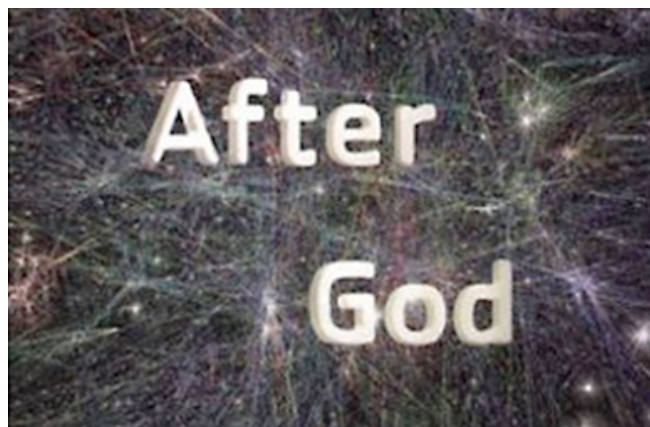


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RDBook: Apocalypse Without God

Nathan Schneider (bio)



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Mark C. Taylor is a scholar of religion who has been accused of not studying religion. Early on, he made his reputation with works on Kierkegaard and Hegel, and during the 1980s he helped to bring the ideas of Jacques Derrida into American theology and religious studies. Starting in the late 90s, though, Taylor ventured far afield with books on architecture, computer networks, economic markets, and even Las Vegas. In 2006, he released a book of photographs of animal skeletons in the desert.

Taylor's most recent book, *After God*, gathers these pieces together into a wide-ranging manifesto. He insists that the major social, ecological, and technological trends of today's world are not in some way "outside" religion, but are integrally connected with the history of religious thought. The solutions to our crises, he suggests, will be another chapter in that history.

The book's publication has coincided with his arrival in New York, after more than thirty years at Williams College, where he now chairs Columbia University's Department of Religion. He is attempting to reorganize the department's faculty around problems, rather than religious traditions or academic disciplines, in order to create a new, dynamic kind of scholarly community that can be responsive to pressing questions as they arise.

RD: A friend of mine saw me reading *After God* and asked, "So what's after God?" I promised I'd ask you. How would you answer?

MT: I always like titles that mean more than one thing. The word "after" means at least two things. It means that which is subsequent to, and it can also mean being in pursuit of, as in going after something. So it plays on both of those meanings of the term.

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Religion is everywhere on people's minds these days, but the level of public discourse about religion, I think, is pretty low. Many of the people both who defend religion from various points of view, as well as those who criticize and attack it, have an understanding of religion that is pretty rudimentary. Most of what the critics of religion are attacking these days, people like Dawkins and Hutchins and Sam Harris, is really a banal form of religion. Part of what the book does is to develop a notion of religion without God, without that kind of traditional theistic God.

"After God" also suggests the way in which religion is often most influential when it is least obvious. There is a religious dimension to all of culture. It isn't just about what goes on in churches and synagogues and mosques, but also what is involved in art, literature, and even things like financial markets. This is about trying to expand the sense of what religion is. The title is all those at once.

The book starts with people like Luther, Kant, and Hegel and then ends with something that isn't often talked about in terms of religion and philosophy: the water crisis, the ecological crisis. What do these old-fashioned thinkers have to do with contemporary crises?

I've been writing a lot for the past seven or eight years about the notion of complex adaptive systems. That came out of work that I had been doing about Hegel and Derrida, as well as work I had been doing in technology, using various kinds of information and communications technologies. In 2001, I did a book called *The Moment of Complexity: Emerging Network Culture*, which looked at the whole notion of complexity and how it might be used by people in the arts and humanities. I then looked at how those notions of complex systems worked themselves out in financial markets and the interrelationship of what I call neo-foundational religion, neo-conservative politics, and neo-liberal economics in terms of the emergence of the kinds of networks that now are creating the financial crisis that we find ourselves in.

My argument has been for some time that modernity more or less begins not with Descartes, as so many argue, but with Luther and the Protestant revolution. One of the arguments of the book is that what Luther did for religion vis-à-vis the Catholic Church at the time was to privatize and deregulate and decentralize it. Those three principles, of course, are what eventually becomes neo-liberal economics.

The Reformation was a product of and promoted a communications revolution in terms of print. Conservative Protestants have always been the first to understand the significance of new technologies. I think the reason for that is the Protestant preoccupation with the Word, and they get the Word out however they can. For a long time it was print. In the early 20th century it was radio. By the forties it was television. Both continue, of course. Now, among conservative Protestants, it is very sophisticated uses of internet and video media. Again, there's that whole trajectory that begins with Luther and comes down all the way through it.

In the book's argument, there is a theoretical dimension, a historical and analytic dimension, and then there is a more or less constructive, if you can use that word, component. Every model *of* entails a model *for*. That is to say, every way of looking at the world—what I call a *schema*—entails a different way of acting. Every way of acting, then, entails a certain interpretation of the world, even if that interpretation hasn't been worked out explicitly.

The dilemma that we face in the world today, and especially as things have developed since the collapse of the Soviet Union and the Berlin Wall, is that the map by which we're operating doesn't fit the territory that has emerged. When the map doesn't fit the territory, eventually you're going to have a significant problem. The challenge becomes to fabricate, to work out, to develop a different map, a different model of, a different schema for interpreting the world.

That's what I try to do in *After God*. It is a relational network kind of model that is built, not only

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out of theories of complex systems but what I'm always working with in one way or another: Hegel, Kierkegaard, Derrida, and Nietzsche.

I take, as you suggest, the particular ethical-political question of water, partly because it's not often thought of in ethical and political ways, and partly because I don't think there's an adequate realization of how critical this issue is. I think water will be the critical issue of the 21st century, even more so than oil. Why? Because there are substitutes for oil, even if they take a while to develop, and there is no substitute for water. The lack of awareness of this problem is astonishing to me.

The Southwest is drying up. Not long ago Atlanta was six weeks away from having no water, the whole city. And it is a global problem. In many parts of the world, there is neither enough water nor sufficient drinkable water. Water is also being polluted by farming practices, which involve the use of fertilizers and pesticides on a massive scale that seep down into the groundwater.

I believe that to be is to be connected. Until we start thinking relationally, we can't adequately address the problems that we face. The difficulty, at least of the last decade or so, is the prevalence of an oppositional ideology in a relational world. If this continues, the consequences will be disastrous.

It's interesting, as I read *After God*, I'm reminded of a speech I once heard by Bill Clinton, in his post-presidential years, when he could wear a pink tie and speak freely. He was talking in just this way. His "schema," to use your word, for understanding the world is one of interconnection and relationship, very much in the terms that you describe.

Maybe I should send him a copy of the book; here as in so many areas lately he seems to have forgotten what he once knew

Maybe you should. And that raises the question—Clinton isn't talking about religion in any way. He didn't think of his schema as religious, nor did he talk about the history of philosophy. Is he missing something?

Heidegger says somewhere that there is a difference between scholarship and thinking. Academics are trained to be scholars and not to be thinkers. It's similar to the difference between the history of philosophy and philosophy, or rather, what used to be called historical theology and constructive theology. I'm not particularly interested anymore in doing scholarship. I've done that. For me, the goal of scholarship has always been thinking constructively.

We must begin to understand how these complex systems work and how they're interrelated. This means understanding not only how natural systems work, but also the interrelationships of symbolic systems, of economic systems, of political systems, and the like.

But where do religious systems fit in?

I would put religious systems as a sub-part of symbolic systems. There's a significant question here. What I'm trying to do in *After God* is to develop a different kind of schema for interpreting the world. This framework, has, of course, a certain kind of genealogy in terms of religion and philosophy and theology. Is it religious? Not in your traditional sense, but, in other ways, it is. Rather than conceiving God as a transcendent agent, imagine the divine as emergent creativity. As long ago as *Erring* [1987] I described this as the "divine milieu." That is: matrix, web. Life is *webby*. By "life" I mean not just biological life, because there is no such thing as simply biological life, apart from culture. That is going to be more and more so.

As we become increasingly aware of these processes, they become increasingly aware of themselves through us. I think consciousness is an emergent phenomenon, and these systems

and structures have a certain kind of awareness, though not necessarily self-consciousness. It emerges from but is not reducible to the reactions of independent agents.

For instance, I believe it makes sense to talk about the mind of the market. The market knows things that individuals don't know. That knowledge acts back on and emerges from those agents, through their interaction. Like the ant colony. From the interactions of intentional agents, something emerges that is neither anticipated nor intended by those agents.

And there's a God in there somewhere?

I don't care what you call it. The problem with term "God" is too much baggage. When you use it, everybody thinks of this theistic, personalistic, transcendent God—no, I don't buy that. The way I always define the divine is the rising and passing away that does not itself arise and pass away or, as I have already suggested, the infinite creative process.

There isn't a divine creator, but creativity is divine. Creativity is an emergent process, and creation always entails destruction. I've rethought this in terms of these complex information-processing because I think all these systems are basically distributed information networks.

Let's switch gears a little bit. Earlier you mentioned the facility of conservative religious movements with modern media. At the same time, in the last chapters of *After God*, you seem to judge their black-and-white worldviews inadequate for the crises of the modern world. How do you stack up this mastery they have of the media—much more so than liberal religious movements—with their inability to solve the big problems?

It is a very interesting question. When you look at the analyses of people like [Timothy LaHaye](#) or [Hal Lindsey](#) on the contemporary scene, they're very sophisticated. A former colleague of mine at Williams, [Glenn Shuck](#), lays out the interpretation of what I call "network culture" by LaHaye. For LaHaye, these developments are the mark of the beast that shows the world is coming to an end and the Apocalypse is at hand. If you look at Hal Lindsey, in *The Late Great Planet Earth...*

...which became a movie with Orson Welles in it.

Right. Lindsey was analyzing Russia's invasion of Afghanistan. He read those political events in terms of a battle for oil. He wasn't wrong. But Le Haye and Lindsey see all of this in terms of an impending apocalypse. If you look at LaHaye or [Joel Osteen](#)—they're very different, of course—you will discover that they use the technologies to spread an anti-modern, foundationalist idea.

In certain ways conservatives are more aware of modern complexities than anyone. I spent a weekend at New Life Church's World Prayer Center once...

...I would like to do that.

It's cheap and they have hotel rooms—prayer closets, they call them. Or take the Crystal Cathedral.

Right. Philip Johnson, who was a leading postmodern architect, designed the Crystal Cathedral. So what's going on? As these systems become more complex, they become more volatile. As they become more volatile, you have to figure out how, in the economic realm, to manage risk. You have the same problem in the religious realm. Increasing complexity leads to a longing for simplicity.

The irony is that as markets became networked, the technology created the possibility and the

need for new financial instruments, which are incredibly complicated. All these instruments are being created as a way of distributing and managing risk, but their very proliferation creates more volatility and greater risk. What was developed in order to minimize risk has exacerbated it.

When you were writing, what hopes did you have for the book? What hopes *can* you have for a book? How has its reception lived up to that?

It's still early. I don't know where the book is traveling right now. Over the years I've written in so many different areas. Hegel says that the owl of Minerva only takes flight at twilight. You can only begin to understand something as you look back. I didn't set out to write about all this different stuff, I just followed wherever things took me. Looking back, it has much more coherence than I expected at the time.

As I move from theology to philosophy, to literary criticism, to art, to architecture, to technology, to economic systems, and now to biological systems, it is all interconnected. But the very structure of education in America—not only in America, but America is where I live—people don't know enough about enough to be able to put the pieces together. It is a culture of expertise, which is more and more about less and less.

After God goes back and puts together all those pieces. There is a very, very different way of looking at the world in that book. The hope is that a few people understand that. What I do is teach and write books. I always tell my students, don't do what I do. Take whatever I have to offer you, do with it what I could never imagine, and then come back to tell me about it.

Wittgenstein told his students to quit philosophy and become doctors.

I would like to be surprised.

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