Yet all may not be lost either in suggesting that humanity will never be able to do away with its categories of the 'perverse', the 'queer', the 'deviant', the 'antinomian', the 'minority'. To suggest as much is to suggest that such eschatological, messianic thoughts, insofar as they must always represent those who 'lose' to the system, structure, institution, representation or law, would have in some ways already 'won' merely by existing (by being *seen* or *recognized*) in the first place [42]. Though such a recognition will always run the risk of becoming conscripted into a more normative order, there is yet too in such possibilities the chance for the ever-incremental growth of justice to be displayed at the same time, as Butler had remarked earlier. Though there will always be an undeconstructible element within justice, as Derrida had noted more than once, any normative structural order will always stand open to its own deconstruction precisely because it is an embodied position within history. This is, in short, the cost of our linguistic, representational and political being in the world.

The way I have been framing this discussion on the nature of normative representations and their opposition (no matter whether labeled as postmodern, antinomian, queer, revolutionary, utopian, secular, messianic and so forth) opens us up to another question as well, one that I am posing is as central to the dialectics of history and any formulation of its supposed end as it is to the normative portrait of Christianity that the West has received: the relationship between law and grace (or love). To speak of the tension between law and grace not simply in religious terms (though this of course must also be done), but in ones that reorient our relationship to the political and social orders of this world is very much the terrain that I wish to ascend to, and taking a look at the ways in which this relationship has played itself out in modernity might assist us in comprehending the exact stakes of this seemingly unending debate.

The identification of an eschatological, messianic community within the church that is at once 'against' the church, while also being at the same time a testament to its existence, is the minimum definition of what Christianity has been calling for since its Pauline formulation so long ago: that there is no division between Jew and Gentile (the ethnic/racial and cultural divide), male and female (the gendered and sexual divide) and slave and free (the economic and social divide) insofar as all identities are divided already from *within*, into the flesh/spirit dichotomy that undoes any previously established identity. It is thus no longer an identity, but a 'condition', as Butler puts it, that brings together people from all walks of life.<sup>10</sup> It recognizes the existence of a 'precariat', or precarious social grouping that now moves history to the center stage while simultaneously appearing to many to be outside the normative order, an 'abnormality', deviance or subversive element that threatens established order [43]. It also promotes new forms of intersubjectivity that call forth new types of interreligious understanding at the same time:

Precarity is the rubric that brings together women, queers, transgendered people, the poor, the differently abled, and the stateless, but also religious and racial minorities: it is a social and economic condition, but not an identity (indeed, it cuts across these categories and produces potential alliances among those who do not recognize that they belong to one another) ([44], p. 58).

Though it may sound strange to suggest that Butler's insights elaborate a somewhat Pauline theology, it may be fair to say too that they explode our traditional understanding of theology at the same time. In other words, I want to suggest that the possibility of interreligious insight flowing from such

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<sup>10</sup> See [19] for a fuller theoretical unpacking of this 'division of division' itself which moves beyond any given identity. In essence, the emphasis is placed upon Paul's further subdivision of Jewish identity (the primary social division of Jew/Greek) through the division of flesh and spirit, thereby undoing the primary division and rendering all subsequent identities as capable of such a secondary 'division of division itself'.

a kenotic state of precarity is something that *is only possible through its foundation* in a church ‘against itself’, the precise formulation necessary for a critical, self-dispossessed identity that is thereby able to exhibit new forms of openness to the O/other who may be the religious other, God or a sense of otherness within the sameness of the self.

To grasp this state of things is to comprehend the only apparently antinomian, but always eschatological perspective that unites us outside of normative identities at the same moment that it reforms the institutions that all of humanity dwells within. To suggest that this is at once both a theological force while it is also that which exceeds the boundaries of theology altogether is precisely why it illuminates a theology ‘against itself’ that cannot be ignored.<sup>11</sup> A hermeneutics of eschatology that takes seriously the interplay between the idea of reform and the material conditions of existence—history, or the autobiographical—is one that opens up to a permanent state of ‘being between’ (the ‘metaxological’), as William Desmond has described our existence. From such a perspective, there is a hyperbolic sense of transcendence locatable within the fundamental porosity of our being, one that opens humanity up to what lies beyond at the same time as each of us are firmly grounded in our being [46]. This hermeneutics of eschatology, of ‘being between’ the end and the present moment, becomes a non-teleological impulse for reform that admits the necessity of structural forms at the same time as it seeks to develop a self-critical mechanism that constantly challenges and overturns facets of institutional dwelling—what Althaus-Reid has referred to in the context of queer theology as the formation of a ‘critical bi-sexuality’ [47]. There is no doubt that such a state of ‘being between’ constitutes a form of failure in that it never accedes entirely to either side of an identitarian spectrum of social, cultural, religious, political or economic identities. But it is precisely this failure, this sense of never arriving on time to our intended destination that makes the human person exactly what it is. We are constantly caught between law and grace, unable to choose one over the other or to easily suture them together—this is the dialectical nature of humanity’s historical being in this world. Attempting to stand, as the poet Eavan Boland puts it, ‘outside of history’ in order to see these tensions for what they are is not our fatal flaw—it is the condition of our being who we are.

There are outsiders, always. These stars—  
 these iron inklings of an Irish January,  
 whose light happened  
 thousands of years before  
 our pain did: they are, they have always been  
 outside history.  
 They keep their distance. Under them remains  
 a place where you found  
 you were human, and  
 a landscape in which you know you are mortal.  
 And a time to choose between them.  
 I have chosen:  
 out of myth into history I move to be  
 part of that ordeal  
 who darkness is  
 only now reaching me from those fields,  
 those rivers, those roads clotted as  
 firmaments with the dead.

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<sup>11</sup> I would argue that there is a certain resonance here with the eschatology of Jürgen Moltmann [45].

How slowly they die  
 as we kneel beside them, whisper in their ear.  
 And we are too late. We are always too late ([48], p. 50).

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