

Carl Raschke, author of *Critical Theology: Introducing an Agenda for an Age of Global Crisis*

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## A Future for Theology in an Age of Crisis

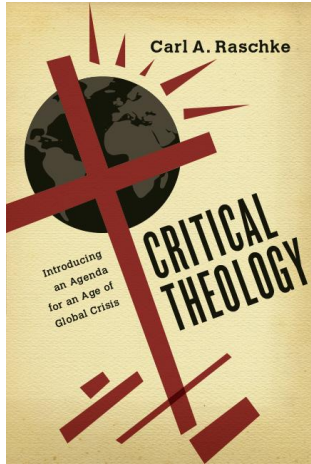
Drawing from the academic genre of critical theory, internationally renowned writer and academic Carl Raschke introduces an agenda for theological thinking in this age of global crisis. In the interview below, IVP Academic editor David Congdon talks with Raschke about the origins and timeliness of this new “critical theology.”

**Many of our readers will be unfamiliar with the literature and debates that you engage in this work, ranging from Bultmann and Horkheimer to Badiou and Žižek. Could you set the stage for this work? What are the origins of what you call “critical theology”?**

**Raschke:** Critical theology is in many ways the ongoing twenty-first-century legacy of pomo theology. Postmodern theology, which started off in the 1980s as an effort to develop an immediate theological application for the tremendously influential philosophy (at the time) of Jacques Derrida, gradually became an extension of what Hent DeVries termed in the late 1990s the “religious turn” in continental philosophy as a whole. Right after the turn of the millennium the more youthful cadres within evangelical Christianity became quite interested in these philosophical thinkers, and they became a significant readership for not only two of my earlier books (*The Next Reformation*, 2004, and *GloboChrist*, 2008) but also for a variety of other works by leading philosophical theologians, such as John D. Caputo and James K. A. Smith. Figures like Alain Badiou and Slavoj Žižek (the latter especially) are leading stars in this galaxy of contemporary philosophical figures who have drawn a considerable following and have become their own household names among academic religious thinkers.

**So what changed after the turn of the millennium?**

**Raschke:** If in the 1990s we experienced a “religious turn” in postmodern philosophy, ten years later we witnessed what might be called a “political turn.” The political activism of many young people during the 2008 election combined with the world-shaking global financial crisis of that year was a major factor in the emergence of this trend. But the social conscience and heightened political sensibility of the young millennials was also a decisive element. The importance of political theology, a concept that had gone into hibernation after its moment of glory in the late 1960s and early 1970s, was suddenly revived in the second half of the last decade and became an instant academic sensation about the same time in both America and Europe. The widespread influence of the journal *Political Theology*, both in its print and online version, is one testimony to its importance. With the revival of political theology, however, has come a profound new interest in critical theory, a term once used exclusively for the work of the writings of the Frankfurt School, which flourished from the late 1920s until after World War II, but in the last two decades has come to be used for a wide variety of contemporary theorists who draw on the discourses and explicit sociopolitical critiques found in Continental philosophy (as well as psychoanalysis). That



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latest iteration is often known as the “new critical theory.” The interdisciplinary interest in critical theory is also expanding rapidly in the present college and university environments. My own institution just this past year inaugurated such a curriculum because of student demand.

### What differentiates critical theology from the new critical theory?

**Raschke:** The Frankfurt School, with its classical Marxist and secularist biases, was notorious for giving short shrift to the religious dimension of experience, while largely dismissing the importance of the theological in framing the discussion about human emancipation. So I asked myself, if the “political” turn in Continental thought has given us the new critical theory, should not the persistence of the religious turn within the same constellation of thinking yield something we call “critical theology”?

**There is a palpable sense of global crisis that you are tapping into in this work. We have also seen a number of attempts to respond to this crisis (e.g., Occupy, Arab Spring). What can theological reflection contribute?**

**Raschke:** Both of the phenomena you mention were political movements that can be considered ad hoc, onsite reactions to what were perceived as oppressive circumstances but were only barely understood in the larger setting. Both were, in effect, efforts to implement utopian or standard liberal fantasies without any real theoretical sense about what was going on around them. Theology by its very nature, especially in its original biblical context, represents a comprehensive theory of who we are, and how we should act, in a universalistic perspective. Furthermore, theology is always at its core communitarian, and therefore inherently political, as the late Jewish philosopher Jacob Taubes always noted. The critical function of theology is always to unmask the “principalities and powers,” including the subtle ideologies, that enslave us. Genuine emancipation requires that we submit to what Badiou calls a “truth procedure,” and “the truth shall make you free.”

**Classical Christian theology is understood as “faith seeking understanding” (*fides quaerens intellectum*). You argue that a critical theology is “faith informed by critical thinking” (*fides informata cogitatio discrimine*). What is the significance of this difference? What changes when we move from understanding to critical thinking?**

**Raschke:** One could argue that the *intellectum* of classical theology always has a critical edge to it, something I would not at all dispute. But, even more significantly, I want to show not just the relevance but also the indispensable character of “theological thinking” (not theology in the usual confessional or ecclesial sense of the word) to the task of “critical thinking” overall. To borrow (shamelessly and excessively) from Schleiermacher, I want to say that I am explaining theological thinking to its “secular despisers” while giving an ardent account of how we should train ourselves to think seriously every time we confront the bewildering and often depressing daily headlines about what is happening in the world.

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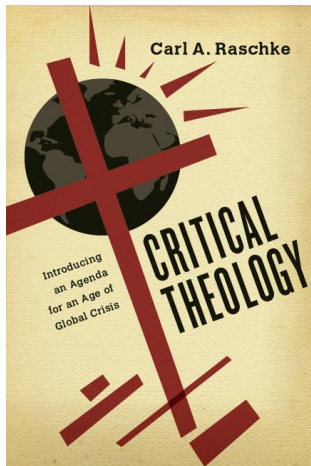


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**“Required reading for those working in the fields of political theology, critical theory, and philosophy.”**

—Hollis Phelps, author of *Alain Badiou*

**“One of the most brilliant trailblazers for theological thinking over the last quarter century.”**

**Carl A. Raschke** (PhD, Harvard University) is professor of religious studies at the University of Denver, specializing in continental philosophy, the philosophy of religion, and the theory of religion. He is an internationally known writer and academic who has authored numerous books including *The Revolution in Religious Theory: Toward a Semiotics of the Event*, *GloboChrist*, *The Next Reformation*, and *The Engendering God*. He is also cofounder and senior editor of *The Journal for Cultural and Religious Theory* and is a regular blogger and current affairs editor with *Political Theology Today*.

Raschke has written hundreds of articles on topics ranging from postmodernism to popular religion and culture to technology and society. As a well-known expert on religion and higher education, Raschke has been interviewed at least nine hundred times over two decades.

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**“Often truth is the first casualty in a time of crisis. For Raschke, however, crisis is what most calls for truth. Unflinching in his commitment to argumentative clarity and undaunted by the enormity of the task of appropriating critical theory for political theology, Raschke offers a manifesto that is intellectually rigorous yet stylistically inviting. Anyone working in political theology will have to engage this book or risk ignoring the global crisis that calls for such theology in the first place.”**

**—J. Aaron Simmons, Furman University**

**“In our globalizing world fraught with cultural, ideological, and religious tension, the task facing Christian theology is both immense and urgent. Impressive in its scope and unflinching in its diagnosis of the current state of affairs, Carl Raschke’s *Critical Theology* proposes a compelling theological agenda for an age of global crisis and asks with renewed vigor the old question, ‘What has Athens (and Frankfurt, and Paris, and Ljubljana) to do with Jerusalem?’ Raschke’s deft critiques and provocative, constructive proposals blaze a promising path forward for radical theological analysis and engagement in our times.”**

**—Brent A. R. Hege, Butler University**

**“All good theology responds critically to the situation from which it emerges. Raschke’s proposal for a new critical theology is no exception. For Raschke, our current, postsecular**

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# ENDORSEMENTS

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condition is one in which religion functions as a public force in a pluralized world—a world that is riddled with sometimes violent contradictions. Responding to this condition requires not only taking religion seriously as a motivating factor in global conflicts, but also deploying it critically and politically toward universal, emancipatory ends. Raschke draws on recent work in Continental philosophy and critical theory—particularly the work of Alain Badiou and Slavoj Žižek—to provide an outline for such a theology. The result is both thought provoking and timely, and it should be required reading for those working in the fields of political theology, critical theory, and philosophy. Raschke’s proposal, in short, sets an agenda that can’t be ignored. Raschke’s style also makes the book very accessible to a broader audience. He provides an admirably clear overview of twentieth-century critical theory and crisis theology as they relate to current issues regarding secularization, making this an ideal book to use in the classroom.”

**–Hollis Phelps, University of Mount Olive, author of *Alain Badiou: Between Theology and Anti-Theology***

“Carl Raschke has been one of the most brilliant trailblazers for theological thinking over the last quarter century. Here he provides a fresh appropriation of critical theory in and for theology, buttressed by critical engagements with Žižek and Badiou. Anyone interested in the vitality of contemporary theory should read this book!”

**–Clayton Crockett, University of Central Arkansas**

“In *Critical Theology*, Carl A. Raschke provides a new and exquisitely detailed examination of critical ‘global’ thinking and its transdisciplinary connections to the legacy of postmodern theology and the future of an ‘assembled’ religious theory.”

**–Victor E. Taylor, author of *Religion After Postmodernism***